

Animals Teach Us Spirituality

by Mary Lou Randour

Animals have been the spiritual companions of humans since the beginning of recorded time. The earliest indication of the spiritual significance of the human-animal relationship can be found in the 20,000-year-old cave wall paintings of Cro-Magnon people. In many if not most cultures, animals have served a variety of spiritual functions: They have been linked with supernatural forces, acted as guardians and shamans, and appeared in images of an afterlife. They have even been worshipped as agents of gods and goddesses. Many ancient creation myths, for example, depict God with a dog. These stories do not explain the existence of the dog; like God, the dog is assumed to have existed from the beginning. In this assumption, these primordial people revealed their intense attachment to their animal companions.

That animals touch us in a deep, central place is not a modern-day phenomenon, but one that pervades the history of the human-animal relationship. We sense that we can benefit spiritually in our relationship with animals, and we are right. They offer us something fundamental: a direct and immediate sense of both the joy and wonder of creation. We recognize that animals seem to feel more intensely and purely than we do. Perhaps we yearn to express ourselves with such abandon and integrity. Animals fully reveal to us what we already glimpse: it is feeling -- and the organization of feeling -- that forms the core of self. We also sense that through our relationship to animals we can recover that which is true within us and, through the discovery of that truth, find our spiritual direction. Quite simply, animals teach us about love: how to love, how to enjoy being loved, how loving itself is an activity that generates more love, radiating out and encompassing an ever larger circle of others. Animals propel us into an "economy of abundance."

They teach us the language of the spirit. Through our contact with animals we can learn to overcome the limits imposed by difference; we can reach beyond the walls we have erected between the mundane and the sacred. They can even help us stretch ourselves to discover new frontiers of consciousness. Animals cannot "talk" to us, but they can communicate with us and commune with us in a language that does not require words. They help us understand that words might even stand in the way.

Lois Crisler did not use human words to achieve a spiritual connection with animals. Instead, she used their language. Sitting in a tent with her husband one twilight morning in Alaska, she heard a sound she had never heard before -- the howl of a wolf. Thrilled, she stepped outside the tent and impulsively howled in return, "pouring out my wilderness loneliness." She was answered by a chorus of wolves' voices, yodeling in a range of low, medium, and high notes. Other wolves joined in, each at a different pitch. "The wild deep medley of chords," she recalls, "...the absence of treble, made a strange, savage, heart-stirring uproar." It was the "roar of nature," a roar that brings us back to an essential place we have known but lost. It returns us to nature and to creation, not intellectually but viscerally. We recollect in the cells of our bodies, not in our heads. If we open to it, we can make out the image of our animal kin by our side.

Fulfilling our longing for the wild, our primordial desire to hear "the roar of nature" within ourselves, does not require that we camp out in Alaska, or even encounter an animal in its natural habitat. Spiritual contact with an animal can happen under quite ordinary circumstances.

I once took a yoga class while visiting my sister in Sarasota, Florida, in a beautiful studio with floor-to-ceiling windows. As the class was engaged in exercise, we noticed a dog standing outside the window, innocently looking in. The dog seemed curious, and wagged his tail in a relaxed motion. Soon, he was joined by another dog, who also watched us through the window. Occasionally one or the other would bark -- not a loud bark, but a "here I am" kind of bark. For the entire hour-and-a-half session they stood there, noses to the glass, looking in with interest. They seemed calm, but intensely

attentive, and clearly interested in joining us. One could assign any number of explanations to their absorbed interest. I think, as did others in the class, that they picked up on some kind of "positive energy" generated by our collective yoga practice. I put quotes around "positive energy" because I don't have precise language to describe what I think the dogs sensed. And that is the point. They were able to perceive, and experience, something some of us are dimly aware of and would like to understand, but cannot find words to describe. Animals can teach us to live outside of words, to listen to other forms of consciousness, to tune into other rhythms.

It was the rhythm of music that one musician, Jim Nollman, used to communicate with whales. Along with several other musicians, he recorded hours of human-orca music in an underwater studio every summer for twelve years. Positioning their boat so that the whales would approach them, the group transmitted their music through the water. Most of the time the orcas made the same sounds, regardless of whether the music was played or not. But not all the time. For a few minutes every year, a "sparkling communication occurred. In one instance, the sound of an electric guitar note elicited responses from several whales. In another, an orca joined with the musicians, 'initiating a melody and rhythm over a blues progression, emphasizing the chord changes.'"

An uncanny meeting with a whale proved a decisive spiritual moment for another person, a retired female teacher who I have enjoyed hiking with in northern California. While hiking along the ocean, she decided to rest on a large, flat rock jutting out over the depths. She lay there, relaxed, listening to the sound of the water and the sensation of the breeze on her body when, she reports, she felt a presence: "The hairs on the back of my neck went up; I was compelled to sit up." Sitting up, she saw a whale, resting perpendicular on her fluke. As her eyes met the whale's, time stopped. As they gazed at each other, the woman entered an eternal stillness, feeling an unmatched intensity. Difference dissolved; words were irrelevant. She felt a deep sense of connection with all of life. No longer restricted by the categories of "them" and "us," she felt herself flow into a seamless web of existence in which all of life is one. In complete harmony with the whale, this retired teacher felt that she inhabited a web of relations some call "God." She had encountered God in, and through, the eyes of a whale.

Cross-species communication may be so extraordinary because we cannot rely on identifying with the creature the way we identify with human beings for connection. Our human relationships are often based on relating to a being like ourselves: We can identify and empathize with each other because we share similar experiences. Of course, there is nothing wrong with this. The ability to identify with others forms the basis for personal relationships, social bonds, and social justice.

Animals, however, offer us a unique opportunity to transcend the boundaries of our human perspectives, they allow us to stretch our consciousness toward understanding what it is like to be different. This stretching enables us to grow beyond our narrow viewpoint. It allows us, I believe, to gain a spiritual advantage. How can we possibly appreciate and move toward spiritual wholeness if we cannot see beyond our own species? How can we come to know God, or grasp the interconnectedness of all life, if we limit ourselves to knowing only our own kind? The goal of compassion is not to care because someone is like us but to care because they are themselves.

Any spiritual discipline, in any tradition, invites us to open our hearts and minds. This invitation represents an ongoing exercise; the desire and attempt to open to others in our midst are the essence of the spiritual process.

Animals can lead us spiritually in a variety of ways. They can teach us about death, participate in our social and moral development, enhance our physical and psychological well-being, and heighten our capacity to love and to experience joy.

-from "Animal Grace" by Mary Lou Randour