

A Wombat Wake: In Memoriam Birubi

Val Plumwood

My wombat Birubi died after a brief illness sometime around Wednesday August 18th 1999. I miss Birubi greatly and continue to catch his beloved form (or 'ghost') out of the corner of my eye, a half-seen image flitting around the corner of a cupboard or across the verandah. Long after his death, my eyes continued to search out his shape on the moonlit grass. He was part of my life for so long – over twelve years – that I found it hard to believe he would no longer wait for me or greet me, that he was finally gone.

We had a wake for him a few days later. The idea of the wake was to focus on his life rather than his death, to honor presence rather than mourn absence, and to celebrate and express gratitude for Birubi's life and for wombat life more generally. We had a small ceremony for him, and told many Birubi stories and wombat stories generally. Many of the people who helped care for Birubi over the years when I was working overseas or in distant parts of Australia were present with their own experiences and thoughts to contribute. The wake was far from being a dismal occasion. Birubi had a full and whole wombat life and died what seemed to be a dignified and peaceful wombat death. He came to the house for sanctuary in his final months and often rested or slept in front of the fire, but returned to his burrow, snug pouch of mother earth, in his last hours.

Birubi came to me from the wildlife rescue service as a malnourished and very sick orphan. His mother had probably died of the mange, a disease introduced by europeans with their dogs that brings so many wombats to an early and tormented death. Since my own human son had recently died, Birubi and I bonded strongly. Birubi (the name, meaning I believe 'the drum', was given him by his first carers in the rescue service) was about a year old, furred but still suckling, when he

took up residence with me. He seemed to have suffered greatly from his mother's death and was desperate for care.

Birubi had received from his wombat mother a good quality wombat education; she had taught him to defecate outside the burrow (or its equivalent, my house), and the rudiments of survival in the bush. Within a day of arriving he learnt to open the sliding glass doors of the house and could go outside into the bush whenever he wished (which was often). His ability to control the access between his world and mine enabled him to be active in choosing and structuring the balance between us, to enter my world while still fully retaining his wombatness. He was generally wary of humans until he had clearly established their identity, and would exit the house if it was too noisy or unsettling.

Birubi grew to belong to both the world of the house and that of the forest, supposedly exclusive and mutually oppositional. He needed a lot of medical treatment and supplementary feeding for the first year, so he became accustomed to the house and knew something of its comforts. But from the beginning he was based primarily out of doors in various holes he selected or renovated, and always preferred that world. Once established in his own nearby burrows in the forest, he came to the house on a visiting basis on the average for an hour or so most evenings for personal, moral and material support. (At his behest I supplemented his grazing with carrots and rolled oats, which corresponded to the roots and seeds sections of the wombat diet). In the first year he would spend part of the night out of doors, and part in my bed with me. He initiated all these high contact arrangements, and would not easily be turned aside from them, (although since wombats are nocturnal, they often led to me getting inadequate sleep). Sometimes I had to exclude him by locking the doors if he became too demanding of my time or arrived at very unreasonable hours.

To sleep next to me was his ardent desire, but it presented some difficulties. It was wise to get the leeches and ticks off him before letting him into the bed if you wanted a comfortable rest. After I had got into bed, he would come over and start biting its edge furiously until I gave him a hand up. Once in bed, he would usually lie down next to me on his side and drop off like a light. I can attest that during sleep he often ground his teeth and also vocalised in ways that suggested the imaginary encounters of dreaming. Usually he would wake up again about two hours later and go outside to graze (and of course I was then

obliged to get up to close the door he left open in case dangerous or unsuitable animals entered.)

Since he was a skilful door and cupboard opener, Birubi had to be locked out of the house when there was nobody else there. There are many stories about what happened when Birubi got into the house without supervision. He was very skilful with his mouth, which he used for manipulation and encounter, and enjoyed opening and exploring food packages and biting hard furniture and soft stuffed things. His tastes are commemorated around my house on cushions, chairs, stools, hassocks and cupboard doors.

