

A RABBIT TALE: ANIMALS AS SPIRITUAL GUIDES

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Relationships with animals can facilitate spiritual development by fostering an awareness of the kinship of all life. After recognizing her own experiences reflected in images and attributes of rabbits, the narrator discovered the true meaning of connectedness through a miracle that hopped into her life.

I was born on the vernal equinox (March 21) four days before Easter (March 25) in the Chinese year of the rabbit (1951). Springtime has long been associated with the hare as a sign of new life. In fact, the term "Easter" is derived from "Eostre," an Anglo-Saxon moon goddess symbolized as a hare and associated with a pagan feast celebrating the vernal equinox. This springtime holiday was appropriated by the early Christians to celebrate their belief in Jesus' resurrection and in 325 the date of Easter was set as the first Sunday after the first full moon of spring (Davis & DeMello, 2003).

Given the timing of my birth and the historical religious significance of rabbits, perhaps it is only natural that rabbits and rabbit symbols would be important in my spiritual development. Yet in my earliest memories, spring is associated not only with my birthday and the Easter bunny, but also with a tragic event.

Less than a week after my fifth birthday, my maternal grandfather died unexpectedly and violently. The waves of shock and grief that rolled over my extended family were intense. Although I was not close to my grandfather, I was deeply affected by my family's reactions. Like many young children who lose a close relative, I began to fear that one of my own parents would die. Instinctively, I hid my feelings, seeking comfort in solitary play at the margins of my family's grief. Throughout this crisis my parents maintained our daily household routine and on the surface life went on as usual. Many years later, however, an encounter with an animated rabbit drew me back to this event and propelled me

forward in a world of "widening and deepening connections" (Lasher, 1996, p. 2).

I entered kindergarten in the fall following my grandfather's death. Our family had recently purchased our first television and my favorite program was Captain Kangaroo. In nearly every episode, the silent puppet Bunny Rabbit managed to trick the Captain out of a bunch of carrots. Revealing the quick-wittedness often attributed to rabbits in myth and legend (Davis & DeMello, 2003), Bunny Rabbit's antics demonstrated that we can use our minds to gain a sense of efficacy. Apparently, I took my cue from Bunny Rabbit, because from the beginning of my school days, I relished learning and flourished academically.

Three years after my grandfather's death, my parents gave me a large pink and white stuffed rabbit on my birthday, just eight days before Easter. The rabbit quickly became my favorite toy; I diapered it and played with it like a doll. In a characteristic photograph, I am sitting on my bed holding the rabbit while reading a book. In retrospect, my attachment to this rabbit seems to have buffered the passage through middle childhood. By the time I had hugged the fur off its body and the starch from its ears, I was ready to "put away childish things" and face the challenges of adolescence.

Some years passed before my next rabbit encounter. During late adolescence I was given a copy of Margery Williams' (1922) *The Velveteen Rabbit*, a children's classic I had somehow overlooked. The book's essential message is that we become "real" (i.e., authentic) selves through loving relationships. Love entails vulnerability and the risk of loss,

but the joy of being real is worth any pain endured. Despite my limited life experience, I recognized the wisdom of this message and stored it in my heart for my journey into adulthood.

At this point the reader may have noticed that no living rabbits have yet hopped into the picture. They are coming – but not quite yet.

When I am asked how I became interested in animal welfare, either personally or professionally, I usually say, “It all started with Thumper.” It would also be true to say, “It all started by paying attention.” Either way, it started on a hot summer afternoon almost 20 years ago. I went to the local theater to see Walt Disney’s 1942 animated film *Bambi*, which I did not remember having seen during its previous releases. As I watched I was captivated by Thumper, the child-like rabbit who befriended the young deer Bambi. Disney’s Thumper was spontaneous and honest. When the newborn Bambi attempted to stand on his little deer legs, Thumper blurted out (to the obvious chagrin of Mother Rabbit): “Kind of wobbly, isn’t he?” Later, Thumper ventured into the forest, introducing his friend Bambi to plants and animals and teaching him to skate on the frozen pond. During another adventure, the threat of a spring storm sent Thumper rushing home to the safety and security of his family.

While watching the film, I found myself feeling protective toward Thumper. “I’m worrying about an animated rabbit,” I thought. “What is this?” Upon reflection, I realized that Thumper evoked my own sense of vulnerability as a small child, especially during the period after my grandfather’s death. Unlike Thumper, however, I had sought safety in solitude rather than connection and I had hidden my feelings instead of expressing my fears openly. Somewhat inexplicably, my connection with Thumper was cathartic; viewing and processing Thumper’s story gave me a new sense of compassion for my five-year-old self.

Having identified so strongly with Thumper, I became curious about the attributes of real rabbits. Because they are prey, rabbits are often associated with vulnerability, fear, and timidity (Davis & DeMello, 2003). At the

same time, rabbits are gifted with the protective gear they need. With their sensitive noses and long, flexible ears, rabbits smell and hear danger, and with their powerful hind legs and big back feet they run with great speed, making zigzag patterns to evade their pursuers. Their burrows and warrens provide places of safety and retreat; above ground, ill or injured rabbits hide their symptoms in order not to attract the attention of predators (Davis & DeMello, 2003; Harriman, 2005).

