On the Banks of the River Styx

New Perspectives on Terminal Lucidity and Other Near-Death Phenomena

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Chapter Eleven

End-of-Life Experiences in Animals

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Abstract

There has recently been an increased interest in end-of-life experiences (ELEs) in humans, but ELEs in non-human animals have not yet been assessed. In this chapter, we summarize findings from a study we performed to collect and analyze reports about remarkable behavioral aspects of animals during their last phase of life. After public appeals in which we asked for reports about ELEs in animals, we received numerous responses from pet owners. We were able to group these experiences into specific categories, which we termed *the last goodbyes, last visits, last rally, retreating into solitude, unusual premonitions of death, somatic surprises, terminal lucidity in animals, and potential near-death visions in animals.* We present representative reports pertaining to these different categories and show that many of them show striking similarities to remarkable behavior reported by dying people. The similarity between animal and human ELEs could increase the recognition that animals share an inner life similar to that of humans during all phases of life. However, as our study was of a preliminary character and only the first of its kind, we encourage further systematic research in this field. Such studies would help to understand facets of the dying process in animals, and especially pets, better. This could lead to a more respectful treatment of pets, as well as of animals in farms, zoos, and in the wild.

Introduction

Numerous treatises on exceptional experiences of humans published in the 19th and 20th centuries covered unusual death-related phenomena. Nevertheless, only in recent decades have spontaneous phenomena that occur around the time somebody dies aroused the interest of scientists in mainstream med-

ical settings. The variety of death-related occurrences has become known by different names, such as death-bed phenomena, end-of-life phenomena, or end-of-life experiences (Brayne et al., 2008; Claxton-Oldfield et al., 2020; dos Santos et al., 2017; Shared Crossing Research Initiative, 2024). They include near-death visions (Claxton-Oldfield & Dunnett, 2018; Depner et al., 2020; Klein et al., 2018; Morita et al., 2016) and terminal lucidity (Claxton-Oldfield & Dunnett, 2018; Nahm, 2012; Nahm et al., 2012; Nahm, 2022, 2024). The study of end-of-life experiences (ELEs) can help to improve our understanding of human nature, advance our knowledge about the dying process, and offer perspectives for dealing with spontaneous and often emotionally intense phenomena in near-death states.

Although unusual death-related experiences have also been reported from non-human animals, research into animal ELEs is lacking almost completely. In order to raise awareness about them, we recently provided the first case compilation regarding phenomena reported to occur when animals die (Sheldrake et al., 2023). The present book chapter is a shortened and revised version of this publication. At the time of writing it, our data base contained about 150 entries of varying quality in which people described behavior of animals that seemed to be related to their impending death. Of these, 114 case reports were sufficiently detailed and appropriate to be considered in our collection. They contain features that allowed us to group them into specific categories. Notwithstanding that some cases could be allocated to more than one category, we classified them into groups with the following names: Last goodbyes (53 case reports), last visits (6), the last rally (28), retreating into solitude (10), unusual premonitions of death (5), somatic surprises (2), terminal lucidity (7), near-death visions (3).

In the following, we present accounts that illustrate typical examples of these types of ELE behavior. More information about the acquisition of the case reports as well as additional examples can be found in our original publication (Sheldrake et al., 2023) and at the website of Rupert Sheldrake (https://www.sheldrake.org/research/end-of-life-experiences). But we also included two new accounts that were sent to us after the original study was published. They demonstrate that many more of these observations must have been made already. These two cases are marked with an asterisk in brackets (*) at their beginning.

Case Examples

Last Goodbyes

The dominant feature in many of the case reports is that the pet seeks to say goodbye to their owners or other loved ones. Typically, these pets are already very weak, and they die soon after this final farewell.

> "This is the sad but true story of what our family experienced with our dog Foxi. We all loved the dog because it was so friendly, devoted, and loyal, as well as very watchful and clever. When the dog became old, it could not hear so well anymore, ate less, and became weak. Finally, at the age of 14, it could barely move from its resting place. Then one day, the following happened: The whole family sat at the dinner table when the good dog struggled to its feet, went around from one to the next, sadly looked at everybody, and gave paws to each member of the family. Then it trudged back, slowly lay down—and died. You can believe me, we had tears in our eyes after this goodbye scene. The dog had felt the end and pulled itself together for a final goodbye to all of us."

