

INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL ISSUE - ANIMAL-HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS: COMFORTING, HEALING, AND TRANSFORMING, PART TWO

Marilyn K. Potts, Ph.D., California State University, Long Beach



Marilyn Potts.
Photo by Phil Tan.

As noted in our first special issue, the response to our call for articles on animal-human relationships was so overwhelming that we are devoting two special issues to this topic. The second contains equally compelling narratives about the importance of animals in human lives. At last, we feature several cats. My own don't enjoy traveling and thus would not make good therapists, not to mention disaster relief workers. We have another rabbit story, two more about horses, and many about heroic dogs. A squirrel makes his debut as well.

I'm sad to say that a few of the animals featured here are no longer with us. At least two of the animals mentioned in my own acknowledgment have died. Perhaps a future special issue should focus on bereavement after such a loss.

As before, we are allowing the authors to decide whether "pet" is a politically correct word, whether to use "it" rather than "he/she" when referring to nonhuman animals, and so on.

The first article in this issue includes three healing stories featuring Cheeni (a squirrel), Tomo (a child), and Kush (a dog). Brinda Jegatheesan describes how, as a child in India, she rescued and then bonded with many sacred squirrels. I hope that Cheeni will return to Brinda in another life, as promised by her grandmother.

Next, Alexa Smith-Osborne and Alison Selby describe a horseback riding program for residents of a Veterans Administration domiciliary. A former rodeo rider regains some of his power by advising other riders. A wheelchair-bound man savors the chance to be the boss on an open trail. Another man gazes into his horse's eyes as he prepares to mount, although he exhibits marked eye gaze avoidance with people.

Horseback riding for children is featured next. Joanne Tortorici Luna writes about her work with Move a Child Higher (MACH1). A child with cerebral palsy who is blind and nonverbal makes "happy sounds" on the mornings she comes to ride. A child with severe cerebral palsy gains balance, motor control, and strength. The horses in this program are also vividly described. Wrigley, for example, who has bucked off more than one trainer, always stops when he senses that a child is in danger of slipping off.

The story of Clementine (a rabbit) follows. Clementine worked for several years in a south Texas elementary school. Catherine Faver and Kimberly Bradley describe how Clementine helped many children "find a voice" because she was consistently nonjudgmental as they read pre-selected books to her. In this particular school, her lack of language and cultural biases were especially valued. "Clementine responded to the reading of a book in Spanish or in English with equal enthusiasm." She will be missed.

We return to older adults in our next three articles. Marilyn Mather describes how she and her mother dealt with the challenges of fighting cancer at an advanced age, coupled with the difficulties of maintaining a pet as abilities decline. Decisions about living arrangements had to take into account the presence of Champ. Home health aides had to be willing to tend to his needs as well as those of their human client. This article illustrates how senior living facilities and home health care policies seldom address the needs of nonhuman members of the household. "Mom sacrificed her own social needs in order to have the companionship of a three-legged dog. We talked about a move to assisted living, but Champ could not stay with her."

The following article presents a contrast. Joan Behrick Digges illustrates what might happen when infirm individuals *cannot* continue to maintain a home for their animal companions. Her role as a medical social worker included "an immediate rescue drive to the dog pound" to save the life of Belle, whose human companion was not expected to recover. She faced a significant ethical dilemma when a person with Alzheimer's was unable to sign the consent form needed to save the life of her dog. Leaving animals to die on their own or be euthanized is "the plight faced by many hospitalized patients once they become incapacitated." At least one policy implication of these examples is clear. "We should expand the concept of the advance directive to include plans for surviving companion animals."

Next, Carolyn Schaffer provides several beautiful examples of how cats and dogs can enrich the lives of nursing home residents. Along with a few dogs, we have two cats as our heroes in these stories. A withdrawn man who had not spoken since his admission said "pretty kitty" in the presence of Heckyl. A gruff man who had consistently ignored the visiting dogs finally opened up in the presence of Ashes. As a faculty member of the School of Veterinary Medicine at Tuskegee University, Caroline has been instrumental in promoting the importance of the animal-human bond. A glance at her author's blurb will show that her actions are consistent with her words.

