



*Stories help us connect
and allow us to see things
through other people's
eyes.*

THE TWICE-GIVEN GIFT & OTHER WRITINGS

by T. J. Banks

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The Twice-Given Gift

& Other Writings



by T. J. Banks

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II. PEOPLE PORTRAITS

1) **Love, Llamas, & Big Fluffy Dogs: Lynda Dunlop & Richard Busch**

The dogs greet you right away at Dragon Dance Farm. The first one who catches your eye is Alvero, a three-year-old Great Pyrenees male. He's followed by Lexie, a two-year-old Great Pyrenees female, and Sophie, a two-year-old Pyrenees-St. Bernard-cross – or “a St. Pyr” and “a foster failure,” as Lynda Dunlop of Big Fluffy Dog Rescue calls her. Next are Mia (aka “Winky”), a one-eyed Chihuahua-Jack Russell-cross, and Stella, “an impossibly happy pug, as all pugs are.” Dunlop, a registered nurse with an advanced degree in behavioral health, cuddles the pop-eyed pug in her arms like a baby. Stella, Sophie, and Mia are “the comedy team,” she tells me. They're somewhere between seven and eight, although Richard Busch, Dunlop's husband, likes to say that Mia is “Methuselah's age, somewhere in there.” And then there's Amelia, an eight-month-old Great Pyrenees who has just arrived at their comfy farmhouse in Barkhamsted, Connecticut.

“She's a hurtin' puppy,” Dunlop remarks. “She underwent a spay surgery, and then her sutures didn't heal. She's on antibiotics. She spent two-and-half days in transport coming up from the South.” She doesn't know exactly what Amelia's life was like before she got picked up by Big Fluffy Dog Rescue, only that the puppy was skinny and looked starved and/or sick. She might've been beaten. So the couple's just letting her be until she feels safer.

Surprisingly, though, Amelia's already showing an interest in her surroundings after having been with them only one day. "It's kind of magical to watch," Dunlop muses. "She goes under my desk, or she goes into her crate. She comes out a little bit, she'll say, 'Hi, how are you?,' and then she'll go back in. Or she'll go with the other kids outside, and she'll run around a little bit. By this time next week, she'll be a different person. She'll be out a lot more. But you have to be really patient and understand that."

When Dunlop calls Amelia "a person," she means it. She and Busch, a former Air Force cop and correctional officer, manage to be both sensitive and matter-of-fact about the dogs who come to them for fostering. Their involvement with Big Fluffy Dog Rescue began when they moved to Barkhamsted and adopted their first Great Pyrenees, Bru, from friends who were internationally known llama breeders. Bru was born with "a horrible cardiac murmur -- could never live on a farm, could never do what a Pyr is supposed to do," she explains. "They're livestock guardians."

He was later joined by Alvero who came "sight unseen" from the National Great Pyrenees Rescue in Texas. "We just fell in love with the breed," Dunlop says. "They're terrific dogs -- they're terrific to be with. We like unusual dogs -- well, we like the unusual. And we rescue all of our dogs, including you" -- this is said in a soft lullaby voice to the dog nearest to her -- "and we just ended up having space and time."

Next came Lexie, courtesy of Lone Star Pyrs & Paws-North in New England. The couple began looking at other Pyrenees and discovered that Big Fluffy Dog Rescue "had a lot of the Pyrenees -- lots and lots of Pyrenees -- and we just started talking with them. And we said, 'All right, we'll just start to foster.'"

A good many of the rescues come up from the South, where Pyrenees are used as working dogs. If they're not able to work, they're shot, dumped at shelters, or abandoned outright. The spay/neuter and animal-protection laws are much more lax down there than they are here in New England, Dunlop explains. "We're talking about rural South – we're talking about rural Tennessee, we're talking about rural Kentucky. We're talking about people who are dirt-poor and who will breed Pyrenees and maybe get fifty bucks a dog. But the puppies are full of worms and full of mange." The shelters will contact the breed-specific rescue organizations to "come and get them if they can. You have to go down and get 'em...pull 'em up and quarantine 'em and heal 'em...and sometimes operate on 'em. And you have to neuter them. It's very expensive to rescue a dog."

