

A GIRL AND THREE DOGS: FINDING THE MAGIC IN ANIMAL-ASSISTED THERAPY

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The following narrative is a modified excerpt from *Afternoons with Puppy: Inspirations from a Therapist and His Animals* (2008).

Introduction

Surrounded by my dogs, birds, lizards, and fish, I feel like a modern-day Dr. Doolittle, although in my case, I don't talk to the animals. I talk with them. For close to 30 years, I have worked in the company of animals, with children who have special needs.

Since becoming a therapist, I have tried numerous approaches and alternatives, some more conventional than others, to reach the hidden inner selves of my clients. About 20 years ago, I even worked with a renowned magician to learn sleight of hand to enhance rapport with my clients. Although magic was popular and worked well to relax and transition my patients into a session, I continued my search for other options to make me a better clinician. At the same time, I also wanted people to feel at home and as relaxed as possible. That is when I discovered the power that animals could have on people.

My nonhuman colleagues have the ability to bond with and support my young charges. These animals have been influential in opening doors that appeared shut and providing clients with a blanket of emotional warmth that promotes a strong therapeutic relationship. When I opened my private practice in 1987, I began systematically to incorporate animal-assisted interventions with my clients. In a chapter that I prepared in the *Handbook of Animal Assisted Therapy* and a chapter that I prepared with Pam Beiler, I identified several reasons why therapists incorporate animals into therapy (Fine, 2006; Fine & Beiler, 2007). The following briefly reviews some of my findings.

One of the primary reasons that many therapists incorporate animals into their therapy is because the animals act as a social lubricant. The therapy animal may ease tension

and act as an icebreaker when greeting clients with warmth and enthusiasm.

It is apparent that calm and friendly animals can effectively ease the stress of the initial phase of therapy and promote interactions and conversations between a therapist and client. My position is that a therapist may appear less threatening, and therefore the client may be more willing to reveal him/herself.

The presence of a trusted animal in therapy may also lend comfort and stability to the environment, especially when a therapist must become more confrontational with a client. The animal can act as a "blanket" to help comfort the client in times of stress and anxiety. Additionally, Fine (2006) suggests that a therapist may use the life history of the therapy animal as a catalyst for discussion, especially when clients share commonalities with animals. Some patients may see similarities between their own life histories and emotions and the perceived life outcomes and emotions expressed by an animal (being shy or fearful). For example, children who have been abused or neglected may feel comfortable relating to animals that have had similar life events, such as being abused or abandoned. This may lead to sharing their own life experiences in the presence of the animal.

Finally, it has been noted in the literature that animals can be a valuable contribution to the therapeutic environment. The therapy animals can help create a setting that is perceived as friendly and comfortable to clients. For instance, there are now numerous medical offices which showcase fish tanks or coral reefs primarily to develop an atmosphere that is extremely calming. Research reported by Fine (2006) demonstrates how observing



Magic. Photograph by
Tom Zasadzinski.

fish in a calm tank can have an impact on reduction of stress.

The Role of Animal-Assisted Therapy in the Life of Sally

Excerpt from Ellen's dairy: "On the way to the first visit with Dr. Fine, I think we were all nervous. Sally was silent in the back seat of the car, clutching her baby doll. Her assistant and I were discussing ways to facilitate the visit and priming Sally as to what to expect. I had brought a camera along because Sally always liked to have pictures taken. These could be used as a reward for her. I have always known about her keen interest in animals. She isn't able to have a large animal in the

group home. Recently, she overturned her bird's cage during a tantrum, luckily not hurting the animal. There was potential for problems."

Ellen had called me knowing of my use of animal-assisted therapy, but was upfront in declaring that Sally was a tough case and, because of her open hostility and physical aggression, most traditional modes of treatment had been ruled out, leaving them with limited options. Knowing this and feeling a bit anxious myself, we set up an appointment.

In the months prior to meeting Sally, I'd been training a young puppy, Magic, to work with clients. She'd shown signs of promise, but the training sessions were short because little Magic periodically needed to be a juvenile and could still lapse into puppy behavior. It wasn't uncommon to find her, in her downtime, scavenging through the trash to find a tasty wrapper or dismantling one of her play toys to get the squeaker out. However, her playfulness, along with her gentle manner, is what made her a lovable hit with my clients. She often appeared mature beyond her years. Nevertheless, my gang of dogs still considered her the puppy in the house and let her know that she was to pay her dues.

