

Working with Animal Spirit Helpers: An Anthropological Approach to the Healing Bond Between Animals and People

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Abstract:

In many of the world's traditions, people recognize an unbreakable bond between humans and animals that transcends time and space. Dr. Marilyn Walker is an anthropologist whose work in India, Tibet, Southeast Asia, Siberia and the Americas has pointed out the very diverse ways in which we as humans engage with animals in healing on all levels – physical, emotional, mental and spiritual. In this session, she speaks about different cultural attitudes towards animals and the healing gifts they offer us, as well as about her own animal companions and what they have taught her about death and dying.

A few of the ideas I'm going to mention in this talk have to do with shamanism, spirit helpers, and some ideas from the "new sciences" that can help us understand the marvelous and still evolving relationship between humans and animals, and especially dogs.

I will be bringing in some of my findings as a medical anthropologist, archaeologist, health researcher and also as a shamanic practitioner who has worked in "other" cultures for about 30 years in the Arctic, Siberia, Southeast Asia, India, in Latin America, and with First Nations/Native Americans in the U.S. and Canada.

Humans' relationship with animals goes back a very long time – to our very beginnings as a species. And even before.

Some cultures I've worked in trace their ancestry from a bird or animal, or perhaps from an intermarriage of a first human with an animal. And we find this profound and elemental connection in myths and creation stories throughout the world. The anthropologist, Diamond Jenness, for example, wrote down a legend of the Salish of the Northwest Coast in which Khaals, their "mighty trickster and transformer," turned a man and his family into wolves and gave them the power to grant hunting skills to future human generations. The wolf, along with the killer whale, were respected for their hunting proficiency. Shamans or hunters may have gained mastery of these skills with the assistance of these animals as guardians and protectors.

We share a large part of our DNA, our genetic make-up, with other creatures. And if you follow the work of Dr. Hasaru Emoto, the Japanese scientist whose amazing work on water points out that humans and animals are mostly "water", we can begin to understand the primeval and cellular connections amongst us that all of those of us who have animals as companions just "know" on an experiential level – we can feel them. And so can others as

I found out at a conference on Clinical Hypnosis several years ago when the participants, mostly medical doctors and dentists who use hypnotherapy in their practice, were asked to work in pairs and sense things about one another using our intuitive and creative left brain rather than our analytical right brain.

In the first part of the exercise, we were to ‘scan’ our partner’s aura, electro-magnetic field or subtle energy field and describe in detail their home and the entrance to it, the layout of furniture, etc. My partner and I were able to do this for one another quite accurately. For the second part, we were to describe each other’s “significant other.” I was accurate in describing hers – a tall man with dark curly hair, etc. She kept looking at me rather quizzically and eventually said, “I can’t seem to get anyone to describe to you. What keeps coming up is a black dog!” I laughed and told her that the black dog would be Baffin, my constant companion for 16 years and when I thought about it, she really was my significant other – we had shared more than any of the human relationships I had been involved in and our had lasted longer than most of them! She and I had built up a relationship that transcended time and space. And it was “real” enough that it could be perceived by a stranger in this phenomenal or physical world.

We co-evolved with them, as we did with plants that we harvested, ingested, distributed, processed and selectively bred, and otherwise shared our lives with. Or, did they selectively breed us to ensure their own survival? Perhaps dogs domesticated to ensure that they would have humans to feed them with their own leftovers, keep them warm besides their fires and ensure their fertility and enhance the chances of their offspring surviving.

I used to joke about Eube – the daughter of my dog Baffin. She was a very interesting little creature – the runt of the litter. She would sit on her haunches and look up at me with a very direct and penetrating gaze and I would say to my friends that she was trying to evolve. Now that I think about it, she was trying to get me to evolve.

Indigenous cultures maintain this connection with nature that Christianity, and also the other major religions, broke by separating “Man” from “Nature” and prioritizing human. The First Nations phrase, “All My Relations” is used as a sort of “amen” to thank and show respect for all the other beings on which we as humans depend for our livelihood as well as for our spiritual awakening.

Let me talk for a little now about dogs as “relations” with whom we communicate on many levels – physical, mental, emotional and spiritual.

Science is corroborating the value of touch therapy with animals. Recent research is suggesting that humans can distinguish, or learn to distinguish the various types of barks that dogs use to communicate alarm, pleasure, and other mental or emotional states.

Recent research in quantum physics, in the mind-body connection, and in psychoimmunology is showing that we have a brain in our head but also in our heart. This “heart-brain” is surely how we communicate with our companion animals, and they with us. More about this a little later. On a spiritual level, we can learn a lot from indigenous cultures, and from looking back into the history of our own – our human origins are all in shamanic traditions (although they may be hidden) whether we trace our ancestry to Central Asia, northern Scandinavia,

the Bon tradition of the Himalayas, the Celtic tradition of Europe and Britain, or the pre-Celtic traditions of Wales.