Not all of the dogs are easy fosters either. Some of them come to Dragon Dance Farm shy, hurt, or afraid of men. Dunlop and Busch work with them, observing and medicating them...basically healing them both inside and out and "get [ting] them ready for their forever family to come along." The rescues have been anywhere from twelve-weeks- to six-years-old and the turn-around time anywhere from six hours to two months. The couple is very strict when it comes to screening potential adopters. "I'm really wacky about who adopts the puppies," she admits. "I've told people, 'You're not appropriate to take one of my dogs.'" Both Jean Harris, the president of Big Fluffy Dogs Rescue, and Elizabeth Zaccaro, the head of the Connecticut chapter, have "trust[ed] my judgment. We've put so much time in our fosters. I think all fosters do."

Dogs aren't the only creatures who have found haven at the farm. At one time, they had close to twenty llamas. Why llamas? Dunlop starts laughing, and Busch joins in. "She was into

llamas before I was,” he explains. “She divorced her husband, gave up her llamas...”

“He got the llamas in the custody battle,” she says facetiously.

“No, he sold them,” Busch corrects her.

“He sold my llamas out from under me,” she agrees.

“Then, about a year later,” Busch continues, getting into his story, “she goes, ‘Richard, guess what?’ I say, ‘What?’ She goes, ‘I bought The Man back.’ And I go, ‘Well either I’m not going to have a place to live because you decided to go back with your ex-husband, *or* she bought her favorite llama back, which was Chili.’”

(This is the sort of playful dialogue that keeps spontaneously breaking out during the interview. Dunlop and Busch are so totally in synch with one another, they’re kinda like the George Burns and Gracie Allen of animal rescue.)

Over the years, the herd dwindled down to three. Then two died. Llamas are herd animals and don’t do well on their own. So they gave the lone survivor to another llama owner. Dunlop looks back at those twenty years with the llamas as “an incredible special time. They’re wonderful beasts.” You can hear the ache in her voice. “I miss them horribly. They’re just great companions. They’re not much different than these guys.” She gestures toward the dogs. The llamas “have a Pyrenees mentality. They’re very independent. They’re very smart. They’re very loyal, very family-oriented.”

She and Busch share all sorts of llama lore. How when a female gives birth for the first time, her voice changes and she develops a call that’s unique to her. How the baby does the same, making it seem almost as though they have their own private language. And how llamas will keep out any and all intruders. “We did not have any deer, bobcats, coyotes, or bears

around,” maintains Busch. “Llamas have a distinctive sound that they make whenever they’re worried. An alarm call. And that alarm call kinda sounds like a horse’s whinny. All of a sudden, you hear this sound, and you *know* something’s going on in your area because they’ve got it spotted.”

It wasn’t unusual for the llamas to spot bears several hundred feet away, he continues. “If anything *was* to get in there, they would actually have killed it. Stomped it to death. They’re very protective.”

Now, of course, the couple just has the dogs and a flock of exotic chickens who look like escapees from a Mardi Gras parade. But the nurturing instinct is still going strong in both of them. “Richard has always brought home stray living things,” remarks Dunlop. “Stray dying plants, kittens...all kinds of strange animals.”

“I’ve just always liked animals,” he says in that easy-going way of his. “I enjoy animals. So she’ll sit there and go, ‘Oh, we’re getting a new dog this weekend. ‘Oh, we are? Oh, O. K.’”

“That’s not true,” she retorts.

“Sometimes.”

“I always ask you.”

“You always ask me.”

“I always ask you.”

“It’s funnier the way I say it,” he points out.

“Yeah, it is.” And they both start laughing.

