

HE SHOULD HAVE BEEN A PANDA

BEFORE A BROTHER'S HEART QUIT

PUMPING | BY BARRY R. BERKEY, MD '61

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AUTHOR'S NOTE: Hsing-Hsing and his mate, Ling-Ling, arrived at the National Zoo in 1972—a gift from the Chinese government. Immediately they became the zoo's most popular attraction and perhaps the most loved and photographed giant pandas in the world. Ling-Ling died at age 28 in 1992 of heart failure, and when Hsing-Hsing died in 1999, an acute outpouring of public sorrow and communal mourning gripped the nation's capital.

My brother, Floyd, lay in a coma for six years before his heart quit pumping on October 28, 1999. This was about the same time that Hsing-Hsing, the National Zoo's remaining panda, began a steep decline from a fatal kidney disease diagnosed that May.

Like Hsing-Hsing, Floyd was cared for at home, with expert care—and loving attendants. Not a single bedsore. Spoon fed only the most nutritious, pureed foods. No trace of urine or feces on his waxy skin. Each day since the series of devastating strokes shattered an active and productive life, a caretaker read to him from the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*: book reviews and sports, Floyd's favorites. Of course, he never heard a word. Never responded. Just lay there motionless. Except he was rolled over every two hours—which was why he had no bedsores.

"When I started with Floyd six years ago," the caretaker told me upon my arrival for the funeral, "I never thought I could get so attached to nobody who couldn't talk back. But I did. I really

did, and I talked to him all the time. I'd say, 'Floyd, it's time to clean you up now, so help me roll you over' or I'd tell him, 'Swallow,' when I'd bring the spoon up to his mouth."

"You think he understood?" I asked.

"I ain't sure. But you know, there's a funny thing. Every night, long about two in the morning, he'd start screaming. Real loud screams. Scared me the first time I heard it. And he wouldn't stop 'til I'd hug him. I'd hold him like he was a baby; and in a little bit, he'd quiet down. Then the next night, same thing all over again."

This kind man told me how he worried about Floyd when he wasn't on duty and how he got to know him through others. The neighbor next door told him about Floyd being a World War II hero, a flyer on a B-26, and that he had a heck of a sense of humor. "Like that time—it was about three in the morning—and the neighbor was working in his garage, running his band saw. Floyd's bedroom was right next to the guy's garage. Well, Floyd opens his window and yells, 'Hey, John, knock it off! How do you expect me to count my money with all that racket?'"

"Your brother was something else," the man who held my brother like a baby told me. "A real fighter, I can tell you that. Almost every time I was feeding him, I'd say, 'Floyd, why do you keep on swallowing? You'd last no time at all if only you'd stop swallowing.' You see, he weighed maybe 75 pounds at the end."

Through my sadness and foggy emptiness, I thought about the "real fighter" comment. As a physician, I had many times heard the "fighter" phrase spoken in consolation by doctors or caregivers to surviving relatives about

the long but losing battle of a loved one.

But I know my brother. And I know he "swallowed" not to prolong his vegetative limbo, but merely from a gag-like reflex that he had no control over. Floyd would never have voluntarily put his family through the anguish and sorrow of seeing him this way. Nor would he have prolonged the hellish indignity he himself suffered.

Which brings me back to Hsing-Hsing who, like Floyd, suffered mightily, but unlike Floyd, briefly. Until shortly before his death, Hsing-Hsing had been fairly healthy for an old bear. He had recovered from surgery for testicular cancer in 1997, but several months ago he was found to have a fatal kidney disease. His condition worsened, and zoo officials became concerned about the panda's quality of life. Ordinary life activities had become very difficult for him. With Hsing-Hsing's rapidly worsening kidney failure, complicated by arthritis, poor vision, nosebleeds, anemia, weight loss, and loss of appetite, the officials and caregivers at the zoo decided he had suffered enough. He was given a lethal intravenous injection. Is there anyone who would argue this?

Regarding my brother, there is no doubt that his suffering was light years greater and also years longer than the celebrity bear's. I realize that condoning euthanasia in human beings is a slippery slope that arouses widespread concerns of heinous abuses. Yet, as a loving brother who mourned Floyd's six years of indignity, how I wish that someone had the authority to show the same compassion for him that Hsing-Hsing received. ■

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Giant pandas Hsing-Hsing and Ling-Ling in 1974