One of my clients suggested her name because he knew of my love for prestidigitation. He also felt that the name was apt, especially if she could "magically" support

children in therapy. I liked the name because I still use magic in my practice. It's a great icebreaker and an easy way to connect with clients. For a few moments, their minds are open to possibilities. This is what draws us all to the art of magic. It is a way to teach children lessons of dexterity (physical and mental) while also impressing upon them the need for persistence in achieving a goal.

Thus, naming our newest canine member Magic was just perfect, for the word represents two important dimensions in my life – a love of magic and a love of animals. The more I got to know this little one, the more amazing she seemed. Even today she continues to dazzle me with her sense of judgment and gentleness. At one moment, she is a calming cornerstone of compassion. At other times, she can be exhilarating to watch as she plays with an earnest zest for life. Being with Magic has convinced me that magic can be real, especially if we allow it to happen.

This brings us back to Sally, a child who needed to suspend her belief and be open to other possibilities. At our first meeting, she was sandwiched between Ellen and another staff member. I could feel the tension emanating from the three of them. Sally sat stone-faced; her body was so rigid that I thought it might break with the smallest movement. Because I wanted to gauge her behavior, I met her without an animal companion. I sat down in a chair several feet away from them. Sally didn't speak much, but she mumbled the word "dogs." I spoke with her for a few moments, but Sally wasn't responsive. After another few minutes, I told her that I would go back and bring out PJ. She smiled. When I returned with PJ on a leash, her response wasn't what I expected. She immediately curled up into a ball and tried to cover herself. Her face grew pale and her left hand went out as if to ward off an attack. She screeched, "NO! NO! NO!" and spat at me. I had been cautioned that this might happen, but it still surprised me, and I backed off quickly, leading PJ a few steps away.

Reassuring her that PJ was gentle and on a leash did not decrease Sally's anxiety, so I cued PJ to back further away and lie down on the floor. That appeased Sally. After a few

moments, she relaxed and asked to see PJ. By the end of the morning, she had allowed PJ to come just within petting distance and had tapped the dog's head once or twice. Whenever I approached, however, she spat. Not exactly a perfect visit, but it was a beginning. Later, Ellen called to say that all three of them were exhausted, but she thought that additional sessions might be helpful. She then spent time giving me more critical background information on Sally. She was uprooted and immigrated to the United States at age eight (about six years ago). She and her mother initially came to the United States only to visit, but during the visit her mother went into labor with Sally's brother and she then applied for political asylum. Sally hasn't seen her father since. Sally's mom was reluctant to acknowledge her daughter's communication and behavioral problems until these behaviors escalated to biting children and spitting at any adult approaching her in the midst of her angry reactions. Finally, her mother looked for help and eventually placed her in the group home. But as Sally's aggression increased, she started to bite other children randomly and continued to spit at approaching adults when she was upset. Her limited language skills made matters worse. In addition, Ellen disclosed her suspicions that Sally had experienced a traumatic event, possibly abuse.

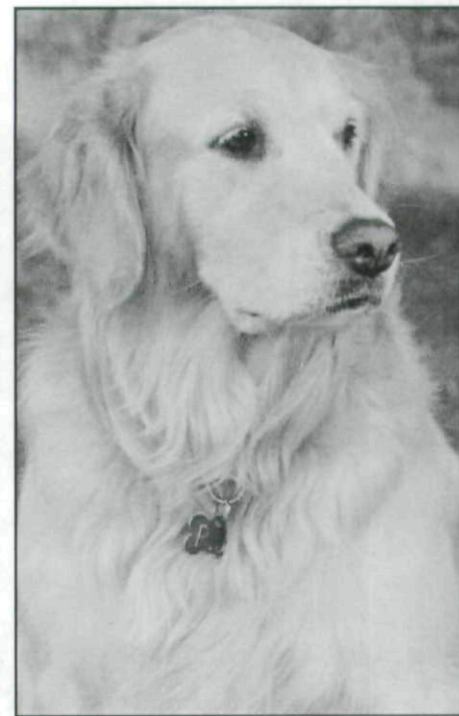
After deciding to continue incorporating the animals in her therapy, we started our treatment plan a few weeks later. Because of Sally's aggressive behavior and status in the group home, two staff members—one of them usually Ellen—always accompanied Sally. She entered the waiting room wearing a blue skirt and a white blouse, her curly hair pulled back with a cheerful barrette. She was more talkative that morning and remembered PJ's name. After talking for a few minutes and showing her my bearded dragon, named Spikey, I told her that I would bring out PJ once again. Sally had a similar reaction as during our first visit and moved away from the waiting PJ. Then, once again, she asked to pet PJ, but I wanted her to approach the dog this time. However, it wasn't going to be easy to get her to make the first move. As PJ sat patiently, Sally inched closer to her by

