

Letting Go

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By Elizabeth Moyer

Telling people was one of the hardest things, before and after. And now I am having to tell you this, too: I had to put my horse Teddy down on June 1, 2007.

Several months ago, I noticed a lump at the base of his neck, which my vet pronounced “not good.” The technical term for this type of not good-ness was lymphosarcoma, a serious form of cancer, with poor prognosis.

In his mid 20s, Ted had a long and full life. I have been privileged to have him for some of that, including this last journey. After watching my mother’s brief and horrible battle with cancer several years ago, I knew I would be able to see this horse that I loved so much through this, no matter how difficult, and vowed to make the most of the time we had left together.

I didn’t panic at the initial diagnosis: I still had my horse to enjoy and love; he was happy and handsome and seemed to be enjoying life too—just at a slower pace. Our goal was to keep him as comfortable as possible, and monitor his condition for signs of pain or progression. I kept a journal to track his good days and bad.

As much as life went on, with the daily routine of feeding, refilling water buckets, mucking and wrapping legs, in the back of my mind I worried that I wouldn’t recognize when my horse was suffering and know for sure when it was time to let him go. I discussed this with my closest horse friends who have been through this, as many of you probably have. With supportive friends and the expertise of my trusted vet, I knew I wasn’t alone, yet the decision had to be mine alone. It would be between me and Ted in the end.

The first thing I did was throw him a party. Ted loved to be the center of attention. To him, the more people around the better—probably based on a quota of treats per person in his mind. It was a perfect excuse to get him all spiffed up and take some photos. Ted had a lot of friends, and I wanted them to be able to come and celebrate life with him.

We had a few good months. But in the end, it was clear to me when he began to fail and the time was near. As I made a list of questions for my vet about Ted’s prognosis and quality of life, I began to realize what the answer would be.

I knew I would regret it if I let my horse suffer even a minute of unnecessary pain or fear. I wanted Ted to maintain his dignity, above all. I know my horse, and he has always been very stoic. But it wouldn’t be right for me to let him continue for my sake. After going over things with my vet, I made my decision, and we made the appointment.

Still, it wasn’t easy. I felt like the angel of death for a week, as I tried to enjoy every moment with my horse. Dr. P. left strong medicine for Ted, so we could keep him comfortable in the meantime. I felt lucky to have the chance to say goodbye. I held Ted’s head and told him he was a good, brave, kind, wonderful horse, and how much I loved him. Not that I hadn’t hugged him every day and told him this before, but now it was more important.

I spent as much time as possible with my horse, watching him doze, keeping him company as he ate, stroking his neck. As I watched him sleep one evening, I pictured the most beautiful meadow, full of lush grass and dotted with yellow flowers—the dandelions that Ted loved to graze on. I imagined leading him through the gate to this pasture, taking off his halter and releasing him to join the horses galloping over the hill. He moves easily, without a trace of stiffness. He hesitates for a moment before joining the herd, leaving me standing at the gate. After running joyfully around with his tail in the air, he comes back to touch my hand with his nose one last time. I tell him to go, and I walk through the gate with that empty halter and, leaning on the rail, watch as he races over the hill, to become part of a vast sea of chestnuts, bays, blacks and grays. The thunder of hooves grows fainter.

I ran through the scenario several times in my mind, willing Ted to understand what I was trying to tell him. A few days later, I got an answer. We were ambling slowly in the sun, grazing and visiting with Ted’s favorite friends. As I went to take Ted back to his stall, he suddenly grew very purposeful in his walk. His legs seemed less wobbly and his stride more certain. It did my heart good seeing him walk out like this, and I was happy to indulge him. He took me to the head of the trail, which was unusual—we had not spent a lot of time out here, so to see his confidence and strength as he took me up that trail was significant. Suddenly I understood why, when I caught sight of the yellow blooms emerging on the

hillside.

I let him lead the way down the trail. His head was high, and he felt powerful again. It was as if he was showing me, "There is a new road I have to go down now. I am strong and not afraid." I knew then it was OK to let him go.

"and so I have nothing to fear; and here my story ends. My troubles are all over, and I am at home; and often before I am quite awake, I fancy I am in the orchard at Birtwick, standing with my old friends under the apple trees." –Black Beauty.