Comforters and friends

Rachel Field

THE INTIMATE ROLE PLAYED BY PETS IN THE LIVES of many people cannot be overestimated. Animals as companions and friends can be of immense value to the mental, physical and emotional well-being of the individual. This is found to be particularly so when human interaction may have failed or when such intervention may seem inappropriate to the needs of particular people.

For centuries the benefits of the presence of animals have been proved to be of direct therapeutic value, whether to the sick, disabled and lonely, or to those living in institutions for their health or safety. The first records of such 'pet-facilitated therapy' date from 1792 in York. Rabbits and chickens were used to calm and befriend the mentally ill while at the same encouraging patients to accept some responsibility for the animals' care and welfare.[1] The work developed and spread to include a variety of psychiatric illnesses and to what is now known as learning disability. The therapy proved to be of great value to those patients who found it difficult to relate to their fellow human beings. Relationships with animals became a stepping-stone to forming a trusting social bond with a fellow human being.

The social animal

Let me illustrate my theme with an example. Annabel was my neighbour who had suffered for many years from a psychotic illness. She lived with a devoted manservant. Her garden and her cats were her delight. Occasionally she became verbally aggressive, often threatening violence to any person who just happened to be around. The way to stop this behaviour was to approach her carrying a pet. She immediately became gracious, gentle and caring – to the pet. The aggression quickly ceased. Many was the time when professional help was called. But, if the pet had arrived first, the professionals often had difficulty in deciding what the problem was – and who precisely was the patient.

Human beings are social animals. The ageing process, sickness, disability, bereavement or any other form of mental or physical isolation may interfere with the socialization process. All too often this leads to feelings of rejection, of being burdensome to others, of not being part of society. Even well-intentioned people may find the

patient's state of health unbearable for them to witness and they choose to 'stay away'. Instead of an active, vibrant relative or friend they confront a sick, dependent stranger. Visting may become stressful and time-consuming. One sees this in the long-term care of the elderly when visitors reduce their once frequent and regular calls over a period of time.

It is this plight of the sick and elderly which has prompted the professionals to turn again to animals to bridge the gap. The PAT ('Pets as Therapy') visiting scheme is an innovation which has been introduced in the community, in hospitals and in residential homes.[2] The visiting pet is always accompanied by its owner. This brings another human being into the life of the patient. The pet and owner soon become a part of the patient's routine: regular visitors and friends who are not connected to the clinical scene, who ask nothing of the patient and who bring no problems with them to the bedside.

We human beings are genetically programmed to form attachments. We have a physical and psychological dependency on the need to socialize. But when human contact has failed – or has hardly existed – this can have the most traumatic effect on the healing process. So much so that in some people the very desire to live may be lost, or a prolonged state of mental depression may occur. Contact with animals promotes interest, curiosity, physical activity, friendship. Animals can become a catalyst in rehabilitation processes whether these be of a psychological, physical or spiritual nature. The holistic benefits are legion. And, since pets would not be selected to do the work unless they were happy and contented working with people, the benefits to the animal are also positive.

In general, animals bring people together. People will often talk to each other if one is accompanied by a pet. Barriers which would have prevented strangers passing the time of day with each other are broken down. In some cases regular greetings are exchanged by people who do not know each other's name but who know the name of the pet. If the healthy can reap such benefits from pets how much more benefit can the isolated and sick obtain from regular contact with members of the animal kingdom?

A report in *Stroke News* notes that 'people who have had strokes are among those who benefit from having animals around. Those with speech problems may feel more relaxed about trying to talk to an animal than to another person.'[3] Heart attack patients who own a pet have been found to be five times less likely than patients without a pet

to suffer a second attack within a year of the first.[4] Stress is reduced, blood pressure and heart rate are lowered, and worries are put aside while the pet's needs are being met. Pets may be time-consuming, but to their owners they are a joy not a burden. The bonding between human and animal is unique. It may not be fully understood, but it is nonetheless real and positive. It is often a question who learns from whom.