Birubi was a vigorous player of various wombat chasing and hiding games he began to teach me as soon as he recovered his strength. These games seemed to me (there is of course much uncertainty here) to roll together features of play, love and war. He played very rough by human standards, but I do not think that he really intended to hurt - it's probably just that wombats are tougher, especially around the ankles, his favourite nipping point when he caught you. He was a skilful game player who expected to win, would sulk if he did not, and had learnt the efficacy of feinting. When young, Birubi would have been happy I think to play games all day, but fortunately this desire waned a bit as he grew older. Even as an older wombat though he showed that he liked a game and had a sense of humour.

I was always conscious of a dimension of mystery in my knowledge of Birubi's mind. The sense of bridging a great gulf of difference was part of the magic of the relationship. I think it was the centrality of the mother-child relationship to both our species and what was shared in its framework of ethics and expectations that made possible intimate contact with a creature so very different. This kind of relationship is necessarily cast in communicative terms that disrupt the severely restricted vocabulary for describing animal behaviour and interaction allowed by reductionist science and its objectivist ideals of non-relationship or its near approximation, subject-object relationship. Although you could entertain a large range of hypotheses about the meaning, complexity and specificity of his responses, that relationship, plus your knowledge of context and past interactions, usually suggested some credible and reasonably lucid tale about the other's mental processes and attitudes that enabled you to continue relating as co-actors in a partially shared narrative of the world. There were times, especially when he was an adolescent testing out his power, when I felt

my relationship with him was balanced on a knife edge, but as he matured it took on a less precarious form.

Birubi, like other wombats and unlike dogs, was a resilient and determined animal who could not be shaped to human will. He did not recognise human superiority or pretensions to own the world and had a strong sense of his own independent selfhood, his own equal interests and entitlements. This stubbornness and sense of equality is the feature that has brought the wombat so strongly into conflict with the farmer, but to me it was wonderful. It meant that you were dealing with a real other, that contact had to be on his terms and not just on yours. Discipline, punishment and training to accept human will, of the sort we apply to dogs, were out of the question; not only would they be totally ineffective, but they would jeopardise the entire basis of relationship.

Once you had recognised that he would not give way to you, you were motivated to find creative ways to work around conflict or to give way yourself. A corollary of his independence was his anger when thwarted. Birubi tended to get quite angry if shut out of the house or the vegie patch, would snort in a loud disgusted tone and sometimes retaliate destructively, for example by chewing the doormat or digging a big hole in front of the garden gate. As primarily a grass eater, he rarely did much harm in the vegie garden though (except for digging up the carrots). He did not usually hold a grudge for long, although there were a few occasions when he was still angry with me the next day for something I had done the day before.

Wombats, being burrow dwellers, like a few home comforts. Birubi liked to sit (and in his latter days especially sleep) right in front of the wood stove in midwinter. He was fascinated by the fire and used to poke his nose right up against the hot glass until it hurt (something he never learnt not to do). He was very partial to a hot bum rub, and loved to stand in front of the stove rubbing his rear end against the warm corner. Birubi's sexual expression began while he was still quite young and only subsided in the last few years of his life. He was erotically aroused by cushions, and would attempt to copulate with them after a 15 minute foreplay period of savage biting. He was often absent for considerable periods, especially in the warmer months, and several times I came across him miles away. I speculate that he may have been away visiting wombat lovers. If so I hope he treated them better than he did the cushions.

Because wombats are solitary and do not form family groups, I know little of Birubi's relationships with other wombats, with the exception of his male rival Clancy. Clancy lived about two kilometers away but would often come over for a feed and a fight. He was openly envious of Birubi's privileges in relation to humans and wanted them for himself (and himself alone). Birubi had to face up to Clancy's aggression when he was still a juvenile, and was valiant in the face of Clancy's superior age, size and fighting skills. Nevertheless when I heard the sounds of warfare between Clancy and Birubi (a high pitched, harsh call), I would run out and try to separate the combatants and bring peace and light, but was sometimes unable to prevent the infliction of some nasty wounds, mainly to Birubi.

