

RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER ANIMALS: A VERY PERSONAL JOURNEY

Christina Risley-Curtiss, Ph.D., Arizona State University

This narrative summarizes the author's evolving journey in developing her sense of personal and professional self by discovering the importance of other animals in her own life and in the lives of others, such as our clients. Understanding how other animals have helped her survive and thrive has enabled her to recognize the powerful potential and importance that relationships with animals can have for people, especially those in distress.

Popular and research literature increasingly report that affectionate relationships with animal companions can enhance the health and enrich the quality of life of people (e.g., Lago, Delaney, Miller, & Grill, 1989; Sable, 1995). It is also suggested that while keeping companion animals may be universal (Brown, 2002), these relationships are complex and vary depending on characteristics of the study population (Risley-Curtiss, Holley, & Wolf (2006). Relationships with animals can also range from the most negative, such as animal cruelty, to the most positive, whereby one believes in the equality of all living creatures.

Sixty-two percent of U.S. households report having companion animals (American Pet Products Manufacturers Association, 2003). This means that helping professionals are likely to encounter individuals and families with companion animals. Furthermore, anywhere from 68 to 97 percent of Americans consider their companion animals as family (Brookman, 1999; Risley-Curtiss et al., 2006). Thus, including animals in both our practice and study of people is a natural extension of our work with humans. With appropriate knowledge and training, helping professionals who recognize the impact of animals on people's lives will be in a position to enhance the lives of both people and animals.

Making inquiries into the presence and meaning of animals in clients' lives is essential. In addition, many interventions can be enhanced by the inclusion of animals as adjuncts. While much of our awareness of the roles that animals play in our lives is fairly new,

many of us have lived lives surrounded by them. I am such a person.

My Journey

I am a passionate social worker and have been for years – in the old AFDC program; in child protective services; in public health; and now as a social work educator, researcher, and animal abuse treatment program developer. My business is people. Yet some would say I was born connected to animals. "They are in my blood."

Both my father and his father were veterinarians, and from the time I was six months old I lived on a beautiful farm in a small town in Connecticut, surrounded by all kinds of animals, domestic and wild. Despite this wonderful natural environment, and the fact that I had an affinity for rescuing animals early on, it has taken me nearly 60 years to really appreciate their presence in my life, to see them for themselves, to understand how much of who I am is defined by my relationships with them, and to recognize fully the importance animals may have in our ability to help others.

My vision of my relationships with animals is my own and not one necessarily shared by significant others in my life, or by clients. Nonetheless, to understand me you need to understand it. This journey I ask you to take with me is one we should ask our clients to take us on, if appropriate. While my story is mine, it is not totally unique. Many others fortunately share similar and/or different connections with their animals. Because of this, it behooves helping professionals who work with individuals and families to ask about

other animals and their meaning for their clients, and to consider including other animals in treatment when appropriate. In my own therapeutic journeys, I have always been the one to mention that I am single, have no children by choice, and live a long way from my human family members. But I am not alone as I live with a large other animal family. If my therapist were to in any way dismiss or devalue this family, he or she would lose me as a client. If I were another client—one not so verbal and forthcoming—and my helping professional did not ask about my whole other family, he or she would not know me because they, and my relationships with them, bring me great joy, peace, and awe, as well as much pain and sadness. As I have recently come to realize, my animal friends *are* my lifeblood.

Like many people, I have my own demons when it comes to my early relationships with my animal companions. There was Misty the beautiful long-haired black cat whom I begged for but never brushed enough and who became so matted and then sick that we never really were able to get the mats off her. And Billy, the horse I was ashamed of because he was big footed (like me) and chunky. I used to lose my temper with him and hit him around the head with a wood switch. And Haden, the kitten I adopted and then took to the shelter because he hissed and bit too much. I didn't appreciate or understand my companions then. They were there for me—to meet my needs—not for me to meet theirs in mutuality.

Fortunately, I have awakened from my sleep. But it has been a slow, awesome, and yet painful awakening. Now I am so grateful for Billy's patience with me despite my abuse of him, so aware and remorseful of Misty's suffering, so sorry I didn't try harder with Haden. But another thing I have learned along the way through the deaths of my parents, brother, stepmother, and many companion animals is that if we do the best we can at the time, we must forgive ourselves for failing those who loved us and move on; being sure not to repeat our mistakes. So I have spent the last 35 years doing over! Or at least learning about and cherishing the amazing creatures who have trusted me with their well-being and with whom I have been honored to share my life.