Friends and confidantes

Let us look at another story. Tommy is my eight-year-old cat. He was hand-reared by the breeder from birth. From the very beginning he bonded with humans and by the time we adopted him he was twenty weeks old and did not really know he was feline. He related to us comfortably, followed us everywhere and attached himself to any other human being who called at the house. At the age of six months he became interested in our speech mechanisms, watching the changes in facial expression as we talked to him. Then one evening he stood before me, his paws on my knee, neck stretched out, moving his throat and mouth while making cat-like noises. While sitting on my knee he would be captivated by my mouth moving as I spoke – so much so that he kept touching my lips with his paw. I believe he was trying to make direct verbal contact with us.

Because of the strange bond he had made with humans it was decided to consider him for hospital visiting. The vet was consulted and Tommy went forward as a 'cat visitor' to the elderly in long stay care. Our aim was to visit those people who liked cats, particularly those who had left their pets at home to be cared for by others. Tommy soon had a regular 'case load' of patients whom he visited each week. Within a short while he proved to be a tremendous psychological boost to the patients who eagerly awaited his visits. His presence provided a meaningful and significant other to the patients, many of whom perceived him as a substitute for a friend, relative or their own pet. To some he even became a sort of confidante.

A doctor requested that Tommy should visit Annie. Annie was 84 years old, an unpopular lady, frail, aggressive, angry with family and friends, all of whom she felt had either neglected or abandoned her. She often called innocent people inappropriate and insulting names. All her healthy life Annie had cared for cats. She also became sole carer for the cats in the factory where she worked. The doctor had noted that Annie had been in hospital for six years and had not received a visitor for five.

When asked if she would like a cat to visit she replied, 'Yes, I would, it's about time this place did me some good.'

Tommy and I arrived at her bedroom with her doctor. We were introduced. 'What's that woman doing here?', she said pointing at me. The doctor reinforced the rules of pet visits which she had already been told about, namely that the pet had to be accompanied by an adult. I introduced her to Tommy. 'Put him on my bed and make yourself invisible,' she replied aggressively. The doctor identified the location of the emergency bell for me and left. Annie focused on Tommy. She was very gentle with him and stroked him. He purred. What followed next formed the pattern of our visits for the next three years. While stroking Tommy, Annie shared her dislike of people, giving sometimes vivid descriptions of incidents in her life. She tired easily. She would kiss Tommy and say, 'Night, night, darling. You are Aunty Annie's own little boy and she loves you very much.' She would then close her eyes and we would leave.

After each visit I would write a note on Tommy's behalf, saying that he would call and see her again. I would leave the note on her locker. Tommy's notes, birthday cards and Christmas cards were the only correspondence she ever received. Their relationship was said by the doctors to be of enormous benefit, since Annie was calmer and less aggressive for up to four days after each visit. Once she realized that nobody was going to stop him coming, she started talking to human beings about her visitor.

Animal and human relationships

In considering the writings of the philosopher Spinoza, Stephen Clark quotes him to the effect that the emotions of animals which are called irrational differ from the emotions of humans as much as their nature differs from human nature.[5] He suggests that the lusts and drives of all animals, including human ones, are bound up with each being's endeavour to maintain and improve its own life. The happiness and contentment each species receives from the other is different because the species are different. This may explain why animals are more faithful, tolerant and consistent in human–animal relationships. A breakdown in faithfulness, tolerance or consistency within a human-to-human relationship is very often the cause of permanent breakdown. Annie was a case in point. She did not have any faith in human beings and chose to keep them well away from her by being aggressive to all, despite the fact she was so very lonely. Attributes such as faithfulness,

tolerance and consistency make the animal the perfect companion for the somewhat erratic human being.

It is of great interest to animal lovers and to anthropologists alike to attempt to understand this relationship between animals and humans. By loving or respecting animals we are, of course, very well aware of a tendency to try to humanize pets. In the Western world we are encouraged to do so from a very early age; the furry, cuddly animal hero of so many children's nursery books is dressed in human clothes and speaks human language which reflects human thoughts and feelings. The child may be able to empathize with the fictitious animal in the story. When real pets enter into the scene, the fact that they respond to human commands, or even human emotions, makes them appear to be human within themselves.

