

THE HAND THAT FEEDS

Darrin Vernier
Phoenix, Arizona, USA

It is quite an interesting experience, this thing of being human. Sometimes it can be quite the soup of conflicting thoughts and emotions. Those of us who keep tarantulas, scorpions, and centipedes for example may tend to think of ourselves as off in the left field of the community consciousness. But there is one subject almost guaranteed to bring out the bipolar aspect in many handlers. This subject is handling.

Oh sure, most keepers can think about this subject with little difficulty or conflict. But bring up the topic in a public forum, and the situation will often get out of hand. Don't think so? Walk up to one of your fellow keepers and tell them that you handle *Poecilotheria regalis*, *Centruroides exilicauda*, or *Scolopendra* centipedes for starters. Can't you just see their eyes steeling over and the "This person is crazy" thought quietly forming behind their eyebrows as their definition of personal space grows a foot or two?

Why is that?

We've all heard the reasoning that it isn't ok to handle these animals for fear that they may be damaged. No doubt this just may be true for a beginning keeper, and it may even be so in the rare time for experienced keepers as well. But no, this isn't it.

Many say that one should not discuss handling these creatures for legal reasons. Yet no one says that of driving instructors, do they? Which activity is more likely to get someone killed?

There are some who say that handling should not be advocated due to the fact that one unfortunate outcome could result in the passage of laws that would restrict our freedom to keep our chosen animals. So tell

me, where is our freedom if we censor and ostracize ourselves? Is freedom a genie to be kept at bay in a bottle, or is it a muscle to be exercised? Or is it a demon to be exorcised? Are you sure?

Some say that it is fine to handle dangerous and aggressive animals, but one should not talk about it lest a less experienced keeper read the account and try the same thing themselves. Okay then, so how does an inexperienced keeper gain handling experience? Does it come in a can? And what is this thing about calling tarantulas aggressive anyway? If a 40-foot spider was getting too close to our comfort zone and we were to wave our arms and gnash our teeth at it, would we be acting aggressive or merely defensive? Isn't there a difference? Shouldn't our language reflect the difference, or should it not, because aggressive is more exciting? If I were to suggest that they are not dangerous, you might not like that, because it is not very exciting, is it? Now you are getting the idea.

It's possible that handling should remain as un-discussed as possible to retain the mystery, the excitement of it? Could it be that discussing it openly threatens to banish the feeling of initiation into an exclusive club? Could it be that discussing it openly threatens to ruin our high? What? Oh, now I've done it. I've let the cat out of the bag. So here is my theory. We are all stoned in love with our tarantulas, scorpions, and centipedes.

Literally. I can see your eyes steeling over and that thought forming quietly behind your eyebrows. Not to worry, I will explain.

There is a relatively simple though remarkable philosophy whose major tenet is that each person has a belief system. Of course we knew that already, but along with that is

the observation that this belief system differs from reality. We learn when we are willing to recognize that our beliefs do not reflect reality and adjust our belief system to fit what is. When you think about it, it may be true that grief of any kind occurs only when we steadfastly refuse to adjust our belief system to reality and are suddenly forced to reconcile the difference between the two. Many who are familiar with this system of philosophy have come to recognize the sign of our own refusal to reconcile our belief system with reality: Our own resistance. And many of those recognize that this very resistance is our friend. It tells us exactly where we must go to learn the lessons we need to learn in this lifetime.

Some of you may have noticed that those who keep these types of animals tend to be a little different than the average person. How many of you have made trades or purchases by email with someone you have never met? How many of you have finally met someone you've spoken to only by electronic means to find that you felt as if you were old friends who were simply meeting again after a long absence? There is almost undeniably a certain, indefinable quality of spirit that is the hallmark of those who keep these creatures.

Now, (let's have an honest show of hands) how many of you were excited as hell by your first tarantula, scorpion, or centipede? How many were just plain scared of it? So tell me, wasn't the feeling delicious?

Why? Isn't it really because we so strongly felt our own resistance and found it to be exhilarating?

Many of us went through exactly that. We kept our first animal. It excited us. We felt an adrenaline rush. We met our own resistance. Some people never adjust their belief system to reflect the reality of the situation, such as the actual, objectively observed behavior of their animal. Most keepers, however, are of a more advanced breed, and quickly learn. What is more exciting and invigorating than learning? However, as our resistance to this

new experience and the amount of new knowledge lessens, the adrenaline flow lessens as well, and we go in search of our next fix.

Often we then get a rarer, more defensive, or simply cooler (often meaning more intimidating) looking animal and start the process all over again. Wow, I have a *Makebelievicus coolerguy* coming in the mail! I'm so excited!

Eventually, the excitement of this may wear off as we begin to run out of readily available, inexpensive species or more often simply space. Then the light bulb goes off. I'm going to breed these things!

No doubt you can see the common elements that have developed here. Yes, it may be obvious to some of us by now that we are participating in an ever-escalating stream of adrenaline. This can be mixed with the thrill of learning about our captives, but aren't we learning just as much about ourselves?

A few of us may then up the ante one more time. Handling; Spider Bob with his recluses, Rosemary Kraft with her pokes, Dr. Stockwell with his centipedes. I love them all, even if we have never met.

