

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

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Our call for narratives on animal-human relationships clearly touched the hearts of many helping professionals. The response was so overwhelming that we will be devoting two special issues to this topic.

Although I did not need to be convinced of the power of nonhuman animals in my own life, I have learned much while serving as guest editor for these two special issues. I have become acquainted with the devoted cadre of social workers in veterinary schools helping students deal with human clients and both students and human clients deal with bereavement. I have learned the difference between animal-assisted visitation, animal-assisted activity, and animal-assisted therapy. I have gained appreciation for the heroic canine crisis response workers whose healing presence comforts both human responders and disaster survivors. The importance of including companion animals as family members in psychosocial assessments has been reinforced. The parallels between wild horses in training and the prisoners who train them have become apparent. I have learned how horseback riding can empower those with mobility limitations and how dogs can help clinicians establish rapport and trust.

Some issues of political correctness should be addressed at this point. Calling our animal companions "pets" is viewed by most in the field as inappropriate. One author pointed out that the word "animal" is misleading as well. Since humans are animals also, the correct term would be "nonhuman animal." I struggled with the use of "it" as the correct pronoun when referring to nonhuman animals, preferring to use "he or she" myself, although

the former is said to be grammatically correct. For the most part, our authors were allowed to use their own preferred style regarding these issues.

The first article in this issue illustrates Catherine Faver's spiritual development through her relationship with animals, particularly her rabbit companions. This sets the tone for the remainder of the issue by "fostering an awareness of the kinship of all life."

Next, Karen Dalke describes the Wild Horse Inmate Program of Colorado Correctional Industries. Through a partnership with the Bureau of Land Management, inmates train mustangs for adoption. These are some of the parallels she draws. Neither horse nor inmate wants to be there. "There is a separation from a prior life, but they are not yet reincorporated into another society." Both parties serve as teachers and students as they develop an awareness of others and a sense of empathy. Both earn an opportunity for a second chance.

Sue Grunfest and Coco (our cover girl) are featured next. Coco came into Sue's life when Sue was recovering from a serious illness. "Little did I know then that by saving *her* life, she would in turn save *mine*." Although limited by her own health issues now, Coco continues to teach children about empathy, among other important lessons: "...when Coco could no longer see with her eyes, one gentle child told me not to be sad because Coco now sees with her heart."

Nancy Gee then describes her work with her two therapy dogs. Like Coco, Louie and Nikki have enhanced the lives of many special

needs children. Nancy describes the case of Adam, in particular, a child with significant mobility limitations, who was empowered to crawl through a tunnel for the first time due to Louie's intervention. "When he saw Louie do it, he began squirming to get away from his aide. The next thing we knew, Adam had crawled into the tunnel."

F. Ellen Netting's article is about "lessons learning from aging dogs." Through nearly 40 years of married life, she and her husband Karl learned much about relationships, aging, and dealing with death from their animal companions. Beginning with Pooker and ending with Sandy and Schnapsy, "their stories have become part of our narrative as a couple."

We then present a narrative about an animal visitation program, written by Christina Bach. As Christina goes to work, she assembles her things. Blackberry, pager, and Beagle. Beagle? Yes, Gus the Beagle works with her in the VETPETS program at the Philadelphia Ronald McDonald House. Christina describes how Gus and his co-workers bring joy to children undergoing treatment for life-threatening illnesses and comfort to families experiencing bereavement.

A light-hearted yet insightful narrative is presented next. Peter Nguyen describes his unrealistic expectations for Colt, his new puppy. Far from fulfilling Peter's dream of a Norman Rockwell painting of a "boy and his dog," Colt "ran amuck doing what puppies do" while Peter played the "role of a worried and frustrated parent" whenever Colt did not conform to Peter's expectations or fit neatly into his world. Through self-reflection and cognitive restructuring, Peter remembered his social work practice skills – we must "start where the client is" rather than imposing our own values and needs.

Sandra Younger and Terra are a crisis response team. Sandra is a human and Terra is a Newfoundland dog, certified through HOPE. While their own home is in danger (after having burned down in 2003), Sandra and Terra head to the Esperanza Fire base camp. Upon meeting Terra, "exhausted, depressed firefighters... would start to smile, perhaps for the first time in days... A few would even well up in a sudden release of emotion."

Next, we return to horses, this time as they empower physically handicapped children and adults. Patricia Westerman, Dolores Westerman, Holly Hargreaves, and Melissa Verge describe the work of "Great and Small," focusing on two special riders and their horses. An adult with multiple sclerosis describes this as "a disease of loss" but regains one of her lost activities through riding Goldie, a draft horse who is also a "goddess." "I am empowered," she says. "I have better posture. I have more core stability. These may seem like little things, but they're huge." A child with developmental delays describes her interactions with Bear. "I trust Bear so much. I talk to him about my feelings." The child was empowered not only by her own riding, but also through her work as a mentor for newcomers to the program. She says, "I feel proud that I teach the kids who don't know how to ride how to sit in the saddle straight."

Aubrey H. Fine (the author of one of the few books in existence on animal-assisted therapy) and Cynthia Eisen then describe the work of Magic, P.J., and Huck. The narrative about Magic's magical work with Sally, a child with severe behavioral issues, is a compelling case study. The authors note how Sally progressed from "open hostility and physical aggression" to a state of steady increase in her language abilities, attention span, and self-awareness (in the words of her group home caseworker). In Sally's own words, "Thank you, Magic. You make me feel like a good girl. I love you."

Christina Risley-Curtiss writes of her "very personal journey" with her cats, dog, goat, horse, and rooster. She reminds us that other animals can help human animals survive and thrive. She reminds helping professionals that if we are to "look at our clients in a truly ecological and holistic perspective, we must ask about the presence of, and relationships with, other animals in their lives." We need to "consider ways to support those healthy relationships and draw on them for client support." Anyone who has experienced the illness and death of a beloved animal companion will appreciate her call for helping professionals to address such traumatic experiences with their clients.

After reading the foregoing articles, our readers will surely be convinced, if they were not already, of the significance of nonhuman animals in our lives. Thus, our final article may come as a shock as it deals with euthanasia. Tracy Zapanick discusses the personal experiences inspiring her research on compassion fatigue among those who work in nonhuman animal care provider (NACP) environments (i.e., veterinary medicine, animal rescue, animal shelters, etc.). She points out that most helping professionals work with populations about whom they care. She asks helping professionals to "imagine now for a moment that the job required you, directly or indirectly, to stop the beating heart of individuals of that population you value."

Our last piece is a compilation of two short articles written by dogs themselves (with some help from their human typists). Although at risk of being accused of anthropomorphism, I have included these pieces because they illustrate how the humans involved were comforted and inspired by their animal companions during some of the darkest times of their lives.

We end this special issue with Gilda Martinez's review of a new contribution to the field of animal-assisted intervention, authored by Merope Pavlides.

It's my personal hope that these powerful articles, along with Tracy Zapanick's statistics on euthanasia, will inspire some of our readers to adopt a "pet" and otherwise advocate for the humane treatment of all sentient beings.

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 also thank our Editor-in Chief, Jillian Jimenez, for talking me into serving as guest editor for these special issues. It has been a truly rewarding experience. Wendi McLendon-Covey provided excellent support throughout the process. I appreciate the insightful comments of our anonymous reviewers, particularly the one who wrote, "This makes me want to go out and get a dog."

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