But one has to develop a realistic awareness of the human–animal relationship and to consider what the animal is reacting to. Tone of voice, a food treat, a lead which indicates a walk with all sorts of interesting smells and a temporary freedom to run wild, these are just a few of the animal's reasons for relating to his human contacts. As one anthropologist puts it, humans alone have the ability to stand apart within the animal world, to consider what kind of being they are. Where other animals may be conscious only of objects and the effects they have on their lives, the human animals alone are capable of reflection, of self-consciousness, of thinking of themselves as an object.[6] According to W.H. Thorpe, higher animals, including dogs and cats, are capable of reflection and to some extent capable of self-consciousness. This, however, is limited. 'No animal', he says, 'can reflect about themselves or about the abstract quality of their natures.'[7] The human animal is unique in this degree of cognitive sophistication.

Learned behaviour comes into the animal's adaptation to its environment a great deal. The human animal communicates with fellow humans and animals via auditory, visual and tactile stimuli in order to produce a response in the other being. Animals learn to respond to their human carers who supply their needs by interacting with the human's system of communicating. The behaviourist school of psychology has researched the phenomenon of human–animal interaction in considerable detail. What still remains a mystery is the inner thoughts, feelings and emotions of the animal. But at this point I would dare to suggest that the real evidence cannot be found in the laboratory; it needs to be observed in long term human–animal relationships.

Learning, loving and independence

A third story. Len rescued Suzie as a six-week-old stray kitten. She moved in with the family, was given the run of the house and became a household pet – on her terms. There was no demonstration of affection between Suzie and her adopted family although she was very quick to respond to verbal commands, a learned behaviour which endeared her to the family. They just had to accept that Suzie was not the loving kind. She hunted in the garden and the nearby field, fished in the stream which went through the garden and watched Len at his favourite hobby, growing flowers. She was an animal who kept a very strict daily routine.

Each morning Suzie left the house at 7a.m. and headed for the field at the top of the garden. An hour later, she would return home and have her meal in the kitchen. Len left home for the office at 8.45 each morning via the lane which led to the town. Suzie always accompanied him along the lane until the noise of the traffic from the town was audible. At that point she would return home. At 12.15 each weekday Suzie could always be found in the lane as Len came home for lunch. This routine was repeated as Len returned to work in the afternoon. In the evening she was always there waiting to escort him home. This behaviour caused interest in the village. Some people attempted to stroke Suzie but she totally ignored all the attention. Very often the comment would be heard, 'She's not very friendly, is she?' Too true; Suzie was not a 'person cat'.

Len retired from work. Suzie continued her early morning routine but stayed with Len in the garden or in the field during the day. Then, a year later, Len developed cancer. One day he had to go into hospital for a palliative drainage procedure, lasting four days. The treatment took longer than expected and Len was required to stay another night in hospital. The following morning Suzie left the house at 7a.m. as usual. She returned an hour later but refused to come in for breakfast. The weather was bad, freezing fog. She was very cold, dirty and angry, but only spat and scratched when approached. A short while later the night sister from the hospital arrived at Len's house to say that Len had died earlier that morning. Over the next few days Suzie was only seen in the distance. Numerous attempts were made to bring her into the warmth of the house but she only responded by staying away.

Nothing was seen of her for four days. But, on the day of Len's funeral, as the funeral cortège left the house, Suzie appeared high on the gable end, watching. The procession stopped to persuade her into the

house but she chose to stay put. That night she came home but refused to eat. The next day the vet was called in. Diagnosis: depression due to grief. The humans could not understand how she knew. The vet commented that perhaps we were not meant to understand these things.

One month later, things got better. Then, nine weeks after Len's death, her depressive behaviour started all over again. The family were advised by the vet to follow her when she visited her usual haunts. He believed that Suzie had found some object that belonged to Len. And, sure enough, there in the field behind the house was found Len's sweater, covered in cat hairs.