> "When I was a child, our family inherited my great-grandmother's parakeet, Sugar-bird. Sugar-bird was a light blue parakeet that had suffered a stroke and was no longer able to use his legs to grasp his perch. My dad installed a batten to replace the perch so the bird could still sit in his spot. One day the bird flew from his cage in the family room to the kitchen while the family was eating dinner at the kitchen table. We were all startled by this as he had never flown outside the cage before. The next day he passed away. We thought at the time that the bird must have flown up to the kitchen to say goodbye to all of us as we were all gathered around the table."

Last Visits

In this category, we included accounts in which animals visited loved ones for a last goodbye in a similar manner as in the cases described in the previous section—but this time, the animals crossed a considerable distance between two different locations. In their book on remarkable aspects of animal life, Gaddis and Gaddis (1970) included a case that represented a case of "psi trailing", i.e. a case in which an animal found its owner in a new location that the animal had never visited previously (Rhine & Feather, 1962; Sheldrake, 2011). A dog found a beloved caretaker in a location it had never been to and

then died there. The case described below likewise involves the astonishing feature of psi trailing.

> "For many years I had a mongrel dog called Bruce. When I started courting, I spent less time with him, although I still loved him. In turn, he turned his affection toward a girl who lived not very far away who took him for long walks, and occasionally she would ask if she could keep him at weekends. After mother died, my father decided to move to a house several miles away. What to do with Bruce was a problem, which was resolved when my friend said she would love to have him. Many years later, on a lovely summer's evening, I heard scratching outside the bedroom window of my new home. I opened it and looking down, I saw the white-haired face of Bruce. You can imagine the excitement in the household. We made such a fuss over him. However, in the early hours of the morning, he made indications it was time to go. I can still see him walking away over the field, stopping and looking back. I met my friend whilst shopping a few weeks later who informed me Bruce had died. He had gone missing one night, returning early the following day—and had passed away three days later. It is especially remarkable that Bruce had never been to the new address, and we had been parted for over five years. The dog had to cross over a bridge and travel over three miles to find me in my new address."

The Last Rally

In some of the presented cases, the animals appeared to muster an extra strength to say goodbye. A pronounced surge of vitality in animals shortly before dying was, in fact, a frequent feature of the cases reported to us. Therefore, we grouped some of them into a distinct category. Such increased vitality has long been known to occur in dying people. There are various names in different cultures and languages for this remarkable phenomenon. In English, recent terms that are used in the context of palliative and hospice care include the last "rally" before death (Kastenbaum, 2006; Kemp, 1995) or "premortem surge" (Schreiber & Bennett, 2014). We present three examples below.

> (*) "My PhD was in microbiology, but I have also been a registered nurse for 50 years. The phenomenon of the last rally is by no means common, but I too have observed it several times. Having shared my home with many dogs in my 72 years, I also observed it once in a dog! We had a

wonderful Labrador, Max. He was what we call in the UK an 'old soul', he was very wise and kind. He grew old. At the age of 12, he suffered a weak heart, arthritis and a degree of dementia. Max was unable to walk far at all. One morning I took him out for his little toilet visit and he ran away from me! I chased him and he ran to a wooded waterfall walk about a mile away. He ran around, swam in the river, tail wagging the whole time. It was his favorite walk many years ago. We went home, he ate and settled in his bed. Next morning he died. I'm sure on some level Max knew that death was imminent and he chose one last happy gallop around the waterfalls."

"I have a bird story that is almost hard to believe because it is about our family's parakeet who lived 20 years, seemed to adore my mother, and exhibited skills and traits seemingly impossible for a creature with a brain the size of a pea. The years came and went, and I am at a loss to know how to explain all the wonderful things we learned from this cheerful, loving green being. The last day inevitably came, and he sat in a stupor on his perch for hours without eating, drinking, wing-stretching, or chirping. We just sat there by his cage, wondering if he was suffering or if there was something we should do for him. Suddenly he awoke bolt upright, exited the open door of his cage, and managed to fly to my mother's hand. He never moved again. He returned to a stupor state for another two hours as she held him. Then he was gone. We never knew how he found the strength to make that final flight. He knew he was dying, and he wanted to spend his final moments with my mother."