moving to the end of the couch. I sat next to the leashed PJ, trying to coax Sally to get closer and to place her hand gently on PJ's head. "Sally, come over here," I urged. "PJ wants you to pet her." The staff also encouraged Sally to move closer. Eventually, Sally moved to the edge of the couch, bravely stretched out her hand, and gently petted PJ. I cued PJ to lie quite motionless so that she wouldn't startle Sally. We even coaxed Sally to brush PJ's coat. Sally was leaning over the edge of the couch, just barely brushing PJ's fur. It was the first time I saw her smile. She appeared not only content but also proud of herself. After a short while, we decided that we were ready for our first walk. PJ was harnessed with two leashes, one for Sally and the other for me. The two staffers stayed very close to the three of us. We decided to take a short walk to increase the likelihood of a positive outcome.

Sally didn't speak too much during the walk, but her smiles told me she was happy. If PJ strayed even a little off Sally's planned course, however, she would get agitated. "NO! NO!" she said, as she almost dropped the leash. I quickly cued PJ to walk straight and Sally calmed. Once we arrived back at the office, Sally fed PJ treats, all which of she gladly gobbled. A connection was brewing, but it was in a slow cooker.

Sally and I began to correspond with one another between our planned visits. She loved mail and she enjoyed receiving notes from PJ. Ellen told me that Sally saved all the letters we sent her. Plastered on her walls were pictures of the dogs and the notes that she received. Sally also talked about our visits with anyone who would listen. The staff conveyed that she loved her office visits, although she didn't proclaim this to me in either word or action.

As the weeks passed, Sally's self-imposed barriers dropped, but that isn't to say that things were much easier. Since Sally did well with PJ, I introduced her to Hart, to whom she took



PJ. Photograph by Tom Zasadzinski.

a strong liking. We also began to incorporate a few other activities. One afternoon we spent a portion of the time drawing pictures of the dogs and putting stickers on them. I made a photocopy for my file, which enthralled Sally. "Make copy," she insisted. Then, "I do it" followed as she requested to press the start button. She was insistent that we make several copies of all her drawings. If she'd had her wish, we would have used a ream of paper to copy that one picture. Eventually, with the help of her staff, we were able to disengage her focus and end the session.

Although we were making progress, she still needed a lot of encouragement to get closer to the dogs. Once she was next to them, however, she seemed to relax. The same held true for our walks. She loved going on them, but periodically some of her resistant behaviors reappeared.

Unfortunately, my early visits with Sally were often interrupted by scheduling difficulties at the group home. When she wasn't seen consistently, we had to start all over because her anxiety about the animals would return. Ellen and I agreed that a more consistent schedule would help Sally become more comfortable. We wanted not only to help Sally overcome these fears, but also to enable her use of words rather than acting out aggressively in frustration. For example, when Sally felt anxious, her first response was either to spit or to step back and cover herself with her arms.

Reflecting on my initial work with Sally, I thought that it would be a good idea to incorporate Magic because she was a little smaller than PJ. Although PJ is very gentle, Magic can be a bit more timid. I had been working with Magic quite hard over the past several months and believed that she was ready to work with Sally.

I called to Magic. As we listened for her approach from down the hall, Sally leaned forward for a glimpse. On a typical visit, it usually took a few minutes for Sally to work up her courage to approach the dogs. Today was different. When Magic entered the foyer, I cued her to lie down. She looked baffled but complied. I then turned toward Sally and reminded her that Magic was new to this and

needed Sally to be gentle and kind. Because of my previous experience with Sally, I was surprised when she followed my instructions and sat on the floor next to Magic and began to pet her.

Although there was some distance between them, Sally looked more at ease. She asked for a brush and began to brush Magic's fur. She was so engrossed in taking care of Magic that her comfort level increased. She wasn't guarded with Magic and was even playful. She put her hand next to Magic's paw and said, "Slap me five, Magic." Then she giggled when I helped Magic comply. I was impressed with both of them. Next, and without hesitation, Sally rested her head on Magic's tummy. This was the last thing I expected. After a few minutes, Sally gently kissed Magic's face. This was another first. Finally, I thought, she was opening up. Magic reciprocated by turning slowly toward Sally and licking her face. Then, we went for a walk around the block.

