

Live Baboon And Bear. Gas, Ice, Cigarettes.

By Randall L. Eaton, Ph.D.

The opening of the steel-lined barn doors was met with an incredible uproar of hoots, trills and hollers resonating against the din of big cats pawing cagesides, rhesuses frantically shaking cage wire and the thunderous clap of Charlie the baboon thrusting himself against the metal walls of his cubicle. The mad frenzy escalated into what could be likened to a prison riot. Once the lions and tigers started roaring in anticipation of eating, their primary excitement, the other animals joined in, some out of fear, others from contagion or for entertainment and still others from eagerness to interact with me. These last had been hand raised, irreversibly socialized to humans but forced to live largely without human contact as adults. For Sabrina the tigress, my coming meant a temporary reprieve of what I am sure was a terrible loneliness.

When my professor gave me a special assignment to undertake a research project in animal communication which would broaden my knowledge of animals other than carnivores, I opted for a study of non-verbal communication in the baboon. But since Charlie was the only baboon in the zoo, I would have to serve in the role of baboon. My aim was to learn Charlie's communicative behavior and use it myself to interact with him.

Baboons are among the most social creatures on earth, and they are certainly capable of communicating with people; for instance, those baboons who serve South African ranchers as herdsmen riding sheep and protecting flocks against predators, or the famous baboon who cooked meals for his paraplegic master before pushing him in a cart to a train track while the baboon switched the tracks throughout the day then carted the man home to fix dinner and clean house.

An adult male of the East African savanna variety, Charlie busied himself in a sterile world as best he could by competing for status among such familiars as the director or myself, adequate substitutes for male baboons. He had, as behaviorists say, a low threshold for social interaction, the professional's way of saying he was lonely. Charlie's life evolved around trying to communicate his studliness to us while we worked in the zoo feeding animals or renovating cage environments. If I passed out of view, he'd jump from his high stool on the back wall and ricochet his body off the metallic side wall making an enormous clang, and if I walked in front of his cage he'd leap down on the floor and walk parallel to the bars shrugging his shoulders as a display of dominance, then leap back up to his perch, spread his legs wide and exhibit an instant erection as wild baboons do to warn strange troops trespassing on their territory. If I stared at him, Charlie would quickly threaten with partially open jaws showing leopard-size canines, but since this hardly fazed me, he'd assume a submissive stance—his erection would go limp as fast as it had risen, his legs would close and he would stare off at the ceiling.

Charlie had a poor reputation among the zoo people, which I considered was the result of prejudice—until he got me. I was hurrying to finish feeding the big cats and when I passed a foot or two closer to his cage than usual he jolted me with a force so powerful it nearly bowled me over. My jaw was hanging as I glanced to see Charlie perched at the back of the cage staring off as though nothing had happened. He had jumped off his stool, taken a bounce against the floor which propelled his body to the bars, passed his arm full length through them, and in one lightning fast motion pinched my arm and ripped my

shirt half off, all of it so incredibly quick that he was able to rebound back onto his perch without me seeing anything but a blur. The same had occurred to everyone else— it was just a matter of time until he got me, they said.

As Captain of Purdue's weightlifting team, my muscles were rock hard, and in years of playing football and basketball, receiving broken bones, sprains, dislocations, all the athletic maladies, his puny hand gave me the nastiest bruise of my life. At the university weightroom, known locally as the cage, I recounted my experience and presented my ugly bruise as proof, the only time I was able to generate interest in animal behavior among the "animals." A conclave of powerlifters, body builders and jocks listened attentively as I described experiments that documented the vastly superior arm strength of chimpanzees and gorillas.

A few nights later during feeding one of Purdue's football players appeared at the zoo door. His non-verbal gesturing consisted of inflated - "barn door" – latissimus muscles, protracted trapeziuses, rolled up shirt sleeves revealing bulging biceps and wide flung steps exaggerating columnar thighs. Curious about this he-baboon named Charlie, he saw his frail sixty-pound body and doubted that Charlie could hurt anyone with the mere pinch of his hand.

The fellow told me he couldn't believe that Charlie had bruised me so bad, and I assured him that he had, that Charlie was small but powerful and quick. I told him that Charlie could jump across his cage and grab him faster than he could react, but he wouldn't believe me so, feeling that proof was required and knowing that Charlie wouldn't strike me as I stood in front of his cage and faced him, I walked over to the edge of the cage, faced Charlie squarely, and told the guy that if he stood where I was, Charlie would hit him before he could get away.

