

Animals as Teachers

By Dr. Serena Patterson and Monika Grünberg, RCC

Serena has been sleeping with the window open these past two months, so that she can hear the salmon run in the creek. "They are my new teachers," she says. "They are teaching me not to be afraid of the end of life. I love how they spend this time facing the current, having sex, giving every ounce of their being to both the beginning and the ending of life. I love how they will leave their bodies behind to nourish the fry. I love how they carry nutrients from the ocean to the inland, year after year, century after century; the circle of the whole thing moves me."

Animals have been our teachers many times, and continue to be. Monika had a spaniel-border collie cross who, for sixteen years, followed faithfully at her heels. Wherever Monika went, there was her Arrow. And while Monika moved through her twenties and her thirties, Arrow went from bouncing puppyhood to settled adulthood to, finally, the bittersweet enthusiasm of a geriatric dog, still willing but less able to play. There are so many lessons to learn from a love that lasts all of one's best friend's life: how to receive unconditional love, to return loyalty, and to be faithful in the day to day duties of care. Then, there is the way that love can sweeten as the loved one changes to be more beautiful, if not to the stranger's eye, then to the eye of the one who knows, and adores, the spirit within. Monika laughed, and cried, at her old dog's tottery gait and horrible dog breath. But Monika held Arrow gently through her last breaths, and she grieved strongly afterward. Now, many years after, Monika smiles when a dog reminds her of her Arrow.

Serena's current dog is a one-eyed, twelve year old mongrel who used to jump six foot fences, but now no longer moves fast enough to threaten even the neighborhood raccoons. He injured his eye last summer, swimming in the Puntledge, and he was having so much fun that he didn't notice the accident when it happened; he just came back and barked for a another stick to chase. Serena's physical pain threshold is low, and she is amazed at a dog who, as she says, "is not Mr. Sensitive", but will plunge into ice cold water any time of the year. Together, they are a pair: one who can't smell worth a darn, hates the cold and who feels every bump, sliver and scrape; one who feels no pain, sees only half of the world, and can smell a raccoon trail at 50 yards, two days after the raccoon has passed. Different strokes, different abilities, as they say.

The Comox Valley's Therapeutic Riding Association, which has for many years brought children with disabilities together with horses, has recently begun a program for children and teens with behavioral or emotional challenges. There, it is horses who do the teaching. We can just imagine the emotions that the young people must have as they befriend and learn to ride the horses. Large and powerful, horses are also grazers and herd animals, whose nature attunes them to the slightest hint of threat and tells them to run when frightened. In a world full of computers and video games, horses are refreshingly and undeniably alive. In a complicated world of peers who can be cunning and cruel to children with differences, horses are straightforward in their communication; once you learn what to look for, you can know exactly what the horse is feeling. Attention, empathy, patience, impulse control, gentleness, physical balance, self awareness and courage are just a few of the lessons that come with this program.

Another colleague, Wendy Kotilla, has developed the Youth and Ecological Restoration Project, taking teenagers outside to observe and restore natural habitat. Wendy helps teenagers to stretch their awareness of the natural world, and to experience what it means to belong to, and to be a part of the earth. She says by that standing in the creeks and by learning from local people the teens develop a strong sense of place in both the natural and social communities.



Our relationship with animals is not a luxury. Humans have always lived closely with animals, both “domestic” and wild. Both Monika and Serena are the granddaughters of farmers, whose interdependence with the animals included raising them for meat, milk, eggs, and wool. These grandparents of ours had very different relationships with the farm animals than we have with our beloved pets. But even animals raised for food have a right to be free from cruelty and indifference. Every well-raised farm child learns to take responsibility for the well being of animals in their care, even if only for a short life time.

At our counselling office, Monika keeps mason bee houses just outside the window, and children and adults love to check on the developing larvae in their glass-topped nests. With the bees, the whole cycle of life is just a year long, and the adults spend most of their short lives looking after young that they never see. For children who have lost their parents, the bees have a particular lesson: that they, too, fit into the cycle of life and have been nourished by the love of someone, even before they were born. The bees also remind us adults of our responsibility to a future that we will not see, and to the descendants who may not even remember our names, but who will certainly be affected by our actions now.

Back by the creek, we keep one ear tuned to the salmon, and to the schoolyard on the other side of the creek. People of all ages come to watch the fish. Children need to be taught how to treat the salmon and other creatures. Without these lessons, children don’t know that their curious poking can hurt. They don’t know that rocks thrown in frustration at innocent animals release a malice into the world that fixes nothing, and can ruin everything. These moments by the creek are teaching times. It is vitally important to the children, as well as the salmon, that the lessons learned be respect, kindness, and a sense of awe toward living things.

One recent morning, we heard the familiar shouts of children by the creek, and went out to check on our wet, defenseless teachers. Usually, a reminder of “you know not to bother the salmon, right?” is all that is required; children are quick to assure us that they are “just looking”, and we join for a few moments in the hypnotic joy of watching the water and the fish. But on this morning, more than a dozen children were lined up along the banks of the creek, and we were worried. But when we got close and heard what the children were shouting, we smiled. They were watching the fish like you watch a favorite sports team, encouraging them on and cheering like mad whenever one leapt the weir to land in a higher pool. They were telling one another about the spawning, and the fry that would be there in the spring. They were in awe at the size of the Chum, some three feet in length, and at the power with which they fought the current.

We wanted to cheer, too! For the salmon, who made it back to their birth stream to start the cycle again. For the teachers at Puntledge Park School, who were back in their classrooms after the hardship of an autumn teacher’s strike, and who have taught these children not only creek etiquette, but also joy and respect for the salmon. For the children, who will carry a sense of the beauty and drama of the salmon with them as they travel far from this creek and from this day; for the full face-into-the-current and zestful experience all of it—life, death, renewal, courage. It was one of those moments that is like a prayer, when everything sacred seems to be present and washing over us.

Animals are teachers of the deep lessons. Death is a part of life. Everything changes. Embrace life with enthusiasm and zest while it lasts. Love our fellow travelers—human, canine, equine, piscine (that’s fishy), domestic and feral. Watch out for their well being, and appreciate what they give in return. Grieve them well when they pass on. Try to leave a nurturing legacy behind us when we go.

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