We then turn to a different type of institution, the psychiatric hospital. Beth Prullage's dog Maisy had many duties in one such facility. Like Clementine, she listened to young people read. Those of all ages would confide in Maisy, "often with more clarity and truth than had been expressed to any staff member." She would be summoned on an as-needed basis to soothe those who were particularly upset. Many would request Maisy's presence in the room if they were expecting to have a conversation with their therapist about abuse, violence, and/or other traumatic experiences.

As a psychotherapist in an outpatient setting, Lois Abrams employs Duke and Romeo as her co-therapists. Duke is an expert diagnostician. When he sits next to people on the couch or on their laps, they are probably depressed; when he sits by their feet on the floor, they are probably anxious. Both Duke and Romeo perform their therapeutic duties by facilitating rapport, being consistently accepting and nonjudgmental, and enabling both children and adults to open up with greater ease. These little Cavalier Spaniels also provide a calming effect on survivors and first responders during wildfires, floods, school shootings, train crashes, and hurricanes.

Next, Laurel Rabschutz writes about the importance of assistance dogs in the lives of disabled individuals. Based on 15 qualitative interviews, she found compelling evidence of the animal-human bond in this context. All but one individual expected the assistance dog merely to meet functional needs, such as opening doors and retrieving objects. However, emotional and social needs were met as well. "It's the closest relationship I've ever had." "He means as much to me as my closest family." "He really is my buddy."

This article is followed by a first-person narrative about a specific assistance dog. Co-authored by Amy Garrity, Carla Garrity (Amy's mother), and Phillip Tedeschi (of the Institute for Human-Animal Connection, Graduate School of Social Work, University of Denver), we learn how Indy contributed to major changes in Amy's life. His loyal companionship helped her deal with previously threatening public situations. "Indy has opened

many doors for me. He has been my inspiration to make another attempt at college." Carla expands on this transformation and describes how Phillip became Amy's professional advisor. Finally, Phillip uses Amy's story to support the importance of Animal-Assisted Social Work (AASW).

"Dancing with Grace" by Nan Palmer illustrates how one becomes a member of a Pet Partner team. Their dance involved a few stumbles before Nan learned to follow Gracie's lead. Gracie was reserved, very sensitive to touch, and protective of her personal space. These are not good traits for one who must manage "exuberant clumsy petting, restraining hugs, and crowded petting by several people." With further training, Nan's ability to transcend multi-species boundaries, and her remembrance of the social work mantra "start where the client is," Nan and Gracie finally succeeded. They passed the Delta Society's evaluation tests and danced their way into a variety of medical and psychiatric treatment facilities. Jean Palmer (Nan's mother) ends this narrative with her reflections on all that she and Gracie have in common.

A vivid narrative on Animal-Assisted Crisis Response work comes next. Louise Graham communicated with me at least twice from an airplane as she traveled with Ellie-Mae and/or Smart Alec to yet another deployment, including our California wildfires. Several deployments are highlighted in this article, including fires, floods, and tornadoes, but perhaps the most compelling is the story of Northern Illinois University, the site of a campus shooting incident. Ellie-Mae was especially welcomed there since the school's mascot is a Siberian Husky like her. "They expressed their feelings and thoughts as they stroked and hugged little Ellie-Mae." The many vignettes in this article show how dogs can serve as valuable tools in crisis intervention work.

We end our full-length articles with one by Tracie Laliberte-Bailey. As a professional educator and consultant in the area of the human-canine bond, Tracie describes her views on problematic behaviors in dogs. Various disciplines have various names for

Tracie's approach - cybernetics, systems theory, the biopsychosocial approach, person-in-environment fit, etc. Regardless of the label, our helping professional readers will appreciate Tracie's description of how the family dog is a member of a system, in this case a pack. As all family therapists know, the involvement of the whole family is a key factor in treatment success. The human members of the pack must learn "dog speak" before family communication patterns can improve. "My goal is to...highlight how both their and their dog's behaviors can mutually and simultaneously shape the dynamic of the family unit." Tracie's use of "reframing the problem" will also sound familiar to many readers. If human pack members learn that a problematic behavior (e.g., jumping up on you whenever you come home) is actually a complement (i.e., dogs typically sniff other pack members' faces as a sign of welcome), then the behavior will not be viewed as deviant and effective problem-solving can proceed. In other words, if you stoop to the dog's level when greeting each other, you're less likely to be knocked down. Even seasoned helping professionals might heed this advice.

