

To Slinky, with love, part 1

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I have loved hundreds of animals throughout my research career. That's probably not news to those of you who know me. Many have considered my attachment to our animals to be bit over-the-top. For years I've been lectured, ridiculed and accused of being an animal rights activist by colleagues and supervisors. Maybe it's because I told them that Danny, one of my study monkeys, was so cute that I wanted to smooch his lips off! Maybe it's because I spent time each workday cuddling and playing with the cat who lived alone down the hall. Maybe it's because I spent several nights in recovery with my monkeys, monitoring and comforting them after long surgical procedures. Or maybe it's because these people forgot that most of these beautiful creatures would die so they could live and love longer. My love for our research animals may be over the top, but so are their sacrifices to humankind and animalkind. They are heroes to generations of people and animals of the past, present and future. And I love them like crazy! I don't understand why this is hard for some people to grasp. I also don't care. It's not their comfort that concerns me. And I don't work for them, regardless of their position. I work for our animals.

Now that I am the director of an animal care program, I don't get to spend nearly as much time with our animals as I would like. Still, I am enormously grateful for the opportunities I have to serve their well-being in this capacity. I can live with this trade-off because I am surrounded by specially trained animal lovers who are committed to providing our animals with everything they need to feel healthy and comfortable. Our goal is for them to experience as much joy as possible before they leave us. We bond strongly with them, on

their terms, and follow their lead. Some are more playful than others. Some like more alone time than others. And some like to be rubbed and snuggled more than others. The bottom line is that if they want it, and we can give it to them, they get it. We spoil our animals and make no apologies for doing so, because we love them and it's the best part of our job. Continual heartbreak is also part of our job. Their time with us is limited and we need our moments with them to be as loving and memorable as they do.

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Every now and again we are graced with a real character, an animal so full of personality and life that everyone who meets him is smitten instantly. Our pig, Slinky, was one of those characters. He was two months old when we met, and he was adorable, playful and unusually personable. Slinky couldn't get enough of his caregivers and they couldn't get enough of him. He was out of his run a good deal of the time, following folks around while they worked, like a little pink nag. No one minded this because, when the work was done, Slinky liked to lie on the ground, face to face with his caregiver, and have his head stroked. The bond between them was palpable during those moments.

Shortly after Slinky arrived we learned that his study was cancelled. Pigs are powerful models for human disorders because we share many anatomic and physiologic characteristics. We expected Slinky to be



chosen quickly for another study. Until then he was ours to enjoy and spoil. Every day with Slinky was special, full of antics and routines that still make my heart smile. Breakfast was his favorite meal. He demanded to be served at the same time each morning and squealed like a lunatic until his caregiver arrived to transfer him to his clean run for his meal. Soon he started opening the latch to the clean stall himself. He was a very helpful pig. His afternoon routine was no less entertaining. Slinky liked to relax in the afternoons and enjoyed fresh oranges during snack time. So, he would lie in his hay like Julius Caesar and wait for his favorite caregiver to feed them to him by hand! They were a priceless pair.

Eleven months and 700 lb later, Slinky was called upon to help in a study designed to prevent brain damage that is common in children after heart surgery. We were told that all of his blood would be drawn, while he was sedated and euthanized. Slinky rested in his favorite spot that afternoon, surrounded by the caregivers he loved, who laid with him in his hay and stroked him as he drifted peacefully to his eternal rest. He lost his life for our children that day. Slinky was a hero for families who never knew him and, yes, we loved him like crazy! I'll bet you do too.

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