Baited by my standing there unmolested, he bet me five dollars that he could trade places with me without being hit. I backed away from Charlie's cage as the skeptic marched straight to where I had been standing. He stood there a few seconds looking at Charlie who seemed to be ignoring him with those far away stares at the ceiling, then he propped his fists on his hips, adopted a smug grin, and glanced back towards me when Charlie's arm shot through the bars and ripped his T-shirt. I stood there laughing while he examined his arm for damages, pulled his shirt onto his shoulder and cursed.

I reminded him that Charlie was real fast, but he was too awed and dazed to wonder about anything except whether I possessed supernatural powers. How else could he account for the difference in Charlie's action toward us? The door was open for interpretation of non-verbal behavior, and how I had maintained eye contact to prevent Charlie's attack, which I demonstrated by returning to the front of the cage. After I coached him a bit, he returned, also unscathed, then I opened his mind to everyday eye contact on the street and in the weightroom, firmly establishing a curiosity about the relationship of animal and human behavior.

Life with Charlie took on new dimensions as I began to systematically investigate his expressions. I watched him interact with people much the same as wild baboons do with one another, and this provided me with a basic repertoire of gestures, body signals and facial expressions— fundamental baboonese. I practiced shoulder shrugging, eyebrow raising, lip smacking and teeth chattering to prime myself for using his language as the way to identify the meaning of his gestures.

I began simply by walking from the side to the front of Charlie's cage, each time in precisely the same manner, as neutrally as possible, save a single expression. One time I'd

raise my eyebrows, nothing more, avoiding direct eye contact and having to observe his responses peripherally, then walk out of view and record the interaction. I'd repeat the procedure but shrug my shoulders without raising eyebrows. For thousands of trials I tested, observed and recorded Charlie's behavioral responses using strict guidelines including the random interspersing of totally neutral interactions so as to evaluate any conditioning effects which might have accumulated unintentionally. Finally I began to combine gestures, such as shoulder shrugging with lip smacking or eyebrow raising with teeth chattering, until I had learned proper baboonese well enough to predictably elicit Charlie's behavior at will. I could provoke him into erecting his penis or into submission—legs together, penis flaccid, mouth closed, eyes fixed on the ceiling.

But there were some gaps owing to my emotional responses. I had not been able to overcome fear when Charlie walked close enough to clobber me while chattering his teeth. I figured out what he was saying by doing it myself, to which he instantly responded by presenting his buttocks as an invitation to groom him. Charlie wheeled around and pushed his rear against the bars waiting for me to pick through his hair looking for ticks or something worth removing. He had no parasites, but grooming is a friendly thing among baboons and humans...Charlie wanted to be friends. After I groomed him awhile, I chattered my teeth, turned around and bent over, and sure enough, Charlie promptly sat down, reached his arms through the bars and meticulously picked away at my jeans. Imagining that teeth chattering in close proximity somehow signalled aggression, I discovered to the contrary that it derived from grooming with the teeth. Charlie and I had overcome a language barrier.

When I returned to Purdue two years later to work on some writing, I asked my professor how Charlie was getting along, and he told me that the decision had been made to sell him so more space could be given to the tigress. I was sorry to hear that Charlie was gone, and reminded my professor of what a fine subject Charlie would have made for animal behavior classes. I took it for granted that Charlie must have gone to a large zoo where he would have found a natural social life among other baboons, and was very angry when he told me that the zoo director had sold Charlie to a gas station with a crummy roadside zoo down in Brown County.

My professor said that it all happened before he could do anything to stop it—that the director considered Charlie a weirdo, while the tigress was his favorite, he had raised her. The fact that Charlie and I had become friends, that people could socialize with Charlie with a minimum of baboonese and some grooming now and then, didn't seem to matter. After all the work we had contributed to improve conditions for the zoo animals, doubling their space, it was incongruous that the director would dump Charlie in a worse place. Eight years of solitary confinement should have been enough of a sentence.

A few days later I drove down to Brown County to see Charlie, but turned around when I read the makeshift sign beside the road: "Live Baboon and Bear. Gas, ice, cigarettes."