"I run a very large animal sanctuary and oversee every soul who passes. They usually know when they are going. I had a race horse who was dying of snake bite with us frantically trying to save her. Suddenly she got up, and we were able to lead her to a stable. We thought she was healing. But she died the next day. This type of rally, for me, is part of the dying process. Dying animals will get very active. We just lost a beloved old goat who wandered up to the hay shed and gorged himself. We knew it was his last rally."

Retreating into Solitude

Another seemingly typical phenomenon reported from animals is their retreat into solitude before dying. As the following examples from our collec-

tion illustrate, animals sometimes gather enough physical strength to bid farewell to their loved ones prior to leaving.

> "We had a Collie many years ago. In the final months and weeks, it was just lying passively on the floor without energy. Then one day it came running to each family member to greet us, jumping like in joy, etc. Then it took off to the woods, where it chose to die in solitude. We found it later the same day. Without a doubt, it knew that now the time had come to say goodbye."

> (*) "I inherited two cows when I bought my property. They responded to being called by name. During a drought period I decided that I would need to start feeding them as everything was really dried up. One of them, Devi, came up to me showing me that she was no longer able to eat. I am not sure how old she was. She had lost her teeth. She came up to me and looked me in the eyes with a sad goodbye-look and then wandered off towards the bushes. She turned around one more time looking at me as if saying thank you and then disappeared. We never found her body until two years later. I still have her horns now and cry every time I tell this story."

Unusual Premonitions of Death

Several of the previous case reports indicated that the moribund animals knew that their lives were about to end. These premonitions are quite remarkable, given that even the minds of higher mammals such as dogs and cats are often thought to be not developed enough to be able to form a concept of dying and their own death. Nevertheless, the animals in the previously presented examples had been very old and/or ill already and might have felt their powers fading. It is, therefore, even more intriguing that we also received reports that concerned comparatively healthy animals that nevertheless seemed to display premonitions of their impending threat to their lives, such as the following two cases.

> "It happened in December 1944 during the Second World War in Houffalize, Belgium. An old man who owned sheep had died. He had no family. My grandfather decided to lead the sheep into his garden and into a kind of veranda or greenhouse near the main building. The sheep didn't have a problem with living in this new environment for a few days. But one

evening, they all began to bleat very loudly all night through. The eight children who lived in the house (including my mother) didn't understand what was happening and considered the sheep's behavior very curious. It was difficult, if not impossible, to sleep. Early in the morning, a bomb hit the greenhouse and killed all sheep. My mother told me this story. It was impossible for her to forget it."

"In the summer of 1997, my daughter was working on a grant under Dr. [...] at a university. Part of her duties was to retrieve the cage with the lab rats. They were part of a cancer research program and, as such, had been injected with live cancer tumors and then different medicines to study the results. Each of the rats was color dotted to determine how long they had been on the medications. And, every so often, the rats would be 'sacrificed' so the cancer and the organs could be studied. My daughter, not really sympathetic to lab rats, became concerned when she noticed a regular phenomenon. On the day the rats were to be sacrificed, unlike days when they were being weighed and measured, the rats would all gather in a corner, heads facing the center of a circle, and they would be squeaking and showing signs of alarm. As my daughter said to me, 'Mom, they know. Somehow, they know.' "

Somatic Surprises

Sometimes, the last rally or terminal vitality goes hand in hand with physical improvements or movements that seemed inconceivable before because of the animals' handicap or injury.

"I have a story about a cat that I found on the road with a broken neck and brought home to die. It was with me three days and never moved, just panted. Just before it died, it got up, stretched, meowed very loud, purred into my hand, and then lay down dead."

Terminal Lucidity in Animals

The mental pendant to the last rally and somatic surprises is terminal lucidity, the already mentioned unexpected improvement of mental clarity shortly before death in creatures that have previously been in a drowsy, confused, or even comatose state. Naturally, somatic surprises and terminal lucidity can occur concomitantly. But because the communication of animals is more difficult to decipher than that of other human beings, it is often difficult to

determine whether an animal is confused or demented, and thus, if a last goodbye or rally before death also implied an instance of terminal lucidity. Nevertheless, we received case reports according to which the mental state of the moribund animals was clearly impaired before they seemed to brighten up for a very last time.

