

A Tribute for Alex



On this sunny afternoon, I'm sitting before a keyboard—numbed. As a person who deals daily with words, both mine and those of other people, today they elude me. Words are awkward, clumsy things when trying to express the emotion I feel when I realize that Alex is no longer among us.

I never met Alex, but the world is a different place for me now that he is gone. Life seems duller, flatter...and less open to possibilities. But thinking about limited possibilities negates all that he accomplished in his life, and all that he will mean to future generations of parrots, people and animals in general.

Alex taught us many, many things about how the avian brain works. In doing so, he helped define the bonds between human animals and the rest of creation, illuminating a commonality that was unimagined before he showed us his truth. Alex opened the door into his mind—a mind that was so similar to ours that it seemed like coming home, and yet so different that it opened a thousand different doors to the universe.

He was both magical and miraculous. In his home, Alex filled the air with his watch-me-see-me-hear-me personality. Alternately cajoling his parrot partners in their learning, and shouting out orders that sent lab assistants scurrying about his room, the atmosphere Alex created was charming and challenging and undeniable. His stupendous presence was a magical experience for those lucky enough to have known him.

For those of us who never knew him, we still felt the miraculous wonder of his being. Alex reached across what we thought was an impenetrable barrier---the barrier between human consciousness and avian consciousness. He reached out to us and let us know him. That is the miracle that was Alex.

His going will leave a huge empty space in the world of science. What he might have accomplished is dismaying in its semantics—the eternal unknowing of what might have been. But we can be grateful for what he was and what he gave to us.

I cannot imagine the depth of the aching sadness now felt by those humans Alex loved. Arlene, his lab friend, who so lovingly held his broccoli when Alex demanded that he be fed by hand--all the lab assistants and volunteers that he "supervised"--Alex's friends, Karl and Leigh Ann, who gave him weekend vacations. We who did not know Alex send you all a most heartfelt sympathy and also our gratitude. Because you loved him, he loved you. And because he loved you, he showed humankind wondrous things.

Most of all, we send sympathy and gratitude to Dr. Pepperberg. In losing Alex, she has lost a friend, a family member, a partner in learning and a partner in life. She and Alex were together so many years--years in which they accomplished something astonishing—true communication between parrot and human. Their extraordinary bond will stand as a testament and a milestone to future animal-human relationships.

It is difficult to write what I feel about Alex's passing. Again, words are unwieldy. The closing of one of Dr. Pepperberg's favorite films, "Out of Africa," says it well. At the end of the film, Baroness Blixen reads a moving passage over the grave of the man she loved. These words speak clearly about my feelings for Alex. They may speak for others as well.

"He was not ours, he was not mine. Thank you for sharing him with us. He brought us much joy. We loved him well."

I cannot imagine the enormity of Dr. Pepperberg's loss. And it is so hard to express to her the emotion one feels. But there is one thing I can say with a certainty.

Dr. Pepperberg, although Alex is gone from our world, he is not gone from our hearts. And wherever it is animal souls go when they pass, he will wing his way back to you. Alex was a free spirit and free spirits always find their way home.