

Why We Need Animals in Our Lives

Sometimes called “Animal Angels,” companion animals help heal human illnesses, teach us about unconditional love—and may even save our souls.

By Wendy S. Myers



Ron Krows weighed just 85 pounds as he lay in a hospital bed. After living with AIDS for 10 years, his immune system and spirit was weak. Specialists treated his illness, but the latest AIDS cocktail didn't save his life. Timber did.

Because Krows couldn't care for himself, he stayed with his sister after leaving the hospital. He rested quietly on her couch for a week, but a cold, wet nose often aroused him from sleep. Timber, a Keeshond puppy, wanted to play. “He was my inspiration to get up and start walking,” Krows says. “He seemed to say, ‘You're supposed to be doing something, not just lying there.’ Within two months, I was out of my wheelchair and walking on my own.”

Now six years old, Timber goes everywhere with Krows. They walk 5 miles a day through the streets and parks of downtown Denver. Along the way, they stop to visit residents at a nursing home on Race Street. At Diedrich Coffee, Krows orders a cup of coffee for himself and a bagel for Timber. After breakfast, they walk to Cherry Creek Park, where Timber and Krows meet a support group of six AIDS patients who walk their dogs each morning.

Timber and Krows exemplify what many animal lovers already know. Animals can help heal human illnesses, teach us about spirituality, and comfort us in times of grief. Now scientists are confirming our hunches:

- A study published last year in the *Canadian Journal of Occupational Therapy* found that men with AIDS or HIV believed in a strong relationship between emotional well-being and physical health. Participants described reciprocal, unconditional love and a sense of responsibility for their pets. This attachment may be a coping strategy to combat depression, social isolation, stigma, and grief associated with HIV or AIDS.

- The human-animal bond enhances seniors' quality of life by providing social interaction, reassurance of worth, enhanced mobility, and increased relaxation, according to *Companion Animals & Us: Exploring the Relationship Between People & Pets* by Anthony L. Podberscek, Elizabeth S. Paul, and James A. Serpell (Cambridge University Press, 2000).
- The Australian People and Pets Survey showed that dog and cat owners made fewer doctor visits and took less medication than non-owners. The national survey estimated savings of \$1.8 billion or 5 percent of the country's annual healthcare expenses thanks to pets, according to research published in *Social Indicators Research* in 1999.



But the benefits of pet ownership go beyond physical and mental health. Our connection with animals helps us grow spiritually. After 17 years in private practice, psychologist Mary Lou Randour, Ph.D., realized that spiritual understanding helps us recover from emotional trauma and mature into well-integrated humans. Part of the cure is extending compassion to others. In her book, *Animal Grace: Entering a Spiritual Relationship With Our Fellow Creatures* (New World Library, 2000), Randour explains how animals help us grow spirituality. Animals teach us about death, participate in our social and moral development, enhance our physical and psychological well-being, and heighten our capacity to love, she says.

"Animals offer us a unique opportunity to transcend the boundaries of our human perspectives," says Randour, director of programs for Psychologists for the Ethical Treatment of Animals in Washington Grove, Md., and a consultant to the Doris Day Animal Foundation. "They allow us to stretch our consciousness toward understanding what it is like to be different. This stretching allows us to grow beyond our narrow viewpoint and gain a spiritual advantage. How can we possibly appreciate and move toward spiritual wholeness if we cannot see beyond our own species?"

A Touch of Faith

For most of her adult life, Randour had searched for some sense of spiritual contentment. Her search had its fits and starts as she explored different religions. Randour had reached a spiritual impasse when she read *Animal Liberation* by Peter Singer (Avon/Hearst Corp., 1991). She had nightmares and cried herself to sleep. But the stories of animal suffering helped Randour find her spiritual center. "I became an animal advocate

and had my spiritual journey reawakened because I was working on behalf of others,” Randour says. “For me, spirituality means being able to approach life with openness and wholeness. Animals feel and act with a certain spontaneity and passion, and we realize we’ve lost some of that along the way. In our relationships with animals, we can recover that.”