Like rabbits, I was given protective gear that offset my childhood vulnerability. The time spent quietly observing my family in the aftermath of my grandfather’s death helped to shape my way of being in the world. I made friends with solitude and learned to cherish time alone for reading and reflection. I learned to be attuned to my surroundings, intuitively taking in people and situations as a whole. These gifts have served me well in teaching and scholarly work. Coupled with the religious training of my youth, my sense of vulnerability surely affected my choice of social work as a profession as I entered early adulthood. On a cognitive level the religious mandate to “do justice and love mercy” (Micah 6:8) provided an impetus for my vocational choice. On an emotional level, however, both the religious mandate for justice and social work’s commitment to vulnerable people resonated with the vulnerable child still hovering within me, the child who had withdrawn in fear in the aftermath of tragic loss.

My reflections on the connections between Thumper and my own life experiences heightened my awareness of real rabbits. Soon I began to notice wild rabbits feeding in a field near my apartment. Leaping in the tall, dew-covered grass, they surprised and delighted me. I wanted to be closer. I wanted to know rabbits personally.

Assuming responsibility for rabbits as companion animals is, however, quite a different matter from simply observing wild rabbits in their natural habitat. Thus, several years passed before I welcomed my first two domestic rabbit companions, sisters Daffodil and Dandelion, into my home. In preparing for my rabbit companions, I had read an early edition of Harriman’s *House Rabbit*

Handbook (2005) and I knew that we would need a veterinarian with specialized knowledge about rabbits. After Daffi and Dandi joined me, I found additional guidance and support through the House Rabbit Society (HRS), whose website (www.rabbit.org) and journal (*House Rabbit Journal*) provide extensive information about the needs and care of domestic rabbits. Over the years these and other resources have not only supported me as a caregiver, but have also connected me to a network of people committed to the well-being of rabbits.

Living with rabbits changed my perspective and my life. My rabbits did not try to convert me, but their needs and behavior constantly challenged me to see the world from their point of view. They invited me into relationship, and relationships are transformative. Gradually, my human-centered perspective, which gave little thought to the welfare of nonhuman animals, evolved into a view of human spirituality as “a process of taking our rightful place in the web of life” (Faver, 2008), a place that is characterized by respect, compassion, and kindness directed to *all* animals (human and nonhuman) and the earth which is our home.

Living with rabbits also demonstrated to me what research on many species has documented: animals have intelligence and experience emotion, and each individual is unique, not simply a representative of a species (Bekoff, 2000; Goodall & Bekoff, 2002; Davis & DeMello, 2003). Yet, while humans and animals have much in common, it is a mistake to assume that intelligence and emotion can be defined by the human experience of these qualities. Each species has unique sensory capacities and skills, and humans can never fully enter into other species' experience. As Davis and DeMello (2003, p. 346) noted: “Animals...may actually be more emotionally complex than humans, not less.” Recognizing the “otherness” of animals as well as our connectedness fosters humility and respect, thus opening a path to spiritual growth:

*Animals...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...When we relate to them as “other,” yet also as our kin, our fellow creatures of God and the universe, we enter an expanded level of consciousness. (Randour, 2000, pp. 6, 13-14)

For many years I had believed and taught that “we are all connected to everything” (Ochs, 1986, p. 121), but I had mostly ignored our connections to the earth and nonhuman animals. I had emphasized the value of diversity but had failed to explore the gifts of “otherness” received through relationships with non-human animals. At last it became clear to me that the barriers we maintain between human and nonhuman animals are just as arbitrary and harmful as the barriers between human groups that we have challenged. Our commitment to those who are vulnerable and oppressed must also include compassion and care for nonhuman animals. As Randour (2000) explained:

Love demands that we stretch ourselves beyond our usual way of thinking, often characterized by defining ourselves by our differences. Sometimes the difference we find is gender or race. Other times it is religion or nationality...[W]e have begun to realize that organizing ourselves by these differences not only disenfranchises others but also diminishes us. But even as we find unity within the human race, we still go to great lengths to distinguish ourselves from other species. We need to extend our care and understanding to all species. (Randour, 2000, p. 30)

My growing awareness of the kinship of all life compelled me to add my voice to the chorus of those who acknowledge the many connections between human well-being and the welfare of the earth and nonhuman animals. In retrospect, I was following what Lasher (1996, p. 2) calls "the path of animal connections." Through my relationships with rabbits, I finally perceived "the essential connectedness of all things" (Lasher, 1996, p. 2), which is the foundation for compassionate action.

The three rabbits who now share my home – Flopsy, Tuli, and Clementine – were all lost, abandoned, or "runaways" as young rabbits. Despite their similarity to their wild counterparts, domestic rabbits are unprepared to fend for themselves and rarely survive on their own outdoors. Thus, although the circumstances that brought my three rabbits into my life were very different, I regard each rabbit as a special gift. Tuli's arrival, in particular, taught me an important lesson. Here is Tuli's story.

