

## An African Experience and the Four Agreements



Dr. Larry Lamb (left) and traveling companions in the sub-Saharan desert. Two of the three vehicles made it.

Pets and People covers a diversity of topics and this week I will share with you things I learned about a very special people and the animals in their lives. The story began when I graduated from Cornell University at the age of 23 with a doctorate degree in Veterinary Medicine. Up to that point, I had led a cloistered life that involved studies and work and felt a great desire to continue my education in other ways.

At 24 I was a Captain in the United States Air Force during the Vietnamese Conflict, assigned to a security services base in southern Italy providing military public health services to the Navy and Air Force in southern Europe. It was somewhat

disarming to have a majority of service personal saluting me, a young vet wet behind the ears and a recent graduate with few worldly experiences.

The Air Force provided me with the opportunity to travel around the world and created in me a desire to learn about other cultures and the people who practiced them. As a result, after practicing small animal veterinary medicine for several years in a major metropolitan area, I determined that the best course for me would be to take a break from veterinary practice and expand my experience with people in other parts of the world and observe the animals that were a part of the fabric of a distant and somewhat alien continent: Africa.

I previously described the adventure of driving a Volkswagen campmobile from northern Africa, through the Sahara desert to West Africa, then across the jungles of central Africa to the destination of this story: the Serengeti plains of Kenya in East Africa. It was here that I had an experience that could have ended the journey and my life.

I do not believe in embellishing stories and over the years I have struggled with this one. At one point I felt a sense of superiority in the way I handled the situation. This morphed into an awareness of my limitations as a witness of my own experiences and eventually became a source of inspiration, knowledge and humility.



We were always greeted by curious friendly faces.

I will first describe the experience and my original impressions and then explain how I have re-evaluated my experience based on my personal evolution and the knowledge

gained from studies of an ancient people who were best described as “women and men of knowledge”.



Even on the fringes of the desert, nomadic people would find us and just observe.

*After driving all day over very difficult dirt roads on the Serengeti Plain of East Africa I was eagerly anticipating the campground which was my final destination of the day. I had been exhilarated by the smells, sounds and sights of the cradle of human evolution. I had experienced many sightings of the animals for which this journey was partially about.*

*In the distance I could see a large herd of cattle and as I approached, I observed they were being shepherded by several warriors dressed in the most beautiful adornments.*

*They are a regal people with many unusual customs and unfortunately, at this time I knew very little about them. As I approached them I took out my 8mm motion picture camera to record my passage through the animals. At this time I was approached by one of the tall warriors who had a large spear in hand.*

*He approached me and put out his hand, apparently requesting money for taking the film. At this time I did not feel any fear, but rather a certain indignation. I said to myself “I didn’t travel all this way to have to tip someone, after all, I am not a tourist on safari, I have driven across this continent...having to pay for a photo is an insult...this is a matter of pride and principle!”*

*He then put his hand inside my open window. Reflexly, I closed the window and accidentally caught his hand briefly in it and then continued making my way slowly through the herd on the road. I decided to continue to film this. The Masai watched me as I moved forward. I had absolutely no sense of the relationship between the Masai and the animals who are so much a part of their culture, livelihood and tradition.*

*The Masai must have seen me filming from the reflection in my side view mirror, and came charging to the front of the van. I had to stop. He then raised his spear and pointed it directly at my head behind the front windshield. I had only several options: One might have been falling to the floor of the vehicle to protect myself, however, that would have left my traveling companion vulnerable in the seat beside me.*



As seen on the trip in the Masai-Mara reserve.

*At this moment I was left with only my instincts and my intuition. In my practice of veterinary medicine I had always prided myself with my ability to resist fear because I understood that animals can smell slight changes in human emotions, and once fear is telegraphed to an animal, it may respond aggressively.*

*I had no avenue of retreat and I decided to mask my fear by being offensive. I threw open my door and approached the Masai as I waved my hands in an effort to communicate the message..."How dare you do this to me". He retreated.*

*We continued on to the campground and I must admit I was quite full of myself for having had the kind of courage Hemingway defined as "grace under pressure". Then I learned that several weeks earlier, two British tourists had been killed in similar circumstances.*



An elephant visits our campsite in Masai-Mara reserve.

I came away from the experience feeling good about myself. In the years that have passed I have had the opportunity to study the ways of the Masai and other ancient people and see the events that transpired in a different light: perhaps the Masai was actually demonstrating something I did not understand and my sense of superiority was not in fact real. I have wondered how often, we who are raised in a western civilization misinterpret the intelligence and knowledge of peoples we are unfamiliar with.

There was an ancient society in South America called the Toltecs. It is only recently that their wisdom and knowledge has been interpreted and shared with us in the west. When applied to this experience, I now understand how ignorant I was. These teachings can be applied to our everyday life; they are called the four agreements and when applied to our daily lives can provide us with a sense of peace, happiness and love. These are the agreements to be made with yourself.

1. Be impeccable with your word. Words are a force, they are the power you have to communicate and create the events in your life.
2. Don't take anything personally.
3. Don't make assumptions.
4. Always do your best.

If I had applied these agreements to this part of my adventure, a life threatening experience could have been averted and I would have had the opportunity to know the Masai on a meaningful level. I would have known they are a warrior people who use their animals as a source of nourishment and social prestige. My thoughts (words) were far from impeccable; I took a reasonable request under the circumstances as a personal affront; I made incorrect assumptions about a people I knew nothing about. In this case, I simply did not do my best by not learning about a people whose land I would be

traversing. To the Masai, their cattle represent their very livelihood and prestige. And worse of all, as a caregiver who understands the importance animals have to people in my way of life, I made the mistake of not honoring something they held sacred, the animals in their lives.

(The first article titled African Adventure appears on my website, [www.manchestervet.com](http://www.manchestervet.com) under the heading Newspaper Column Archives)