There’s a lot of laughter and playful verbal sparring between them...a friendly copacetic energy that spills over into everything they do, including their rescue work. They both work from their gut, Busch says, and that’s how it has been with them from Day One. They met on-line: he was living down in Maryland, “and she lived up here in Connecticut. She was going through a terrible marriage, and I was ending a terrible

marriage. And we started talking to each other – we were in the same [chat] room. She thought I was some kind of idiot until one morning, I just happened to say a certain phrase, and she thought it was funny.”

Dunlop seconds his version of the story. “When I started talking to him, he couldn’t express himself. He couldn’t spell. He wasn’t typing very well. But he was *funny*.” They talked to each other on-line for a year; when they finally met, they were “both free of our marriages.” Six dates into the relationship, she asked him if he wanted to move to Connecticut, and he said, “Sure.” Since then, they’ve been apart maybe three weeks at most.

“We’re really lucky,” Dunlop reflects. She’s cutting up green grapes – “crack for chickens” – as she talks. “We have a really nice love story. And I think that probably why we’re successful with our fostering is because we’re successful with our relationship. Our household is pretty quiet. It’s pretty mellow. It’s good energy. And I do think that with any kind of intuitive, intelligent animal, they *know*.”

7) Conserving What We Love: Saving Australia's Animals

In the end, we will conserve only what we love, we will love only what we understand, and we will understand only what we are taught.

-- Baba Dioum, Senegalese poet and conservationist

The teapot -- an earthenware one from Australia that I picked up at a tag sale years ago -- is fashioned to look like a cottage. A kangaroo with her joey in pouch greet you at the front door. A wombat pokes a curious, thoughtful face out of the chimney. A kookaburra nests in the curve of the handle while koalas and other marsupials watch from the windows and back porch. It is a home for the animals and birds that hail from Down Under, and I have always loved it for that.

Like so many other people across the world, I have been watching with horror as the creatures' real-life counterparts have been falling prey to the bush fires ravaging Australia. In early January, more than 15 bush fires were burning in Southern Australia, taking with them 60,000 hectares of land. (A hectare contains roughly 2.47 acres). And the list goes on like some hideous litany: in Queensland, more than five bushfires and 250 hectares; in Western Australia, more than 40 bushfires and 1.2 million hectares; in New South Wales, more than 100 bushfires and 3.6 million hectares; in Victoria, more than 40 bushfires and 500,000 hectares; and in Tasmania, more than 30 bushfires and 8,000 hectares. Almost half of Kangaroo Island has been scorched by the fires -- although by the end of January, Humane Society International was

reporting that those had mostly been extinguished. At least 33 people have died, among them four Australian firefighters. Three American firefighters also died in a plane crash while fighting the fires in New South Wales.

In many pictures, the sky is orange from the flames, and black smoke is rolling in like some menacing fog from a horror movie. “Oh, my God. It looks like a scene out of hell,” I message Nola Higgs, my Australian friend.

“I think everywhere does,” she replies. “These fires can send embers several kilometres ahead, and spot fires break out in new and unpredictable areas.”

She sends me pictures. “The trees that you see are called ‘Mallee’ trees. They don’t look like much, but they are exceedingly dense wood. Once fire gets a hold of them, they burn with an intense heat and can smoulder for weeks – meaning control measures have to be in place for some time.”

The loss of wildlife is staggering. The World Wildlife Federation (WWF) estimates that 1.25 billion animals have died directly or indirectly from the fires. In early January, Professor Christopher Dickman of the University of Sydney went on record as saying that 480 million animals had died in New South Wales alone; later, he upped that figure to 800 million. But Professor Corey Bradshaw from Flinders University in Adelaide countered with “We’re not saying the number is wrong – it’s inestimable. The media and the public in general are hungry for numbers, and they get into a fuss, but the reality is no one actually knows.”