> "My pet was a six-year-old Chihuahua that developed a brain tumor. He was basically out of it, did not respond to my wife or me, and was having occasional convulsions. The night before he was to be put down at the vet, he was completely normal for a brief time. He jumped up in my lap, wanted to play like everything was normal, then went to my wife and did the same thing. All of this happened in about a 30-minute time frame, and then he went back into "out of it and convulsing." My wife and I believe he was saying goodbye."

> "My cat Cleo was dying, and I was sitting with her. She was nearly comatose, not moving, her eyes glazed over unseeing. Her legs were very cold. This state had been progressing upon her for days, and because of the coldness of her legs, I felt she might be very close. But I was just sitting there, mostly, not even really petting her. Suddenly she woke up. She put her paw upon my hand and gazed into my eyes with intensity. She was saying goodbye to me. That was perfectly clear. Within an hour, she had passed."

Near Death Visions in Animals?

Among ELEs known from human beings, near-death visions are a prominent feature. In these experiences, sick people report glimpses into what appears to them as a transcendental afterlife realm. Frequently, they perceive apparitions of deceased loved ones or spiritual figures who come to prepare them for their transition (Claxton-Oldfield & Dunnett, 2018; Depner et al., 2020). In the vast majority of cases, these experiences are regarded as very comforting and soothing. Sometimes, near-death visions go hand in hand with terminal lucidity and a transiently improved physical strength. It is intriguing that judging from their behavior, also some of the moribund animals in our reports might have experienced a similar vision. This is particularly evident in the following example (Neppe, n. d.):

> "Our dog Snowy died on 30 June 2004. She was in a coma for several hours: Initially, her level of consciousness fluctuated somewhat, and

she was calmed. Then she fell into a deep coma in which she was unresponsive to sound stimuli, from about noon that day until her eventual death at 11:45 p.m. At about 6 p.m., she was more clearly very weak and had altered consciousness. She did not respond to tactile stimuli, which were not painful (we did not perform painful stimuli for humane reasons). At about 7 p.m., Snowy suddenly sat upright, looked as if she was looking at an object very, very intensely, and followed that object with her eyes, her head moved slightly from side to side. If a dog could smile, she would smile. You could see a certain happiness radiating from her. She started wagging her tail for a few seconds, then collapsed and fell back into a coma. All four members of my family witnessed this. My wife, myself, and two teenagers (my daughter and my son), although I and my daughter were particularly aware of this. We both independently and immediately noticed that it was a very strange thing happening. We spoke almost simultaneously, recording our amazement. I interpreted this as a possible near-death vision."

Discussion

For those familiar with ELEs in human beings, it is intriguing that these ELEs in animals show many parallels to those reported by humans. This concerns especially the *last rally before* death and the additional characteristics that we classified into *last goodbyes, somatic surprises, terminal lucidity,* and potential *near-death visions.* The literature on ELEs in humans describes numerous aspects of this last rally. One of them is an increased desire and renewed ability to eat (Klein et al., 2018; Schreiber & Bennett, 2014). In our collection, we find indications of this behavior in the goat that "gorged" himself before dying and other examples described in our full paper (Sheldrake et al., 2023).

The literature on human ELEs furthermore contains examples of somatic surprises. For example, a man born deaf-mute was said to have uttered his first intelligible words during his last hours (Schubert, 1808); a man suffering from high fever and grave articular rheumatism lost his fever and rheumatism after having had a near-death vision, ate a copious meal and died on the same evening (Geley, 1927); a woman in a nursing home with severe spinal fusion who was able to only look down to the floor for several years noticed one day with surprise that she was able to look out of her room window for the first time—and died soon after (Brayne et al., 2008). In another case, a man

dying from lymphatic cancer, who had been unable to move his arm for over a year, moved his arm while he experienced a near-death vision (Fenwick & Fenwick, 2008; for other examples, see Nahm, 2012).