As we left the building, Sally told me about school and some of her classmates. She also started to sing a song. After a few minutes, Sally asked about the other dogs. "How is Hart? Where is PJ? When I see them, can I give them a treat?" While it was clear that Sally was becoming more responsive, I wanted to keep her focused on Magic. So when her focus wandered, I reminded her to let Magic know that she was doing a good job. The prompt was all Sally needed to refocus.

At one such prompt, Sally stopped walking and gazed into Magic's eyes. "Good job. Good job, Magic!" she said. She then looked at me and said, "Give her treat," as she held out her hand. Just hearing those words were magic to my ears, not to mention the puppy's. Sally took a few morsels of a biscuit and fed them to a waiting Magic. Both seemed very pleased with the outcome (Sally also got her snack). As we walked, Sally stopped several times and told Magic either to sit or to stop, speaking calmly and clearly, showing none of her earlier discomfort.

I was impressed with both of them that early Friday morning. Sally was taking to heart her new role as a teacher and Magic was a star student. Perhaps, for the first time in her

life, Sally was put in a role where others expected her to act responsibly. At least on this day, taking on the extra duties seemed to be a good idea. Sally worked hard that morning. Her comfort level with Magic was much higher than with the other dogs, although she constantly talked about PJ and Hart. Even when frustrated, she was learning to communicate verbally and appropriately. She was more confident and allowed herself to make mistakes.

The sessions with Magic continued and the bond between the two of them strengthened with each visit. She often reminded me of this at the start of our sessions when she'd say, "I'm 'eacher" (teacher) as she gazed into the on-looking eyes of Magic.

Sally's new confidence was also evident at the group home. Ellen said that the dogs were Sally's favorite topic. Whenever she returned home, she told anyone who'd listen about "the girls" at Dr. Fine's office. The staff used this new interest to defuse potential conflicts, reminding Sally that she was Magic's role model. Additionally, Sally showed an interest in art and enjoyed adding her drawings of the dogs to her wall of letters and photos.

Most importantly, Sally started focusing her concern on the dogs rather than herself. On a recent visit, Sally saw that PJ's paw was bandaged. I explained that she had a broken nail and that the bandage helped prevent infection. Throughout our session Sally kept asking, "Will she be okay?" I was later told that when she returned home, she drew several pictures of PJ illustrating her bandaged paw. When Sally returned to the office, before I could say a word, she asked, "How is PJ doing?" She was reluctant to start our session until she saw for herself that PJ was better. Looking right into PJ's eyes, she asked in a serious tone, "You okay PJ? Where's your bandage?" Sally then took out a picture she'd made of the dog's injured paw. Before PJ left the room, Sally gave her a big hug.

At the time of this writing, Magic and Sally have been working together for seven months. PJ and Hart still get a chance to visit with Sally, but her co-pilot in therapy is Magic. Pairing the two of them has been powerful. In

retrospect, placing Sally in the role of Magic's teacher was a great idea.

During these last three months, one of her jobs has been to help Magic ignore distractions. Although this training is helpful for Magic, indirectly I am more interested in helping Sally with this same problem. One of Sally's greatest challenges has been her strong curiosity about babies being pushed in strollers. Whenever she sees babies in strollers, she gets unusually distracted and at times agitated. Our first few training sessions went well, but they didn't include a direct challenge for Sally. So prior to a visit, I placed a baby stroller and doll in the parking lot. After greeting Magic and the ritual brushing, we headed out for our walk.

Once we entered the parking lot, she noticed the stroller. There was an immediate change in her behavior. She was agitated and distracted. I walked close to her and said, "Sally, walk away from the stroller. Remember, you're the teacher and Magic needs help with this distraction." This simple redirection was all it took to focus Sally back into her task. She lowered her voice and said to Magic, "No Magic. Walk away. Walk away." Magic complied, walking around the baby carriage. Sally's look of pride told me she was happy that Magic had listened and that she, too, had done well. "Good dog, Magic!" she exclaimed as she gave the dog a treat. By the end of the walk, both Sally and Magic were full of pride and were awaiting their earned special treats. Magic gobbled up her jerky, while Sally held onto her bag of trail mix.

By the end of October, I felt that Sally deserved a larger reward for her progress and promised that on her next visit she'd receive a surprise. Just before the session, I picked up a pizza and some drinks. When Sally arrived, she was very excited. She had brought along a stack of pictures of her family to show me. She introduced me to all the people in the photos, as if she wanted me to know more about her life outside my office and the group home.