The strife between Birubi and Clancy placed me in a painful conflict between wombat ethical systems and human ones. Should I give my favour to the stronger, as Clancy clearly hoped, or use my superior strength to help and sustain the 'wombat son' I was so attached to? I found this a difficult moral dilemma, since Clancy was the indigenous occupant, but in the end resolved it in the same way as most human mothers, trying to honor commitment to protect the one near and dear to me while avoiding injustice towards his enemy.

Birubi was wily, wary and tough, but the forest is a dangerous place. Sometimes Birubi's fear of what lay outside the door was palpable. I could not protect him, and every time he left the house I knew that he might be badly injured or that I might never see him again. So the relationship was painful as well as joyful, just as it is for the many human mothers who are powerless to prevent harm to the children they love. Birubi was in great fear of dogs, the privileged gatekeeper animals who are allowed and even encouraged to terrorise the others, and he would often avoid my company, sometimes for a week or so, if I had been to lunch at the house of someone who owned a dog. (I think if people realised what terror and danger they cause to sensitive wild animals like Birubi and those who care about them they would be much more careful about owning and restraining dogs.) This is an example of the great depth of temporal understanding available to those who possess a well developed olfactory form of knowledge.

Birubi was an intelligent herbivore, a vegetarian, I believe, in the full sense, both through his biological inheritance and through his convictions. As a non meat-eater myself, I had a rare opportunity to observe his opinions on meat eating when a friend came to stay bringing with them a dog they fed normally on fresh mutton on the

bone. I watched Birubi carefully inspecting and sniffing the site where the dog ate its flesh meals and examining a partly consumed bone. He gave every sign of horror, and came to the house only infrequently and with the greatest reluctance while the dog and the meat smell remained around. On another occasion, when I had fresh minced meat on my hands from feeding an injured juvenile magpie, he backed away from me with obvious revulsion and did not return until several days later when the odour was gone.

Reduced sexual expression was one of a number of signs of aging in Birubi's last few years, which included the greying of his beautiful soft coat and the general reduction in his energy and vigour as indicated by his lessened interest in games and play. At age 13 he was one of the oldest wombats the wildcare people had heard of. I put this down mainly to my 5 kilometre distance from the nearest road, the automobile being such a major cause of wombat carnage. Wombats have been known to live to 25 years in captivity, and if Birubi aged prematurely in these terms it could reflect an unknown disease process or the extreme rigours of the early period of his life.

I feel it was an incredible privilege to be allowed to know a free, wary and basically wild animal so intimately and richly. Our relationship cut across the usual boundary between the wild and domestic, the forest and the house, the nonhuman and the human, nature and culture. The 'culture' world is understood to be a humanised world in which identities are assimilated to the human and conformed to human will, interests and standards. In this world the 'good dog' is part of human culture, trained to accept human dominance and human terms, (terms made possible by the canine social system to be sure but still set by humans), rather than to interact as an equal party bringing their own independent terms. On the other side, the 'nature' world is one we in the west tend now to see mainly through the instrumental and reductionist framework of 'detached' science that tries to delegitimize the rich personal knowledge of highly developed individual caring relationships.

It is no coincidence that the more revolutionary forms of ethology pioneered by women like Jane Goodall have given us new insights precisely because they have broken these false choices down. Between them, the 'nature' and 'culture' frameworks rule out the possibility of deep personal contact with animals except on our terms. Birubi was a 'wild familiar' who established his own terms for contact and friendship. It was an enormous thrill to explore forms of contact that

transgressed the nature/culture boundary, so constitutive of our civilisation. It was enchanting, the enchantment of childhood imagination and story, to walk side by side with Birubi along a forest track, to look up from my desk to find a forest-dwelling wombat sitting in my armchair by the fire. You had the courage and freedom to cross the boundary, Birubi. But do we ?

Ave atque vale, Birubi. We will remember you.

Biography

*Val Plumwood is author of *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. She is currently ARC Fellow in the Research Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Sydney.*

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