

From the Bean Pile – On Communication

By Marj Brady

This quote sums up many things in my life beautifully – my marriage, my kids, my alpacas, my life – somedays I’m sure I’m speaking in tongues; somedays I’m just talking to myself. Perhaps not surprisingly, I am occasionally misunderstood.

When hubby is home to help, we get up, eat breakfast, do chores and all done right? Not hardly. We get up – yes, then commences the discussion of what to wear, long sleeves, long pants, t-shirt, tank top, shorts, overalls, boots, running shoes, long johns – holy cow, we haven’t even made it to the kitchen yet, we still have to decide what to eat! While we eat we talk about our plans for the day. I instruct him carefully on what farm things we need to accomplish, the order in which to approach said projects and hope for the best. As we head out he goes in the opposite direction and starts work on something completely different from what I intended. No, I don’t have control issues, why do you ask?

We humans can text, email, phone, mail, skype, im, pm, bbm, chat and talk face to face but nothing communicates the way a group of alpacas does when they’re trying to protect one of their own. You ever notice that? You bring six or eight alpacas into the catch pen for injections or toenails, or some husbandry item, say the name of your intended victim and they immediately close ranks. Suddenly your target is the furthest animal from you and to get to him you have to work your way through

the mob while they mutter insults, threaten to spit on you and occasionally fire off an anonymous-accidental- oops-kick that was of course not intended to harm you in any way.

I like to think we’re getting smarter. We do whatever we have to do to ‘Protector Supreme’ and excuse him from the pen so he can wander the aisle counseling his minions and posing for his harem.

** “I know you believe you understand what you think I said, but I am not sure you realise that what you heard is not what I meant.”*

Don’t kid yourself, your alpacas know exactly what you’re doing. They are studying you, recording your routines, analyzing your weaknesses, watching for an opportunity to surprise you. I have an old girl, I’ve talked about her before, Ole Whitey PP Legs. She loves, loves, loves the hose! Doesn’t matter whether it’s March or May, she stands right on top of me, staring at me, telepathically demanding that I spray her, backing into me when she’s nice and wet. She so loves the water she gallops down to the barn, udder swinging and lips flapping, from the farthest corner of the most distant pasture, if she sees me so much as rinsing a bucket.

On nice sunny days, when the girls are



all perfectly dispersed through the pasture and tranquilly grazing, I find myself trying to quietly sneak water to the buckets without alerting Ole Whitey because you know, if one alpaca races hell bent for the barn, they’re all going to follow so they don’t miss out on something. Then it is a mob scene, all the girls pushing and shoving and spitting and slapping me in the face with sopping wet tails.

When I try taking pictures and go out with my camera my alpacas are quite happy to present me with their hind ends, lots of fuzzy butt shots on my farm and faces distorted by chewing with ears askew



or extreme close ups of the inside of their noses. But...if I go out sans camera they’re all present, ears up, faces happy, entertaining and active. I think I have to invest in a secret spy camera, maybe hide it in my rake or my ball cap.

Alpaca moms love their crias. Is there anything more precious than a newborn cria being greeted by the herd members and bonding with its mother?

But, give that kid a few weeks and let him start to pester some of the doting aunties when they happen to be sunbathing or eating or pooping and look out! Psycho time! I don’t think I’ve ever seen a girl hurt a cria but they





certainly reprimand and discipline them when they're out of line. More than one cria has come in for dinner wearing a green badge on the back of his head.

Dams cluck to their crias when it's time to nurse. Crias call to moms when they're hungry or scared. I have a girl who refuses to come into the barn when her crias come in to get weighed – she stands out in the barnyard bellowing for her kid, worried but not scared enough to come in after me.

Proven dams are a lot easier to read than maidens but can be challenging to deal with when they're open and you're trying to move them away from the breeding area. An open, 200 pound girl that decides to drop in a doorway so I can't move animals in or out is a big challenge for me. She's not going to get up, macho isn't going to leave her, I can't walk him past her to his intended date and she's too big for me to lift. I've been trapped in the barn a few times when a girl dropped on the wrong side of a door.

Maidens communicate but sometimes I think they're a little confused with all the messages they're getting from their hormones – up down, maybe, okay, not really, oh go ahead, yes, no, nevermind, good, forget it, maybe, nope! I love a maiden that knows exactly what she's supposed to do – push when she's ready not when she's intimidated, get bred, spit, run and broadside, all done.

Boys posture and squeak and pose and strut. They suck in their guts and check their topknots in whatever window or shiny surface is handy. They're usually not hard to figure out. But what about

the ones that refuse to breed? When we first got alpacas I thought all boys were ready to breed all..the..time! Nope, some seem to know when a girl isn't ready or is already bred and caught without being spit on. One of our guys won't even look at a girl if she's done. The first time he did it I was sure he was broken. I used him for spit checks and he just stood there with his head slightly down and away, she stood in full antagonistic battle stance. They were communicating just fine, I stood there looking like a stupid human.

The only other stud I'd worked with before him was always ready to rock 'n'

I walk Mr. Mellow into a stall, he shakes his head, we walk out. Sometimes we get spit on but overall there's no drama. It's a nice easy process and no one gets too worked up.

Mr. Mellow lives with Mr. Eveready and they act like a couple of old bachelors. Eveready is always yakking and whining and complaining in his high pitched whiney voice. Mr. Mellow is fine with that for a bit, until he gets fed up and rumbles back a warning in his low talker voice. Eveready can't take a hint and ultimately Mellow will take him down which provides Eveready full vindication for all the bitching and moaning he's been doing.

When I worked in bankland I remember listening to co-workers explaining things to clients in voices that got progressively louder, in hopes that the increase in volume would somehow make clear what repetition wasn't. I was probably guilty of it myself from time to time. I hope I'm not repeating myself here although at least here you can always turn the page



roll. Always! It didn't matter how old, how ugly, how pregnant – he was always ready. He'd drag me through the barn, bang open doors, rip my arms out, girls would run screaming, some would charge back and chest him, spit would fly and it was quite chaotic. Now most of our spit checks are relatively calm affairs:



About the Author

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**Misattributed - from Wikipedia*

Attributed to Greenspan by Rupert Cornwell, "Alan Greenspan: The buck starts here", The Independent, 27 April 2003, citing an unspecified Capitol Hill hearing. However, as Ralph Keyes notes in The Quote Verifier (2006, p. 233), "This popular tongue twister gets attributed to the obfuscator du jour." The earliest known print attribution is to Robert McCloskey, U.S. State Department spokesman, by Marvin Kalb, CBS reporter, in TV Guide, 31 March 1984, citing an unspecified press briefing during the Vietnam war.