On January 20th, Adelaide Koala Rescue posted that they had “major concerns for the koalas of French Island, as bushfires [had] continued to rip through about 85 hectares of national park” over the previous weekend. The island, located in Victoria, has a substantial koala population. “The news of a

bushfire there is devastating,” the 24/7 rescue service continues. “It’s definitely another wake-up call for us to be careful and nurture what we’ve got... another message that things can escalate really quickly.” Roughly 1,000 of the 4,000 hives of the purest strain of Ligurian honey bees (originally from Italy) there have also been damaged by the fires. Yet another wake-up call: bee populations are already threatened worldwide, thanks to deforestation and climate change.

Photos and videos show “kangaroos desperately attempting to flee great walls of fires while rescue teams have been met by the charred bodies of thousands of koalas,” writes Joe Roberts of *Metro News*. Cockatoos are literally dropping dead out of trees. Innumerable dead birds have washed up on the beaches of Mallacoota: photographer Justin McManus told a reporter that the ash covering the bodies makes it difficult to immediately see “the familiar bright plumage of some of our most iconic birds [, t]he vivid blues, yellows, reds and greens of rainbow lorikeets, of crimson rosellas, of yellow-tailed black cockatoos, whipbirds, honeyeaters and robins.” The Australian bats are getting “smashed in the fires and in the heat,” as the Animal Rescue Collective (ARC) Craft Guild bluntly puts it. “Tens of thousands are dying from abandonment, and the population is in peril.”

Wombats are sharing their dens with smaller creatures, such as lyrebirds (ground-dwelling birds) and wallabies. The wombats aren’t shepherding the refugees from the fire into their dens, as originally reported. But they’re not chasing them out either. “Wombat burrows are big solid safe places,” Nola explains.

Wild creatures aren’t the only ones suffering. Livestock has been lost. “It’s like Armageddon,” one woman remarks. “Everyone is just trying to get water and food to the animals,

shoot the ones that can't be saved, get temporary fences up to keep stock secure, and pull out all the logs and stumps still burning.”

Pets, too, have been drastically affected by the fires. A pound in New South Wales took in 500 animals. “Hundreds of pets are left at the pound and in showgrounds as people evacuate,” says ARC. “Some of these never go back.” So, in addition to requesting bat wraps, joey pouches, kangaroo night-time bags, and penguin rehabilitation jumpers, the guild is looking for people to make kitten onesies, puppy-sized dog jumpers, lamb and chicken jumpers, and animal sweaters. The “jumpers” referred to here are little shirts or pullovers and can help animals “having difficulty maintaining body heat. Usually, a pouch is sufficient, and it’s common to see small joeys in pouches packed in a basket, which has a gentle heating pad on. Depends on what’s available and what condition baby’s in,” Nola says.

Blackwalkers go into the fire zones, searching for surviving wildlife and “bringing them in for rescue and rehabilitation,” she tells me. Feeding and water stations are being set up wherever possible. Very early on, the New South Wales government began Operation Rock Wallaby to get food to the brush-tailed rock wallabies. Stressed by the intense drought that preceded the fires, the marsupials found themselves outside their natural habitats and starving. Thousands of kilograms of food – mostly sweet potatoes and carrots – have already been airdropped. “When we can, we are also setting up cameras to monitor the uptake of the food and the number and variety of the animals there,” said Matthew Kean, the New South Wales environmental minister.

The Victorian government was slower to respond despite calls from the Australian Veterinarian Association to airdrop

food into inaccessible fire-scorched areas, (Some of the animals in these areas – the brush-tailed rock wallaby and the mountain pygmy-possum in Gippsland, for instance – are already critically endangered.) “Aerial food drops began over a week ago in New South Wales,” pointed out Victoria opposition environmental spokesman David Morris. “It’s time that the Andrews Labor Government acts to ensure animals aren’t forced to starve to death.” Thankfully, thousands of Animals Australia supporters convinced the government to get cracking.