A few of the ideas that are key to the shamanic worldview:

1. I've mentioned that in shamanic cultures, human origins and animals origins may be co-creative.
2. Animals are teachers, guides, helpers – in this world and in the metaphysical, subtle or spiritual realms also. Animals are depicted in rock art and cave paintings throughout the world. We have mistakenly interpreted these depictions as being primarily or exclusively pragmatic – for example, showing the game that a hunter would have killed. I think we can look at these depictions as much more profound. In the rock art of the American Southwest, for example, a large dog is a major figure in many Barrier Canyon Style panels and may be the North American equivalent to the jaguar whose form New World shamans are said to assume.
3. This transformation or morphing into another form is called shape-shifting. You may have seen Inuit, Northwest Coast or other examples whereby half human/half bird, fish or animal figures are depicted in rock paintings, shaman's dress, masks, the carved 'poles' or 'totem poles.' One form emerges from the other. Perhaps an animal spirit takes the form of a shaman in order to do some kind of healing work in this world. Or the shaman takes on the form and thus the characteristics of his or her animal spirit helper to carry out his/her work on behalf of their community. The wings of a bird might take the shaman up high where s/he can see far and wide; an eagle is a common power animal, providing strength and clarity of vision. A dog's form may help the shaman to run fast or convey qualities such as loyalty and protection from harm.
4. Power animals or spirit helpers are also a connection with the unseen world that shamans have special insight into. In the western tradition, I like to tell the story of the Wild Swans, which to me is a shamanic story that Hans Christian Anderson wrote as a folk tale. In it, if you recall, a young woman, Elsa, has been sent to jail and separated from her brothers who have been turned into a group of wild swans by the spell of a wicked witch. She is being taken to the gallows in the back of an open cart, in which she is making shirts for each of her brothers from nettle fibres. A flock of swans flies overhead, she throws the shirts upwards and the shirts turn the swans into her brothers who then rescue her from death. All but one of the shirts is finished. One of them is missing an arm and so the youngest of the brothers is wearing a shirt that leaves one wing untransformed. It is a reminder of this shapeshifting that takes place between the worlds.

I would like to tell you about my own experiences with my animal companions – 4 dogs, two of whom you have heard about above.

Both Baffin and Eube lived to be 16. Baffin died 2 years before her daughter. Their deaths were very different.

Baffin died very quickly – within about 24 hours of becoming sick. I lay beside her on the couch with my hand on her as I slept. In the early hours of the morning, I felt an energy pass into my body as she died. It was as if she was giving me all the strength and power she had in this world as a continuation of the gifts she had given me throughout our lives together.

Eube stayed with me for another two years. She stayed with me even when she was physically ailing because I

needed her in my life at that time and couldn't easily release her, as she could not release me. After she died, she kept coming back – in dreams, in visions and in other ways. I gave her offerings to help her in the other world because I came to understand that she was in the transition world between this world and the next – sort of stuck in the nether or inbetween world. When I realized what was happening, I was able to help her, and release her so that she could pass on as she should have.

Now both of them, and the two dogs I had when I was growing up, have become spirit helpers or power animals that help me in my healing work as a shamanic practitioner. The bond was not broken with death, only transformed. They were an entry for me into the subtle or unseen worlds and they help me deal with all sorts of health issues that in a shamanic worldview are seen to be a result of an imbalance between the mind-body-emotions-and spirit. When spirit is missing from our lives, we manifest all sorts of illnesses and conditions. Animal helpers assist with soul retrievals, they accompany people or other beings making that transition from one state to the next, they provide comfort during times of distress, they can frighten away negative influences. They provide protection for my clients and for myself when doing this work.

Conclusion:

My final idea comes from very recent studies in new physics, the mind-body connection, psychoimmunology and neurology. There isn't time here for anything but my conclusions as they apply to the animal-human connection but for the science part you could refer to

- James Austin's Zen and the Brain;
- Rita Carter's two books on the brain and consciousness; and,
- Joseph Chilton Pearce's The Biology of Transcendence: A Blueprint of the Human Spirit.

I mentioned earlier that we have a hemispheric (Left/Right) brain in our heads. Now scientists are corroborating what indigenous peoples and mystical traditions have known and worked with – a heart-brain or a brain that is situated in the heart and that has all the capacities to receive input, connect us with ourselves, with one another and the rest of our surrounds, and direct the activities of our bodies.

Unlike our other emotions and instincts – anger, jealousy, greed, aggression – which have ensured our survival and which are situated in the older parts of our brain, in our evolutionary past, love is situated in our heart-brain.

Another idea of “new science” is that we are “hard-wired” for transcendence and that this wiring is situated in our heart-brain. Love and transcendence are partnered. They both take us out of ourselves and connect us with something greater than ourselves – a greater good and a greater destiny that we participate in with “all our relations.” The dogs with whom I have shared my life have given me awareness of the intricate unfolding of this universal destiny. We have shared a path, a journey of love and transcendence.

Blaise Pascal wrote that the whole purpose therefore of this life is to purify the eye of the heart whereby G-d may be known. What do our companion animals do but help us to purify our hearts?

References:

Patterson, Alex. 1992 Rock Art Symbols of the Greater Southwest. Boulder: Johnson Books.

Bentley, Mary and Ted. 1998 Gabriola: Petroglyph Island. Victoria, British Columbia: Sono Nis Press.

Describes several quadruped petroglyphs at Petroglyph Park, Nanaimo including a uniting of wolf and serpent characteristics: "The animal's snake-like tail, long sharp muzzle and protruding tongue are reminiscent of totem pole depictions of wolves" (p.46). Another "has a dog-like tail and ears, yet the hind leg ends in a bird's talon" (p.47).

Jenness, Diamond 1955 The Faith of a Coast Salish Indian. Anthropology in B.C. No. 3.