

The Most Tender Gaze I Have Ever Beheld by Catherine Carney-Feldman

The exquisite face of a doe with her summer coat

I will always remember the date, November 16, 2001, not only for an unforgettable deer encounter but also for another reason which I will tell you about at the end of this blog.

On that day, David and I were doing many chores on our 2 ½ acre animal sanctuary. We, along with our horses, dogs, cats, chickens, ducks and rooster, live in a pine forest with many wild animals all claiming the same territory and calling it home. David was at the front of the property working on a project next to the street. I was at the back of the property on a sloped area digging holes in the ground to put in some new native hydrangea bushes. I was enjoying the unusually warm, sunny day and was intent on getting six new bushes planted and watered.

As I was facing into the slope and digging, I became aware of a presence behind me. I quickly looked over my left shoulder and saw a deer quietly standing about 4 feet behind me. Knowing it was hunting season, I ignored the deer not wanting to familiarize it to people and make it easier to hunt and kill. I continued working for another ten minutes but kept feeling the presence of the deer. I finally looked over my shoulder again and found the deer in the same spot as before. This time it occurred to me that possibly the deer might be hurt. I turned around and sat on the slope facing the deer. The deer was perpendicular to me so I had a good view of it. It was a female, a doe, fully grown but still young maybe about 3 to 5 years old.

Plan A: As I systematically began visually checking her out for injuries starting with her nose and ending at her tail, she moved closer to me as if to make it easier. She was now about 3 feet away and still perpendicular to me. No injuries were evident. The thought crossed my mind that I don't smell like a human wearing my barn clothes. I decide to talk to the deer so she knows that I am a human. I say, "Hello, deer. What brings you here today?" I was amazed that the deer just continues to quietly stand there. Plan B: Touch the deer and she will then definitely take off. With a little hesitation, I gingerly stroke my fingers down her long neck as if I am caressing my horse's neck. To my amazement she just stands there as if she has been waiting for this touch.

Plan C: I now am talking to the deer as I am gently feeling her neck, back and legs while looking for any signs of physical problems. I find none. As my hands sweep across her body, I can see she has already shed her red, thinner, summer coat and I admire her glossy, thick, grey winter coat of hair. I know that each hair strand is doubly thick due to having a hollow tube running thru it to give extra winter insulation. I can easily feel her perfect muscular structure under her coat. She is very relaxed and seems to be enjoying and welcoming my touch and ongoing conversation.

Plan D: I now sit down on the slope again trying to make sense of what is incomprehensible. At this point I have given up on logical explanations and I again ask the deer out loud why she has come to visit me today. She turns her head and looks me directly in the eyes. Her face is one foot away from mine. I am now going to try to put into words what was a wordless experience. I am engulfed in the most beautiful, gentle and tender gaze that I have ever beheld. Her eyes are huge and luminous. They are profoundly deep. As I look into them it is as if she has invited and allows me to see into her soul. I offer her the same invitation. My thoughts disappear and the moment is timeless. I am at complete peace. I understand everything and I want nothing. I experience love and acceptance and the divine all at once. I don't know how long we both looked into each other's eyes and this experience lasted.

When my thoughts finally returned, the first thing I remember thinking is that if all people could experience what a deer really is, there would be no hunters hunting this profoundly beautiful, gentle being. I felt deeply that this deer allowed me to understand what made her a deer - what was the essence of a deer. Did she also understand what made me a human? Was that intense moment of connection as meaningful to her as me? Did she seek me out for that purpose and if so, why?

Now, I am still sitting looking at the deer with many more questions going through my head, none of which had answers. It dawns on me that I need to share this experience with David who is still working at the front of the property. I know I have a five minute walk to get to him. If I go fetch him, will the deer still be here? I decide to get him and walk up the slope, across the front lawn and down our long driveway. When I reach him, I tell him I have been talking and patting a deer for the last hour or so and hope he believes me. We both walk hurriedly to the slope and I'm thinking surely the deer is gone by now and no one will be able to confirm my experience. My fears are unfounded. As we start crossing our front lawn, the deer emerges from the slope and walks towards us. The three of us stand closely together and I start telling David in more detail the story of what happened.

Plan E: At this point I ask David to keep the deer company as I go into the house to call the police to see if someone has reported a pet deer missing. The policeman I speak to has not had any such calls and tells me he doesn't know anyone in town who has a pet deer. I do not know what to think. I leave the policeman my telephone number and address in case someone calls inquiring about the deer. I go outside to join the deer and David.

Soon, after one more long look at us, the deer starts slowly walking across the front lawn and onto the driveway. The telephone rings. I take one more long look at the deer, who is now walking down our driveway, before hurrying in to answer the phone expecting that it is the policeman saying he has found the deer's owner. Instead, I am surprised to hear my mother's voice which is softer and more subdued than usual. Calmly and slowly, she tells me her younger sister, our Aunt Tessie, died earlier that morning. My mother had 10 siblings. Aunt Tessie was special to all her 27 nieces and nephews because she had never married and was able to spend much time with all of us taking us to the drive-in and hanging out with us in so many wonderful ways. She was the one family member that joined me when I was living and studying in Mexico one summer. I introduced her to my Mexican friends, and explored Mexico City and Acapulco with her. After our Polish grandparents died, she continued to live in the big house, her father, my grandfather, had built for his large family. It was a ten minute walk from where I lived with my family. The door was always open and all family members came and went freely. It was my sanctuary and I spent as much time there as possible.

When I went outside to report on the call to David, the deer was gone. She had walked down our driveway, across the street and disappeared into the woods. I never saw her again. I always remember that I saw her on November 16, 2001 - the day Aunt Tessie died after a long struggle with ALS.

Note: You might wonder, did I ever find any logical answer to why this deer visited me? The simple answer is, no. The encounter left me with many questions that had no answers. I spent much time, even years, telling my horse, nature and animal friends this story and asking if they knew of or had any such a connection with a deer. I even spoke with people I know that are hunters hoping maybe this story would open them emotionally to seeing deer in a new perspective. In the past twenty years I have never heard of anyone having this type of experience with a deer. Although I have had many close and beautiful encounters with deer numerous times while on a horse, I have never had another experience with a deer like the one I have described to you.