It is, as commentator and television host Trevor Noah says, “heart-breaking. And not just because so many animals are being wiped out but because Australia has the coolest animals you can’t find anywhere else.” According to the WWF’s Australian branch, there are 13 creatures whose habitats have been destroyed or severely damaged by the fires: among them are the southern corroboree frog, the regent honeyeater bird, and the western ground parrot. Other at-risk creatures include koala populations throughout southeastern Australia; the Kangaroo Island dunnart (a mouse-sized marsupial); the glossy black potoroo (another small marsupial); the Blue Mountain water skink (a lizard); the eastern bristlebird; and, of course, our friend the brush-tailed rock wallaby.

The ecosystem, too, is at risk, and we cannot afford to lose any of these creatures. Even the quoll or chuditch, a carnivorous marsupial about the size of a house cat, is “an essential part of the food chain,” Nola says, “so efforts to protect them are essential.”

No tragedy is without its glimmers of light, those moments that make the heaviness of spirit -- the sheer awfulness of it all -- bearable. Owen Colley, a six-year-old living in Hingham, Massachusetts, raised over \$20,000 to aid Australian wildlife with his clay koala sculptures. Celebrities have given more than

generously to the relief efforts. The employees of the Port Macquarie Golf Club have been gathering leaves from the gum trees around the course for the 70 or so koalas at the Port Macquarie Koala Hospital. In what spare time they have, members of the 16th Regiment Emergency Support Force have been feeding and cuddling injured koalas as well as building climbing structures for them at the Cleland Wildlife Park. Jamie Joseph, a conservationist with Saving the Wild in South Africa, arrived in Australia with 1,500 boxes of medical-grade manuka honey from Comvita in Te Puke, New Zealand. The honey is antibacterial and used to treat burns and stave off infection. “We use manuka honey for our poaching survivors,” Joseph explained. “For scorched animals, it’s liquid gold.”

These are only a few of the stories. But they help us take heart and give us hope for the future of these creatures we can’t find anywhere else. No one in his or her right mind wants to see them reduced to characters on a tea pot – to something as storied and as unreal to future generations as unicorns.

The rains have come back to parts of Australia. The fires in New South Wales are not all out, but they are contained: green shoots and leaves have already begun to push through scorched bark and earth there and in nearby Victoria, reminding us that there is always rebirth in Nature. But sometimes Nature needs help, and she has never needed it more than now.

“Orthodox views about Australia’s environment and its management no longer work and rapid adaptation is required – using lessons learned by the First Australians,” argues writer Joe Morrison. “The seasons in Australia need to be defined by the changes in our environment, the prevailing winds and astronomy, as Indigenous people did... Indigenous knowledge and management are responsive to the changes in the country,

regardless of the month; changes that in many places may signal actions needing to be taken.”

Nola has some additional thoughts on the situation. “We need to be creating habitats, pollution-free and feral-animal-free,” she insists. Take platypuses, for example: they “are very private (mostly) and need good streams with banks for their underwater entrances. We also need wildlife corridors, so they can move about without danger. Quite a lot has been done in certain areas, but this needs a massive concerted effort.”

A particularly moving editorial cartoon came out at the height of the crisis, and it has stayed with me. A very annoyed-looking joey is complaining about sharing his mother’s pouch with a sleeping koala cub: “Mom, it’s cramped in here. Why is this kid in your pouch?”

His mother looks down at him with sad, anxious eyes. We see what the joey, tucked in her pouch, doesn’t: the leaping flames in the background that she and two other kangaroos are doing their damndest to escape from. “Be patient, dear,” she says gently. “His mom couldn’t make it.”

The cartoon still blows me away. It speaks of the interconnectedness of us all – of our need to help the Australian wildlife, whether it’s through making donations or making koala mittens and bat wraps. In saving them, we are saving ourselves. We are involved not just in mankind but in animalkind, and we will pay a heavy price if we don’t remember that.

In memory of the animal and human lives lost during the Australian bush fires, June 2019 – May 2020.



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