I currently share my home with seven indoor cats: Balinor, Goblin, Xena, Snow, Slush, Smudge, and Electra. Four feral cats in an outside cattery specially built for them: Fire, Neon, Grey, and Rainman. Seven outdoor feral/strays who showed up, got spayed or neutered, and then decided to hang around: Turtle, Tuffy, Tucker, Tale, Mighty, T-Shirt, and Junior. In addition to the cats, I also have a greyhound named Roxy, a rooster called Sonny, a horse named Cisco, and a goat named Ralph. All are rescued and all have their own stories. I have a trust set up to care for them in case of my death. One of my greatest fears is that I will get hurt or killed and no one will know to come and lovingly care for them. Despite having suicidal ideation in the past, I would not consider it now because I will not leave them alone. I am their guardian, and if a disaster strikes and I cannot evacuate them all, I will stay with them so they will not die without me. I have shared this with my sister: "Just as I would not abandon you, neither will I abandon them to save myself." Not surprisingly, Hurricane Katrina has led many of the people I know to talk about this and many of us have concluded that we will stay with our animal families if need be.

All my other animal friends mean so much to me, and I believe that, by their behavior and body language, I mean much to them too. Our relationships are mutual. I love and care for them and they do the same for me. They help me survive not only life's traumas, but also the ordinary days. The other animals and experiences that have shown this to me are many, but I will share just a few. I got Punkin when I was about 33 years old. She was one of several cats I had while living in rented houses and apartments. She and Emma, another rescued cat, helped me get through many moves as well as through doctoral school (1998-1993) in my 40s. Punkin did not like to be held but whenever I was upset and crying, she allowed me to hold on to her tight until I had let it out—like when I had to get ready for a statistics test and my boyfriend of nine years had just broken up with me the day before. I took the test and got an A!

One of my most vivid memories of Punkin was during my "year from hell" in 1999-2000.

My then live-in partner of six years suddenly moved out, and three months later my older brother and stepmother were killed in a sightseeing plane crash in Hawaii. One night I was awakened by a nightmare about my brother and my own vicious sobbing. I was lying on my side, tears pouring from my eyes, when I felt this warm soft breathing cat stretch her body full length and meld herself into my back. Within seconds I stopped crying, a sense of peace came over me, and I fell quickly back into a deep restful sleep. I knew in my soul that Punkin was taking care of me; she was helping me to weather the pain and heal.

Shortly thereafter, Punkin was diagnosed with cancer and one day in January, 2000, I had to make the extremely painful decision to end her suffering. Within a month I discovered that another cat friend, Ralph, whom I had taken in when a friend was moving, was deteriorating. He seemed to have suddenly lost a lot of weight and looked awful. He was diagnosed with feline leukemia and he died within two months of Punkin's death. I believe that Ralph was sick for longer than I knew and that he purposefully hid his illness from me because he knew I could not deal with so much loss all at once. He stayed to help me through the loss of Punkin.

Another experience has to do with that same boyfriend of six years but earlier in our relationship when he also had suddenly moved out (yes, there is a pattern there!). This time I was awake, sitting on the living room floor crying hard, but not for long. My 100-pound sedate rescued greyhound, Warrior, who did not really know how to play, came into the living room and began literally to dance in circles in front of me and perform other antics that I had never seen him do. I was so surprised and amazed at what I truly believed: that my crying upset him and he was trying to stop me from crying. Not only did I stop, but I started laughing – and hugging him and playing with him. Warrior was taking care of me.

Most recently, I spent two weeks away from my home and my animal friends. The last week I was in South Carolina at a home on two and a half acres that I have purchased for retirement. It is one that can accommodate all my animal friends but none are there now.

I love being there alone in the quiet, surrounded by green and trees and birds. But this time I began to get very agitated during my last three days. At first I could not figure out what was going on. Then I had a revelation – I needed my animal friends, I wanted to go home to them. What I love is not being totally alone. I love being alone with my animal friends. Their quiet loving and accepting presence and our interactions help me manage my stress and angst. Every morning when I get up and sit on the sofa in the living room to have my coffee, I am joined by four cats who lie or sit around me wanting to be petted and loved, but are also washing my face and hands and reaching out to me with their paws.

The realization that my animal companions understand and care about me, that they read me, makes me feel profoundly cherished and responsible. They do not have to do that; they choose to and I am honored. I laugh when I read that this is what some people say is attributing human characteristics to nonhuman animals. All I have to do is watch a mother chicken protect and cuddle her young, or my horse and goat sleep together touching each others' backs, or my cats wash each other and sleep entwined. What they do for me is what they do naturally for each other, what they do without me. The fact that they choose to do it for and with me is awe inspiring and a very powerful gift, one that enriches my life and has helped restore my spirituality.