Now, the last one is the one that got me; Dr. Stockwell and his centipedes? I will be honest here. My reaction was to be scared witless, and totally jazzed at the same time. Whether it was the handling of the centipedes that excited me, or the exploration of the soup of resistance I felt welling up inside of me, or a combination of the two I may never know. Quite honestly, it scared the crap out of me. Extreme resistance. Okay, I know.

Before I continue, I will have to interject the customary warnings. Handling of centipedes is not to be undertaken by anyone but an expert. Handling centipedes is an excellent way to get yourself envenomated by a species of medical significance. And I mean that, with all the contradictions described earlier, so do not attempt this at home without fully expecting to watch prehensors (the toxin injecting "fangs" which evolved from the 1st

pair of legs) pierce a juicy thumb or worse, and in some cases to then watch the stricken appendage swell until you decide that you don't care whether you are certain or not that medical attention is required, nor what the cost or effectiveness of it may be. And don't be surprised either if your doctor has no idea whatsoever what to do with you. If uncertainty regarding your medical future concerns you, do not attempt to handle centipedes. That said, there has only been one reported fatality, far less than can be said of many household animals.

Thank goodness that business is out of the way. The problem that developed for me was that I quickly changed my mind about the whole business. But, the seed of the idea of writing an article on the topic of handling had taken root. How could I write about it unless I had recently handled something that pushed my boundaries of resistance?

Mike troll broke the dam of my resistance as he often does in his troll wizard way. He pointed out that he had owned a large centipede whose prehensors had been clipped at the country of export. Mike thought that the centipede did not attempt to inject because it "knew it couldn't." I thought about that. How many people have actually been bitten by a centipede that did not grab one or roll over on one? Perhaps our belief that centipedes are aggressive did not stand the test of reality? What if in fact they are merely defensive? I decided to find out.

The first species I handled was *Scolopendra polymorpha*. This was initially exciting, even with the some of the medium sized ones. The excitement quickly faded. I personally field collect these, so it became quite useful when I did not have a deli cup handy to simply hold them in my hand. One day I got a bit distracted and pressed one a bit too tightly. It bit. With this smaller specimen, the bite was about equivalent to the proverbial bee sting in the palm of my hand. Smarted and swelled for an hour, but was quickly forgotten.

Note that I have no known allergies to animals or venom. The most interesting part of the *S. polymorpha* handling experience was that I discovered that previously, when I thought I was looking at them, I was not seeing them as they really were. I was looking through a lens of fear and resistance. Once that veneer was peeled away, I began noticing things about them I had never seen before.

What next? *Scolopendra subspinipes*. Oh damn. Enter again Mike the wise wizard troll, and also Lenny Flank. I was trying to decipher my own resistance. Poor Lenny was standing in the way. Fortunately, Lenny had the maturity to tolerate my message board posts, which could easily have been interpreted as inflammatory, to see where I was going with it. Thank you Lenny. Mike again broke the dam. What Mike brought attention to was the distinction between two types of resistance, fear, and the "willies." By the willies, I took Mike to mean the autonomic, instinctive flight/response reactions of our bodies. That was IT! That was the resistance! Thank you, Mike. To me, that is an integral, important part of our exploration of our creatures and ourselves.

Yes, I did eventually handle *Scolopendra subspinipes* and also other *Scolopendra* species. Yes, I met substantial resistance that I had to learn to understand and overcome. I also learned a valuable lesson that just because our body gives a reaction does not mean that we have to act upon it. When we see the difference, we are no longer restricted by the former belief. We rediscover the ghost in the machine. This left me with a nagging question: How might this apply to other aspects of my life?

Do I feel courageous about these experiences and am I bragging about them? No. Do I feel that anyone who does not handle this category of animal is lessened in any way by not doing so? No. Am I advocating that anyone try to duplicate my own experiments? NO, NO, NO! This is underscored by

secondhand reports of Dr. Stockwell via Mike that he gets bitten about every other time he handles a centipede. Note also that Dr. Stockwell is still, thankfully, well above ground.

So what is my purpose in reporting all of this? Simply this, I noticed that the people who are handling extreme animals were no dummies, they are very educated people like Spider Bob (Dr. Breene), Rosemary Kraft, and Dr. Stockwell. I realized that my own resistance might be masking the fact that they knew something about their charges that I did not. To break through that plateau and learn a little bit more about these creatures, I felt it necessary to break that resistance. And learn about them I have. However, what I have learned about these creatures has paled beside what they have taught me about myself.

I do not know if I will continue to handle these spectacular animals. Curiosity eventually

gets the cat. I do know that I remain stoned in love with these animals. This is my big thank you to the animals and all those mentioned above who played a part in my little experiment and allowed me to bring it to you. As my animals teach, train, and condition me, I begin to wonder, who is “keeping” whom?

Addendum: This week one of my long term captive female Tanzanian centipedes (species unknown) was found coiled around a batch of eggs following recent breeding efforts. To the best of my knowledge, if fertile, this may be the only captive breeding of this specimen that was not the result of a gravid import. Anyone knowing otherwise or having references that may assist me in identifying Tanzanian *Scolopendra* to the species level, please contact me at gphx@msn.com. Thank you in advance for any assistance that you may provide.