Similarly, the already mentioned unexpected surge of mental clarity before dying—terminal lucidity—has been reported for centuries and across cultures (Claxton-Oldfield & Dunnett, 2018; Lim et al., 2020; Macleod, 2009; Nahm, 2012; Nahm et al., 2012; Nahm & Greyson, 2009). Because terminal lucidity frequently goes hand in hand with near-death visions in humans, it is not too surprising that some pet owners held the opinion that their moribund animals experienced something similar. However, while last goodbyes, last visits, last rallies, somatic surprises, and even terminal lucidity are accessible to external observation and can be documented, it will always remain difficult to gain insight into the mental state of animals that seem to experience near-death visions. It is nevertheless noteworthy that other ELEs known from human life, such as crisis telepathy and crisis apparitions, and even after-death communications, appear to be paralleled in the life of pets as well.

Unfortunately, however, systematic research in these facets of animal life is practically absent, even though respective experiences do not seem to be uncommon. Although there are several popular books on such occurrences, the case collections published by Italian parapsychologist Ernesto Bozzano (1905, 1950) still contain some of the best-documented examples. In order to stimulate future research in these areas, we recently published a new case collection regarding ostensible after-death communications of animals (Matlock et al., 2024).

Regarding the category of *unusual premonitions of death* or of grave danger, the literature on psychical research contains numerous examples already, both in people and in animals. Regarding animals, for example, members of various vertebrate and invertebrate species have been reported to anticipate natural catastrophes such as earthquakes, volcano eruptions, and tsunamis, but also fatal air raids during war (Gaddis & Gaddis, 1970; Pleimes, 1971; Schrödter, 1960; Schul, 1977; Sheldrake, 2005, 2011).

The examples of our animal categories last visits and retreating into solitude appear to be absent in the literature on the death and dying of people in the Western world. At least, we are not aware of reports about sick people who suddenly and unexpectedly showed up at the homes of friends and relatives for a last visit to say goodbye, and died shortly after. In our present Western culture, sick or decrepit people usually stay at home, in nursing homes,

or in hospices and are visited by their kin rather than the other way around. Means for arranging visits to sick people are often readily available, and conversations including last goodbyes can also be held via telephone. In addition, family members can live too far apart from each other to enable the old and sick to visit them unexpectedly. Therefore, it is usually neither necessary nor possible to pay unexpected last visits to loved ones. Nevertheless, cases of crisis telepathy and crisis apparitions from dying people sometimes fulfill the role of conveying a last farewell to somebody at a distance (Gurney et al. 1886; Fenwick & Fenwick, 2008; Shared Crossing Research Initiative, 2024).

Similarly, retreating into solitude is hardly possible for terminally ill humans in modern civilizations. Even in the unlikely case that somebody would prefer to die alone somewhere outside, it would be very difficult and often impossible for such a person to suddenly leave their sickbed in order to walk away and find a lonely place where they can lie down and expire. Regarding supposed premonitions of one's death, which may also play a role when animals retreat into solitude, it is of note that they might not only be due to passively received impressions. It is known from tribal human societies that some of their members seem able to induce their own death, e.g., when they think they have been influenced by sorcery or voodoo practices (Kelly, 2007; Rose, 1968). Severe psychologically driven effects on one's body that may even lead to death have also been reported from the West (Kelly, 2007; Nahm, 2012; Reeves et al., 2007). Thus, an active component of psychophysiological influence on the body could also play a role when people and animals seem to anticipate their own death.

As far as we know, our case collection is the first of its kind. It is necessarily limited in its scope. We also made no attempt to verify the contents of these self-selected reports through interviews with witnesses. Still, we consider the data obtained in our survey sufficiently robust to draw the conclusion that ELEs reported from animals are remarkably similar to those reported from human beings. Hence, we believe that further studies into ELEs in non-human animals could elucidate facets of their lives that have so far received only little attention among scientists. At the very least, it would help to understand facets of the dying process in animals, and especially pets, better. It is increasingly recognized that the loss of a beloved companion animal can have considerable adverse mental and physical effects on the bereaved's health (Brown et al., 2023; Kowalski, 2012; Muldoon & Williams, 2024; Wilson et al., 2021; Zoanetti, 2024). Further research in this field is therefore desir-

able (for some suggestions, see Sheldrake et al., 2023; see also Matlock et al., 2024). It seems certain that performing systematic and large-scale studies in different languages will elicit many more reports about unusual occurrences regarding animals during their last phase of life. We are convinced that there is still a lot we can learn from our animal companions.

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