Nine days before Easter in April, 2004, I left my apartment just before dawn to take a walk. Crossing the parking area, I caught sight of a small animal darting across my path. "Cat," I thought, knowing that numerous homeless cats roamed the area. Instinctively, I turned aside to look and discovered, to my amazement, a small domestic rabbit returning my gaze. All the stories of "rabbit rescues" I had read raced through my mind. Capturing a lost domestic rabbit outdoors can require days of patiently waiting and cultivating trust, but this little rabbit was unlikely to survive for long in the midst of urban predators. I felt totally unprepared to rescue her but I had to try.

I stood still, afraid that she would run away if I approached. As I waited, she hopped close and sniffed my shoes, then retreated to explore the foliage at the edge of the pavement. Seeing her closely, I realized that she was not simply a juvenile rabbit; she was a "dwarf," one of the smallest species of domestic rabbits. Yet here she was in the parking lot, extremely vulnerable in a world of potentially dangerous cats, dogs, and people.

Hoping she would not disappear in my absence, I backed away slowly and darted into

my apartment to grab a towel, the only equipment for "bunny-catching" at hand. Returning to the parking area, I was relieved to see she was still there, still exploring. I followed at a distance, biding my time, waiting for the "right" moment. Finally, I followed her to the edge of a shrub. She was close to my feet, just below me. I had one chance. If I missed, she would run away in fear. With my heart pounding, saying a silent prayer, I dropped the towel over her, reached down, and scooped her up.

At that moment joy and gratitude flooded my heart. I could hardly believe that I was actually holding her. It was a miracle. This little rabbit had hopped across my path and into my life. Speaking softly, reassuring her, I took her into my apartment, and introduced her to her new home.

Almost four years later, Tuli and I were in our Houston veterinarian's office where she was receiving treatment for a minor eye infection. While examining Tuli, Dr. Antinoff asked, "How did you find her? I forgot." I recounted the story, ending as usual by saying, "It was a miracle. Finding this bunny was a miracle in my life!" To which Dr. Antinoff replied, "It was a miracle in *her* life."

Dr. Antinoff's words stunned me. Suddenly, I saw Tuli's rescue in a new light. In allowing me to capture her, Tuli had taken a big risk. In return, she received a second chance. She found protection, love, and a "forever home." Tuli's experience showed me the real meaning of connectedness: what we do for others, we do for ourselves. Tuli was my miracle and I was hers.

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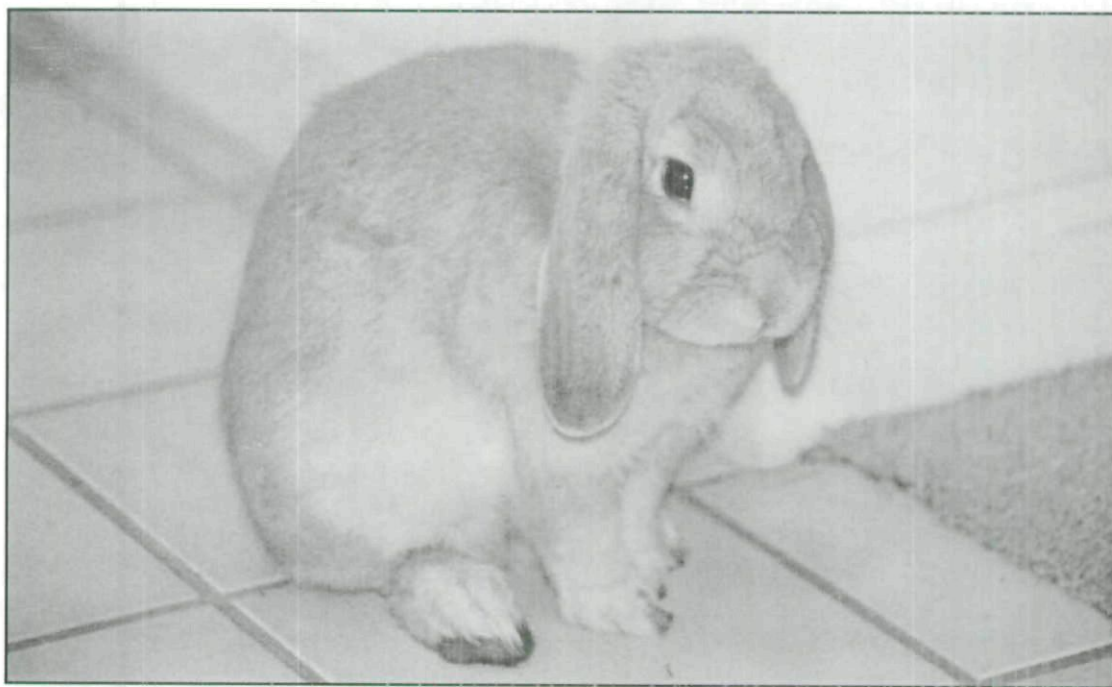
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Flopsy. Photograph by Catherine A. Faver.

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