

“It is the intuitive power of animals that can help us heal hurts,
lessen stress, feel needed, and express our caring side.”

~ *Marty Becker, DVM*

Animal Nature

THEY CAN SNIFF OUT SICKNESS,
CALM OUR FEARS
AND HELP US LEARN TO LIVE IN THE 'NOW' >>

By **Christine Darragh**







As Oscar the Cat jumps up on the bed, sniffs the air inquiringly, then curls up snugly next to the advanced dementia patient, his gentle purr parallels the laboured breathing filling the space. A nurse doing her regular rounds rushes out of the room to alert the elderly woman's family. Here, all residence staff now recognize the obvious. When Oscar comes around to devotedly comfort the ailing, their passing is an imminent reality; indeed, a mere two hours away.

Rescued as a stray kitten from a Providence, Rhode Island shelter in 2005 by the pet-friendly Steere House nursing facility, this feline goes on his own "rounds" several times a day, checking in various rooms to assess ever changing situations. Perpetually accurate in his assessments — up to the year 2010 he'd foretold 50 deaths — he's even confidently left the room of a patient whose doctor said was very close to passing, causing those assembled to doubt the cat's infallibility. Oscar returned a few hours later, in keeping with his usual two-hour window. The doctor had simply called the impending death too early. And while Oscar offers a considerate indication to others of this approaching transition, he also provides needed companionship for those who might have otherwise died alone.

How does one account for the powerful and enduring connection humans have with animals? Anyone who has looked deep into the eyes of a beloved animal companion knows something profound about the immanent substance that lies within, existing beyond our inadequate and limited human comprehension. Without words to complicate, animals relate to us an intense level of understanding and perception, offering an open, accessible pathway of both empathy and insight we may find difficult to realize on our own. Like a Freudian Fido or a Feline Oprah, they can be the stalwart, soothing balm in times of trouble and constant friend to share the best moments beside, embodying a tender awareness and responsive essence which genuinely touches our souls.

Brock University sociology professor John Sorenson believes there are several reasons why we experience this heartfelt, associative inclination, and it can be a complex one to assess. "On one level, it involves our uncertainty about our own place in the natural world and our ideas about what it means to be human." He contends and explains further, "We use some animals to define ourselves and we claim complete superiority over them to reinforce our sense of existential meaning. For instance, we know many individuals experience a sense of personal power through abusing animals and we have institutionalized spectacles of domination such as rodeos and circuses. At the same time, we are drawn to other animals with a sense of interest and compassion."

This societal paradox continuously plays at the heart of an intriguing and deeply ingrained dichotomy.

Scientifically speaking, our significant response to the kingdom of animals surrounding us supports the hypothesis of "biophilia" by Edward Wilson, proposing there is a highly evident, intuitive bond between human beings and other living systems that cannot, and should not, be disregarded. Defining and popularizing the theory in his 1984 book, *Biophilia*, as "the urge to affiliate with other forms of life," it's the primary pull of an inherent and compelling subconscious need to make connections within our natural world, and an occasion to branch beyond our own species to nurture and foster those associations.

As Sorenson points out, through the whole history of human civilization, we see the central roles animals have played in our imagination, as symbols in art and religion, and as objects of worship themselves. And with the practice of keeping certain animals as pets not being an exclusively Western or modern activity, since it has taken different forms in different times and places, "the attraction we feel for animals and the interest we take in their lives is something that is deeply-rooted in our own nature," he notes. "This seems especially strong in the case of particular animals, such as dogs, who became domesticated 15,000 to 25,000 years ago and who have co-evolved with us. Our long and intimate association with dogs has made the relationship with them quite a profound one."

It's not unexpected then, humans have observed the merits of the animal realm and willingly put those capabilities to good use. Blessed with an exceptional "gift of sniff," a canine's sense of smell overpowers our own by orders of magnitude; it's 10,000 to 100,000 times as acute, say scientists. To better illustrate this aromatic competence, if we make a similar analogy to vision even at a mere 10,000 times more sensitive, that's the equivalent of a person seeing only about a third of a mile, whereas a dog could still see clearly at a distance of 3,000 miles.

Likewise, cats have about 200 million scent receptors to smell the world around them, virtually towering over a paltry five million in humans. But as cats apply their "nose to know," using it to communicate and secure relationships with life forms around them and to respond to their environment, as in Steere House's all-perceiving feline guide to the afterlife, dogs use this sensational sense to seek things out, and are eager to gain a human's favour by doing so as a devoted sign of goodwill, or a "dogmatic" errand to achieve. Due to this, many interesting scientific and healthcare situations in recent times involve the use of dogs where comparable human abilities fall woefully short.

With solid research into cancer-detecting dogs increasing, one the-

There is no psychiatrist in the world like a puppy licking your face.

- Bern Williams, philosopher

ory is that dogs — and the abovementioned Oscar the Cat — may be picking up on the nuances of smell and the chemicals released from the body when important changes are occurring. For example, Dr. Claire Guest of London, England was training her Labrador, Daisy, to detect different cancers by smelling a patient's breath, urine or skin, when the dog began acting uncharacteristically anxious and strange. As Guest described it to the UK's Telegraph, "She kept jumping up on me, and she bumped into my chest with her nose," giving the alerting indication the dog had been trained for. Feeling a lump in her breast, a core needle biopsy discovered a diagnosis of early stage breast cancer. Caught at its onset by Daisy, Guest was successfully treated and given an encouraging report, and now credits her vigilant dog with saving her life.