Humans yearn for a sense of wholeness, she says. Our kinship with animals helps us realize and feel the interconnectedness of our universe. “Animal grace helps us transcend the arbitrary boundary of species,” she says. “It helps us overcome other distinctions of race, gender, nationality, and religion. What binds us, what resides in all of us, is the pulse of life. That realization is a wonderful gift that animals give us.”\

From a scientist’s viewpoint, Allen M. Schoen, DVM, MS, says it’s in our genes to connect with animals. We share similar brains and molecules of emotions, so it seems reasonable that animals share similar thoughts, feelings, and emotions with us, he says. After 23 years as a veterinarian, Schoen noticed that more clients and colleagues wanted to talk openly about the spiritual connection between humans and animals. “Because of scientific dogma, we’ve been hesitant to talk about it,” says Schoen, author of three books, including *Kindred Spirits: How the Remarkable Bond Between Humans & Animals Can Change the Way We Live* (Broadway Books, 2001). “Skeptics say, ‘but there are no double-blind studies.’ Lack of evidence doesn’t mean lack of efficacy. People want to talk about this. People know it’s true.”

Sam Romano, DVM, an emergency veterinarian at the Veterinary Referral Center of Colorado in Englewood, Colo., witnesses the power of the spiritual connection between humans and animals daily. When facing a life-or-death situation, an animal’s chance of recovery sometimes depends on the strength of the bond with its owner. “We spend so much time on high-tech diagnostics, but unless family support is there, many animals lose their will to live,” Romano says. “I’ve seen it over and over again.”

The Veterinary Referral Center of Colorado has more than 25 veterinarians, including board-certified surgeons, cardiologists, dermatologists, oncologists, ophthalmologists, neurologists, and internal medicine specialists. These veterinarians care for pets’ medical needs as well as their guardians’ emotional needs.



Java, a 4-year-old chocolate lab, was diagnosed with cancer in his right hind leg. Marlon Neely, DVM, Dipl. ACVS, knew surgery offered the only hope. After a two-hour surgery to amputate the cancer-ridden leg, Java spent one and a half hours in a recovery room that rivals most human hospitals. Soothing classical music played as veterinary technician Atom Gardiner laid Java on an orthopedic bed and heating pads circulating with warm water. He listened to Java's heart, started warm IV fluids, checked the dog's blood pressure, and applied a 72-hour patch of pain medication. Gardiner wrapped Java in a soft comforter, placed hot-water bottles around him, and laid the dog's head in his lap and gently stroked it. "Human contact helps smooth the recovery process," Gardiner says. "You have to think of the situation from the pet's perspective. They rely on us as their guardians."

Healing Our Souls

After 15 years as an emergency veterinarian, Romano considered leaving the profession. Long hours, a heavy caseload, and grieving pet owners took their toll on his career. Then his father died suddenly of a blood clot. Romano's fox terrier, Sandy, recognized his heavy burden. "Sandy saved me," Romano says. "I felt she was a direct connection to support from a higher power. Her deep, unconditional love and empathy went beyond words. She provided a peacefulness when everything else was in upheaval." The spiritual connection with his dog helped Romano realize that his work had a higher calling.

In an emergency veterinary practice, death—either naturally or by euthanasia—is a daily reality. When animal guardians face the decision of euthanasia for beloved pets, the choice goes beyond medical issues, Romano says. It becomes an emotional decision to help the animal transcend into the spiritual world. When offered the choice, 80 percent of pet owners choose to attend the euthanasia. "You have to trust your technical ability as a veterinarian, as well as your spirituality to share such an incredibly sensitive moment," Romano says. Some pet owners read prayers, light candles, and ask close family members to say good-byes.



Today, 70 percent of veterinary colleges have grief-counseling classes. Veterinary students learn about physiological as well as emotional issues surrounding euthanasia. Carolyn Butler, MS, and Laurel Lagoni, MS, of the Argus Institute for Families and Veterinary Medicine at Colorado State University in Fort Collins, Colo., developed guidelines for bond-centered veterinary practices and teach veterinarians nationwide about grief and the spiritual connection we share with animals. “Our relationships with animals are pure,” Butler says. “If you treat animals with respect, you see them through the dying process. Attended euthanasia helps people not be so frightened of death. Veterinarians play a vital role in people’s emotional and spiritual growth.”

Schoen believes this approach will help create a new paradigm for animal health care, called “integrative veterinary medicine,” which recognizes the interrelatedness of human health, animal health, and environmental health. “The kindred love we share with animals can regenerate the healing potential in all of us,” he says. “As we enter the new millennium, I believe that it is time to reevaluate our relationships with every living being and look for ways to deepen and strengthen those connections. In the 21st century, technology is critical for our survival, but our connection to our animal friends is critical to the survival of our soul.

About the Author:



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