

THE SOUL OF FLEECE

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Yellowstone Llamas



Until recently, I admittedly had no particular interest in my llamas' fleece after it was shorn before the summer. Llamas have been bred over the last few decades to have more and more wool and in the process most have lost their natural capability to molt. This results in very wooly pack animals who have to be shorn every year so they don't have to lug their heavy burdens through the countryside wearing huge, permanent wool coats. After shearing my animals and admiring their new, sleek looks, I stuff their fluff into bags, mark them with their names and year of shearing and store them on shelves in my house.

There it sits awaiting a more meaningful future fate. Unfortunately, I am not overly fond of the time-consuming sorting and cleaning and the dust that covers everything around me in the process of getting the fiber ready for the mill. Therefore this task ends up at the bottom of my annual to-do-list and has stayed there solidly and stubbornly for years. I did try my hand at it once many years ago but even though I was rewarded with a neat package of skeins in the glorious colors of my animals, I had no desire to repeat the process any time soon. In

addition, my past habit to knit, once a hugely addictive activity resulting in an impressive number of sweaters, scarves, mittens and socks, gave way to other priorities over the years or simply fell by the wayside due to a shortage of time.

Yet, when the llamas produced progressively cleaner fleece over the subsequent years, I couldn't bring myself to throw away the bounty. Thus the shelving was extended to cover almost a whole wall holding an impressive number of labeled bags. Unfortunately, llama fiber, unlike good cheese and wine, does not get better with age. Something had to happen.

I recently realized to my surprise that llamas have been part of my life for 25 years. During this time, I have learned a lot about these remarkable and endearing beings and have never ever lost interest in them or ceased wanting to learn more. After the many years of shared experiences and adventures, I feel that I have come close to understanding llamas and honoring almost every aspect of their being.

Except one: their fiber.

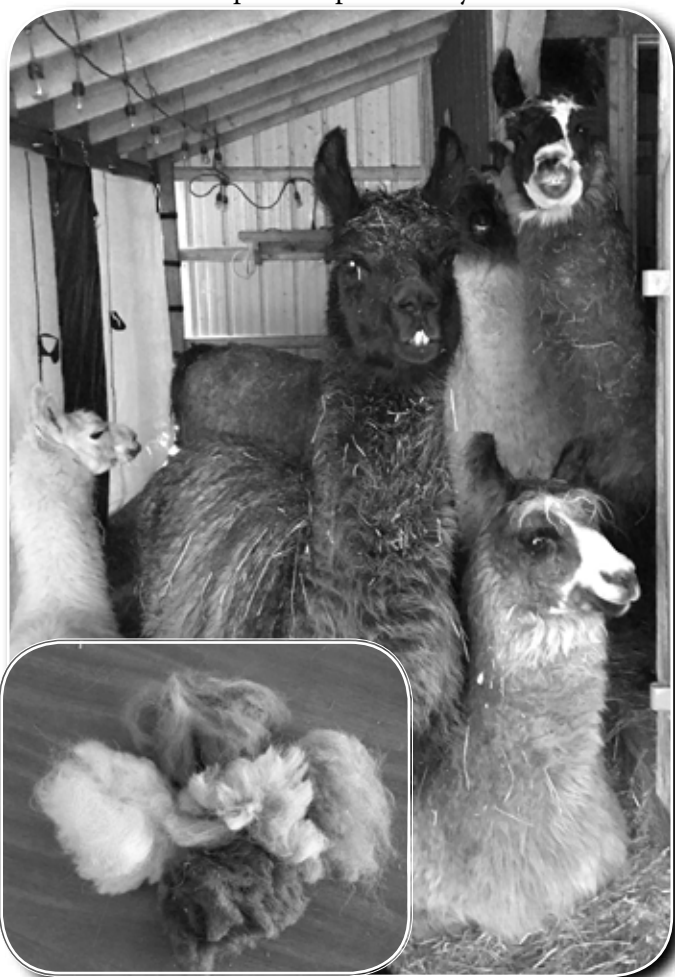
So, on a recent, cold winter afternoon, I decided on a whim to sort through the many bags on the shelves. Hours later, I emerged again to the present time and waning daylight. Where had I been? What I thought was 4 years' worth of shorn fleece was really 6! I dove into the bags, dust notwithstanding, and touched, smelled and marveled at the soft essence of the animals neatly lined up and labeled before me:

Picasso, crimped, so soft and dense. Teddy, luxuriously grey under outward chocolate-brown disguise. Yukon, the color of bubbly champagne. And oh, DotCom, getting greyer through the years, how I miss you, my sweet boy!

Otis, I only sheared your red abundance twice after you came home with me from horrid neglect at the "Sanctuary from Hell" in 2011. You packed with us in Yellowstone, tall Otis, and died too early and mysteriously in 2016. And Ishi, two-toned glamour, white and tan, like coffee-and-cream next to each other. And mischievous Domingo, reddish brown Argentine, prolific fleece producer and lead packer.

I grab the next bag and now I am crying. Amadeus, my most beloved llama. I held your head last summer as you

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breathed your last breath after 24 years of life. I sheared you many times, my friend. You were a classic llama, your black fleece would be scratchy in a sweater, but I am glad I kept a bag full of what was once a part of you. Candido is next, solid and strong, my Prince Charming, white wool always dirty, you love your deep dusty wallows.

Chico, sweet with gorgeously soft wool, you are useless for packing, but I love you. Mucho, a small bag of your fleece in the corner, but not forgotten. A snake bite claimed your life, the horror of watching you die deep in a far corner of my memory. The list goes on. Name after labeled name. Memory after memory. I take my time. I touch them all, quietly acknowledging the gift they gave and left behind.

And then it hits me. This evolutionary masterpiece of insulation, of hollow fiber, natural loft and ingenious moisture regulation that is a gift to anybody who wears garments of the genus lama, contains so much more than solid warmth and exquisite beauty.

There is personality in fleece. There is DNA in fleece. There is SOUL.

Both the tangible and intangible aspects of all our lives, of who we are and who we will remain, some scientifically proven, others heart-felt and just as real to me. On a dim Sunday afternoon of yet another cold Montana winter with my hands deep in fleece-filled plastic bags, the final piece of what is the colorful mosaic of my llama experience falls into place. The timeless connection, the memories flowing through the enduring fiber is a gift from my animal friends, alive and departed. My long-awaited motivation stirs, kindled by the desire to honor their souls through art.

Artists through time have woven, spun, painted, knitted, beaded, braided, carved, and sculpted a part of their soul into their pieces of art. Indigenous hunters included a part of their spirit in the crafting and decoration of their weapons. Drum makers and flute crafters know the sound of their instruments because it carries the joined melody of their soul as well as the essence of the animal or tree they once were.

Creating pieces of art, therefore, is a spiritual act of connecting with the natural materials that are used as well

as a deeply-felt kinship with the animals that provided antlers, hide, bone or fiber. Finally releasing the llama fleece from the shadows of the shelves and into the light of love, acknowledging and remembering each animal and respectfully preparing the fiber to be processed, is a first step on the way to give back. Knitting a part of my soul in a piece of wooly art to join with theirs may be next.



As has been my habit over the last few months before I fall asleep, I touch the small, dense ball of neck fleece that I kept from my last moment with Amadeus. My heart squeezes as I hold it, then becomes light with memories. I see his tall, dark form approaching as a dreamy fog begins to embrace me.

“Tomorrow”, I think as I drift off, “I will start knitting again”.

