

# The Story of Olaf

by Bruce Butcher

I first met Helen when I was still working at the hospital. A nurse anesthetist, she lived with her two dogs and had begun taking riding lessons from a facility a few miles from her home. The barn's main focus was the boarding and training of hunter-jumper horses, their people and the public. After a few lessons, Helen began to notice a skinny old horse that always seemed to be in his stall. He was friendly enough toward people, but few humans ever showed any interest in Olaf. My interaction with Olaf and Helen highlighted the importance of clarifying an animal's message before arriving at a conclusion.

Olaf was 30 years old, and though he had been a champion performer in his day, those days were long past. He hadn't been ridden in years and, in fact, Olaf didn't seem to have anyone who was special to him. The riding academy's management told Helen that Olaf's people had, several months before, relocated to a city 180 miles away. They always paid his board and veterinary costs, but could only visit once or twice a year. Upon hearing this, Helen's heart ached for Olaf recognizing he was wasting away and nearly forgotten. Helen continued her once-a-week lesson but found herself making time to give Olaf some special attention, a good brushing or even a bath. It didn't take long for these two to melt each other's hearts. Helen began coming to the barn just to spend time with Olaf. The big old boy began making a nickering sound to acknowledge Helen as she arrived. She would clean his stall, put down a little extra bedding to make softer footing, brush him down, and give him an apple or carrots -- even though most of the food fell out of his mouth because he was missing so many teeth. All the while she talked softly to Olaf, as if he were the only other person in the world.

Shortly after I quit working at the hospital and graduated from Equine Massage school, I contacted Helen. I wanted to practice massaging horses and God knows Olaf had some tight muscles! It was agreed that I could give Olaf a light massage one Sunday afternoon. For a couple hours I slowly and gently worked with Olaf's muscles and joints, trying to remember what I had learned in school. Helen looked on, speaking softly to Olaf the entire time. Olaf got treats when I finished and I told Helen about some of the things that had happened to me around animals -- specifically, that I could hear them talking. Helen was open and curious, but I knew firsthand how the medical field trains people to be skeptical. She asked me if I thought Olaf knew how much she loved him. Just then my entire body flushed with warmth from the middle of my chest outward. The emotion I experienced almost put me in tears. "I think he does, Helen," I managed to say. "I think he does."

In the next year this wonderful relationship between Olaf and Helen continued growing closer and closer. Olaf began eating more; Helen bought special food and watched him eat, encouraging him and nursing his health. My wife worked at the same hospital as Helen and I would get periodic updates about Olaf. He was gaining weight; people working in the barn said he seemed happier and healthier. A year later, I stopped by to see the two of them. Olaf had filled out and his energy was much more vital. Helen was walking him outside to eat grass whenever weather permitted, or she would pick clover and bring it inside for him to eat. When

conditions allowed, she had begun turning him loose in the arena to romp and have fun. Through Helen's loving care, Olaf had come back from the edge of death. The people around the barn were amazed. They had thought Olaf was just getting old and had mistakenly assumed that is how a 31-year-old horse always looks.

As time went on, Helen began to exercise Olaf on a lunge line. Then she put a saddle on him and put him through some ground work exercises. Olaf's spark for life was back and Helen also was enriched by their relationship. She remained open to the deeper level of communication we had spoken of a year before. I suggested that she consider attending an animal communication workshop I was teaching and perhaps learn a little more. She did so and their relationship grew even closer.

A few months later, I stopped by the barn to hang some equine massage fliers and saw Helen there. She had been struggling in her efforts to communicate with Olaf, but seemed to have a feeling that he wanted to be ridden! One of the trainers had the same feeling about his desire to carry Helen. Helen was very reluctant to ride him because she didn't need to and because she thought he might injure himself. When I asked Olaf about this and whether his body was strong enough to carry her, he was all for it. Helen climbed on and walked the length of the arena a couple of times. Then Olaf broke into a trot and scared the heck out of Helen. Both were beaming as they walked back to his stall. In the next couple of months, I received several reports of Olaf and Helen doing a little light riding and getting along famously.

The next report came a few months later. I could feel the heaviness as my wife began the story. Olaf had looked at Helen one evening and said, "**I have to go soon.**" I was crying as my wife told me. We all know the day comes when it is time for our friends to go "home," and this time it seemed that Helen was getting advance notice. The gift of communicating with an animal appeared to be having a downside and it was a big one. Olaf was telling Helen that he would be dying soon, and knowing this, how does one proceed? It was only another week or so until the barn manager pulled Helen aside to tell her some difficult news about Olaf. His people had just phoned; they had made a decision that she knew would upset Helen. They had decided it would be best for Olaf if they moved him to a barn very close to their home, 180 miles away. We had all fallen into assuming the worst, only to discover that Olaf had been telling Helen that he was *moving* not dying! I will never forget this lesson. Be careful not to make assumptions or leap to unwarranted conclusions. Clarify, with the animal, the meaning of each concept the animal is communicating. As you see, an animal's words do not always mean what we think they do.