Other Animals and Helping

Research supports the idea that human relationships with other animals can be beneficial in many ways. They obviously help me. But they also help people I have worked with, such as the elderly widow who lived with her old dog in a trailer park. When I talked to her on the phone soon after her dog had died, she expressed great loss and was very depressed, saying that she had no reason anymore to get up in the morning. I talked to her for about an hour and all she talked about was that dog, how much she had loved it, and how much she missed it. I told her about my rescued greyhounds and with her consent I linked her up with the local greyhound rescue program that matches older greyhounds and

older people. Within a week she had adopted a greyhound. I talked to her soon after and the difference was amazing. Now she had a reason to get up – to take the dog for a walk. She expressed having a purpose since her dog was a rescue and she was madly in love with her new companion. She had not forgotten her old friend but she now had a new reason for life. While finding a new animal friend this soon may not be right for everyone, it was for her.

Companion animals can assist both professional helpers themselves (self-care) and our clients in many ways. They make us laugh and smile; they give us continuity, responsibility, protection, and friendship; and they let us feel accepted and loved. For example, in a study of women of color and their companion animals, one woman shared about her dog:

“She was...very much so a member of the family, and it was so wonderful. Like when you come home from being tired and so stressed out from work and there would be Sparkles greeting you at the door, smiling and so happy to see you...”(Risley-Curtiss et al., 2006, p. 439)

These things are especially important when we and clients are living in and through difficult circumstances. In the same study, Marie described her relationship with a cat when she was five years old:

“[I]t was kind of like my only little friend that I could talk to...I didn't have good communication in the family...so it was kind of like my friend – my cat was my buddy that I talked to and stuff.” (Risley-Curtiss et al., 2006, p. 438)

Margaret A. related receiving comfort and constancy from her cat:

“[W]hen I was by myself, he always knew when to come and sit on my lap – just sit there while I was

watching TV...[W]hen I was [feeling sad], he always knew just when to jump up and be by me... When things were good, he was there too.” (Risley-Curtiss et al., 2006, p. 438)

It is important to note that while I have dwelled on the positive impact of animals, there are stresses too. My long-term guilt over my early treatment of my animal companions is an example. Another is the stress of having a beloved animal become sick. While I was in graduate school, I often prayed that my cats would not get sick because I had no extra money. If they had I would have taken care of them, but I would have gone without food to do it. This is coupled with the logistics of working, going to school, or both, and caring for a sick companion animal. I was also treated for symptoms of PTSD upon the violent death of one of my stray cats. He was mauled by a neighbor's dog and I had to decide whether to euthanize him or try to save him even though the veterinarian said that he would probably “die on the table.” I experienced tremendous guilt over not operating on him and also for not having been able to protect him, as I felt I should have. Having to decide whether or not to euthanize a sick and/or dying animal friend is one of the most difficult decisions many people will ever make (Horn, 2000). All of these issues and more are ones that we must be willing to address, if needed, with clients who have companion animals.

Helping professionals do not need to like or appreciate other animals the way I and others do (although I wish they would!). But for us to look at our clients in a truly ecological and holistic perspective, we must ask about the presence of, and relationship with, other animals in their lives. When relationships with other animals are there, we need to consider ways to support those healthy relationships and draw on them for client support. If there are unhealthy relationships, we need to figure out how to intervene for the benefit of both human and other animals. As helping professionals, if we do not include other animals in our work, we are not maximizing our ability to help!

References

- Brown, S.E. (2002). Ethnic variations in pet attachment among students at an American school of veterinary medicine. *Society and Animals, 10*, 455-456.
- Horn, L. (2000). *When Euthanasia Is An Option: The Experience of Making End-of-Life Decisions for Companion Animals*. University of British Columbia. Unpublished Masters thesis.
- Lago, D., Delaney, M., Miller, M., & Grill, C. (1989). Companion animals, attitudes towards pets, and health outcomes among the elderly: A long-term follow-up. *Anthozoos, 3*(1), 25-34.
- Risley-Curtiss, C., Holley, L.C., & Wolf, S., (2006). The animal-human bond and ethnic diversity. *Social Work, 51*, 257-268.
- Risley-Curtiss, C., Holley, L.C., Cruickshank, T., Porcelli, J., Rhoads, C., Bacchus, D., Nyakoe, S., & Murphy, S. (2006). She was family: Women of color and their animal-human connections. *AFFILIA, 21*, 433-447.

Christina Risley-Curtiss is Associate Professor of Social Work at Arizona State University. She advocates for the inclusion of our relationships with other animals in social work research, education, and practice. She currently lives in a trans-species cultural home with 20+ other animals. Comments regarding this article can be sent to: Risley.Curtiss@asu.edu.



Christina Risley-Curtiss and Xena (a rescue from Best Friends Animal Society). Photograph by Pam Moody.

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.