This close, intertwined affiliation we have with our animal allies may be one explanation why we advantageously employ animals, and primarily dogs, in all manner of essential assistance. Over the course of centuries, our culture has adapted their presence in our lives to accommodate various needs — using service animals as Seeing Eye dogs, security dogs, drug sniffing or seizure sensing dogs — but

also as empathetic entities providing multitude improvements to our human health. "The list of benefits that we derive from our association with other animals is long and quite remarkable," says Sorenson. "Animals not only have a positive benefit when we get more exercise by walking with them or enjoy social interactions with other dog walkers, but scientific research suggests incredible therapeutic benefits: reduced stress, lower blood pressure, faster recovery times from serious surgery, extended life expectancy among those with cancer, help with depression, autism, reduced needs for drugs in nursing home situations and so on."

Known widely as the "charismatic cowboy counsellor," Arizona horse handler Wyatt Webb's unique perspective from working as a psychotherapist for over 20 years reveals much about our most thorny issues. As he's witnessed consistently in all cultures and across every demographic, people's pain in life, and the challenging, unhelpful re-

actions organically stemming from this pain, falls squarely into two groups: self-doubt and fear. But by connecting authentically with an animal antidote, the complicated can be made clear and simple.

With a totally distinct brand of horse sense, Webb conducts his popular workshops at Miraval, an outwardly stylish spa destination in the Sonoran Desert. Amid the dust and spacious skies, he's created an intensely personal program styled by an equine straightforwardness. The context is exploring how "horses heal people," where successfully interacting and co-operating with a horse is the equivalent to every human relationship we encounter, and a channel for the individual, enlightening journey that's possible when we are made self-aware.

The surprising revelation in all of this animal attentiveness: It really isn't about the horse. Focusing intensely on the internal emotions and attitudes of participants, he knows insight lies within, taking self-absorbed human whining and harmonizing it to a temperate horse's whinny. "How you relate to this animal will tell us what you've learned over the course of your lifetime concerning how you relate to all living things. Your basic training has come from learning how to treat people," he tells those who attend, seeking wisdom

into what works either for or against them in every relationship.

As most people are conditioned to be focused externally, wondering endlessly what others are thinking or feeling regarding things and making presumptions of all kinds, this wise horseman sees distraction as being one of the true impediments to successfully learning anything about ourselves. Projecting outwardly in such a preoccupied way makes it impossible to legitimately couple with others because you're not present with yourself, but directing attention internally, actually opens one up to more meaningful, deeper bonds. Animals cannily pick up on these subtle energies and stimuli and respond in affirmative ways.

"So, what I suggest you do is pay attention to what you're thinking and pay attention to what you're feeling. Know that these two things dictate the way you live your life," Webb counsels groups, in order to mindfully centre themselves prior to their first interaction with a horse. "This way, you'll be able to be present enough to connect with any other living thing, horses or otherwise, which will also cause you to take responsibility for your life and how you live it." >>





905.468.2135

13 Henegan Road, Virgil Business Park | peninsulaflooring.ca



Let Us
Custom Design
Your Perfect Kitchen...

15 Henegan Road | Virgil, Ontario | 905.468.2393

www.millbrookcabinetry.com

While popular pet personalities continue exploring our innate penchant to bond with other species, like “The Dog Whisperer” Cesar Millan, who also demonstrates humans must be grounded, centered and project calm energy in order to have the proper connection with their canine companions, there is still much to learn from our animal co-existence. Perhaps their contribution to our lives should neither be to serve our needs nor even to constantly befriend, but rather, these sentient creatures can elevate who we are and what we are capable of being, as enriching models of how to live in the “now,” moment to moment. It’s an implication extending to all relationships, and the true consequence of this meaningful involvement will be manifested in each and every one of our deepest, gratifying endeavours. NM

Animal Therapy Charitable & Non-profit Groups in Niagara

- **BISHpets**, (animal assisted activity/ animal assisted therapy) program at Brain Injury Services. braininjuryservices.com
- **Equine Ability Niagara**: Therapeutic riding facility offering persons with life challenges joy, accomplishment and freedom through connections with horses. equineabilityniagara.com
- **H.A.T.S. Horse Alternative Therapeutic Services**: uses the unique bond between horses and humans as a tool for personal growth and development. hatsniagara.org
- **I Can Therapeutic Equestrian Riding Association of Niagara**: Offers a setting where those with and without special needs can experience the farm for rehabilitation, therapy, education & training, recreation & leisure. icanter.ca
- **Red Roof Retreat**: Respite, recreation (including horseback riding and a ranch of gentle farm animals) for children and young adults with special needs. redroof-retreat.com
- **St. Johns Ambulance Therapy Dog Services**: has well behaved canine ambassadors and their handlers visit people in hospitals, special needs programs or in long-term care facilities. sja.ca
- **Therapy Tails Ontario (Niagara)**: Therapy dogs and their handlers visit senior care homes, adult living facilities, daycare centres, schools and community partners. therapytails.ca