The Suzie-Len story provoked much interest in the Derbyshire village and it is still discussed today. Bonding or attachment between humans and animals has been the subject of academic research within various disciplines concerning behavioural and biological factors. Others of a more sceptical persuasion, of course, argue that human perception of what is happening in such relationships is susceptible to human emotion, fantasy, and projection of feelings. I cannot say which is correct. What I can say is that there is a truth in the positive relationship between human and animal whereby the latter can be of great comfort to the former. The mystery surrounding the bonding, one to the other, may in itself be God-given – since all good things are said to come from God.

Papal teaching on animals

On 19 January 1990, Pope John Paul II affirmed in a homily to a public audience in Rome that animals, like humans, were given the 'breath of life by God'. The pope also stated that animals possess a soul and that human beings must love and 'feel solidarity with our smaller brethren'. This was the first time that a Pontiff had spoken thus, his rationale being that 'all animals are fruit of the creative action of the Holy Spirit and merit respect'.

Genesis 1.20–30 tells us that by the sixth day God had created microscopic and macroscopic life on earth, identifying them as fish, bird, animal and human species. The divine intervention which produces life also demands a respect and an understanding of all creatures; the human animal which dominates this planet must also have a humane understanding of animals as co-inhabitants of the earth. We are called to an ever closer association, one with the other, inter-relating with each other, not as hostile beings but as companion tenants of God's kingdom, sharing the divine spark of life. Psalm 104, speaking of the

glories of creation, makes no division between humans and the other animals, demonstrating a unity and a common bond linking different species through the transcendent nature of creation.

It is not difficult to understand that the different dimensions of God's creative work interact with each other. Animals as companions, comforters and friends often demonstrate an extraordinary mutual understanding and devotion. Can such an understanding not be seen as a gift from God? It can, of course, be argued that the human as the dominant animal conditions the response and that this is a form of abuse; the animal is not allowed to behave as nature intended. But the *process of bonding* and its sometimes extraordinary outcomes on both sides of the relationship are not to be overlooked. The breaking of the bond through separation often has a profound effect on the emotional state of those left behind. My examples have sought to show that often some powerful if not spiritual element is involved. The bonding of human with animal often takes place before any formal animal training begins. It is, in other words, a natural phenomenon – and such natural behaviour may be considered by some to be God-given.

In conclusion, I quote Basil Wrighton:

> If we are to work for God and the right, we must respect the divinely established order of values. We must put first things first – love God above all things, then His human children, then all his other sentient creatures, according to their nature. To treat human beings as though they were animals or animals as though they were human, or (much worse) to treat man or animals as though they were things, is to upset the order of nature and to work against the interests of all its parts. Order and justice, harmony and charity, are fundamental things on which our work must be built, if it is to endure.[8]

Animals and human beings can live in harmony with each other and be of therapeutic value to each other. For those of us who follow a Christian philosophy of caring, the unique relationship founded on faith and trust between human and animal can only be enhanced by our acknowledging and accepting God's divine plan for *all* God's creatures. This third dimension needs to be brought into play with scientific and the anecdotal approaches towards understanding the bond between the species, if animals are properly to become resources to aid the process of human healing.

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NOTES

1 Laura Lee and Martin Lee, *Absent friend* (Henstan, 1992).
2 Pets as Therapy, Rocky Bank, 4 New Road, Ditton, Aylesford, Kent ME20 6AD.
3 Rita Carter, 'Animal magic', *Stroke News*, Spring 2000.
4 Erika Friedmann, Aaron Katcher, James Lynch, Sue Thomas, 'Animals and survival of patients after discharge from a coronary care unit' (Conference paper).
5 Stephen Clark, *Animals and their moral standing* (London: Routledge, 1997).
6 D. Bidley, *Theoretical anthropology* (New York: Columbia Press, 1953).
7 W. H. Thorpe, *Animal nature and human nature* (London: Methuen, 1974).
8 Basil Wrighton, *Unity in a good cause*, published by the Catholic Study Circle for Animal Welfare. For further information about the CSCAW, contact them c/o Judy Gibbons, Laburnum Cottage, Main Street, East Hanney, Oxon. OX12 0JF, UK.