I received no accusations of anthropomorphism after including two articles written by dogs themselves in our previous special issue. Similarly, this one concludes with a narrative by Beamer (a Maine Coon cat) and Molly Gaffney (a rescue dog). Beamer's story was told to Marjorie A. Smith and Molly's story was told to Lee Gaffney. Beamer relates how he teaches conflict resolution skills to children through his body language. He is particularly gratified when he is called upon to soothe weeping children. Molly relates how she precipitated the awakening of a young girl who had been in a coma for 10 days. "I just stayed there as still as I could. I knew it was an important time. I waited to see what I was supposed to do next. I was told to move around the bed. The little girl was told where I was. She responded by reaching for me every time. Her mother got very, very excited." Lee Gaffney relates how Molly worked as a therapy dog for over 13 years, living up to the Visiting Pet Program motto of "bringing love and leaving smiles" everywhere she went.

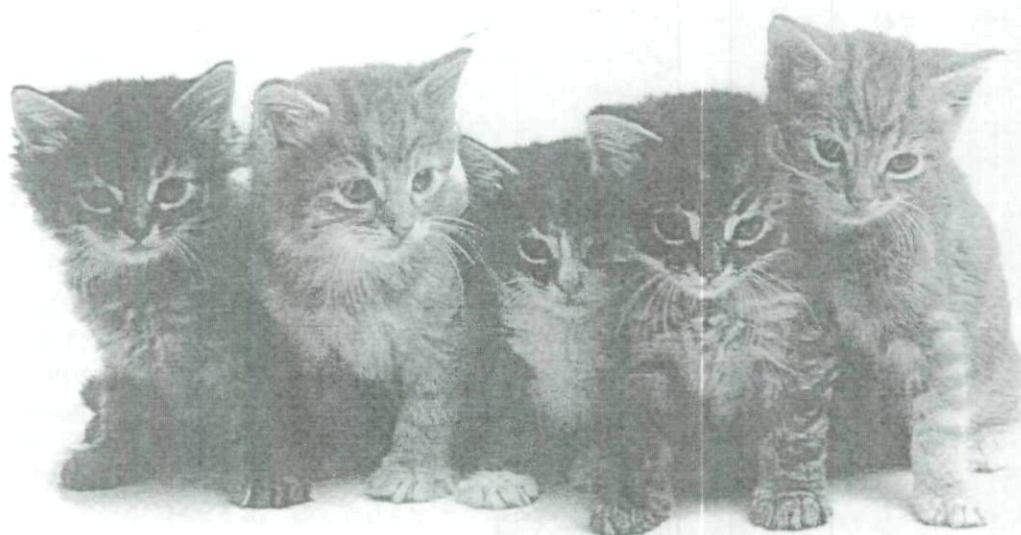
If only human animals could do the same.

Acknowledgement: These special issues are dedicated to all of the animals described by the authors and to Bobby, Goldie, Diana, Susan, Jerry, Tippy, Skipper, Buttons, Penelope, Clara, Marley, Amelia, Ezekiel, Johnny Cougar, Janice Joplin, Buster, Sparkle, Sushi, Kiko, Snookie, Pookie, Rosie, Sweet Pea, Missy, ChiChi, Ishi, Jack, Crackers, Bull, Bulldozer, Maurice, Oliver, Fluffy, Bear, Cosmo, and Inyo.

I thank our Editor-in Chief, Jillian Jimenez, for her strong positive reaction to our first special issue and for her continued support. As before, Wendi McLendon provided excellent assistance throughout the entire publication process. I appreciate the insightful comments of our anonymous reviewers. I also appreciate the new friends I've made along the way via email and/or in person. All authors were extremely responsive to my requests for content clarification, blurbs, photos, photo credits, and so on.

Comments concerning this special issue can be sent to mpotts@csulb.edu.

Correction: The photograph of Flopsy on page 11 in the Fall 2008 issue should be credited to Kimberly Crawford.



Copyright of Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping is the property of Cleveland State University and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.