The highlight of the morning, however, was when Magic paraded out wearing her Halloween clown costume, which was bright yellow with blue and red dots. Sally shrieked

and giggled when she saw her. She immediately told Magic that she was going out as a go-go dancer. "I show you next time I come. I bring pictures," she told Magic. In the middle of a sentence, Sally flopped onto the floor next to Magic and began to brush and pet her. I told Sally that after we took our walk, we had a few more surprises. Sally seemed excited but was glad it was time for our walk. She was extremely talkative and even showed a sense of humor. She giggled and gave Magic lots of praise and loving. But what was most memorable was the return to the office.

Sally went to the van with the staff members while Magic and I went into the office to gather gifts. I returned to the van with a small bundle of candy while Magic followed along, cradling in her mouth a masked and hooded Halloween teddy bear. Sally beamed with joy. I was pleased to see that Magic was willing to relinquish the toy to Sally. She was surprised and it took her a moment to comprehend that the gifts were just for her. After she said "thank you" to us, we turned to walk back to the office. But Sally called us back. She needed to come out and give us a hug. She left knowing that she was accepted for who she was. She knew that we cared for her. Was that day a new beginning? Had there been a little magic in the air? All I know is that after a short visit that morning, Sally left feeling like a new person. Magic had done her job. But what would all of Sally's tomorrows bring?

Ellen has continued to keep an ongoing diary of Sally's progress after each of our visits. Let's take a quick glimpse at what she has written.

"Each visit her autonomic reaction has decreased – initially, her hand was ice cold and pulse rapid through the walk until returning to the parking lot. Her eyes would dart around, glassy and huge. She looked petrified. She had limited eye contact with both Dr. Fine and any of the dogs she walked. She looked hyper-vigilant and easily distracted by all the sights and sounds of the environment, looking past the dogs instead of at them. Now she is so much more relaxed with everything! There has been a steady increase in her language abilities. I have been impressed with her ability to identify some emotions and state them to us

as she walks. No longer does she spit or lose attention immediately upon encountering a new adult. Now she relates to adults much better. Sally seems to have more self-awareness. She seems more content when she leaves. She does not fall asleep after visits, (i.e., they do not seem so emotionally exhausting anymore; they are more therapeutic).

"She seems to want to talk about the visits, Dr. Fine, and the dogs when she is at home. She doesn't seem to want to disappoint the dogs. She recognizes all the dogs in pictures. Recently, I gave her a beanie toy dog that was a golden retriever and she immediately called it PJ. We no longer have to take pictures during visits because she is more interested in what we are doing. She is excited and anticipates coming. She knows the route and when I am not driving, she tells the other driver where to turn. She is making progress and that is all that counts.

"The last visit took the cake. Instead of interacting with the dogs right away, Sally wrote a letter to Magic with the help of Dr. Fine. It was remarkable! I have never heard Sally talk so much. She was so excited to do this. One statement in the letter put into words why her relationship with the dogs, and especially Magic, is so meaningful to her. She wrote: 'Thank you, Magic. You make me feel like a good girl. I love you.' I guess magic can be real, especially if you believe in it. I am a believer now!"

Conclusions

With thought and planning, animals can make a major contribution to a therapist's arsenal in treating clients. Animals can enhance the therapeutic environment by making the milieu more emotionally and physically accessible to clients and making them more relaxed. Some clinicians may still be skeptical of the therapeutic value of the animal-human bond. After reading this article, the writers hope that a skilled and well-informed clinician will recognize the multitude of benefits that animals can fulfill. Martin Buber once said, "An animal's eyes have the power to speak a great language." He was accurate in so many ways. The communication of animals to humans is conducted in silence and touch, two

variables that can have a tremendous impact on a therapeutic outcome.

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Note: Sally's and Ellen's names have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

Psychologist Dr. Aubrey Fine has been in the field of Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) for over 25 years. Dr. Fine has also been an active faculty member at California State Polytechnic University for 27 years. His leadership among faculty and teaching excellence earned him the prestigious Wang Award in 2001, given to a distinguished professor within the California State University system, in this instance for exceptional commitment, dedication, and exemplary contributions within the areas of education and applied sciences. He is the editor of the most widely accepted books on the subject, *The Handbook on Animal Assisted Therapy*, which is now in its second edition (Elsevier/Academic Press, 2006). He recently co-authored a new book *Afternoons with Puppy* (published by Purdue University Press, 2008) with Cynthia Eisen. The book is a heartwarming account about the evolving relationships and outcomes among a therapist,

his therapy animals, and his patients over the course of over two decades.

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Snowflake. Photograph by Tom Zasadzinski.

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