

PAWS for Action – What if...

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I talk to my animals. This is not unusual. Lots of people talk to their pets. Some people talk to their televisions, computers and even toasters. Anthropomorphism is the attribution of human traits and emotions to non-human entities. It is considered to be an innate tendency of human psychology.

Folklore featuring animals with decidedly human traits has been around probably since our species first began to speak. Most of us were brought up watching Disney films populated entirely by talking animals. We are an animal loving culture which is evident by the amount of money we spend on our pets.

I talk to my pets all the time and I believe they understand a lot of what I say. I can ask Sam, Tinker or Sully to, “Go get a toy” and they immediately oblige. My dog Sam has been heard to say, “AH RUV ROO” after I tell him “I love you.” He may or may not know what he is saying but I believe he gets that we are having a two-way communication.

This is on my mind today because I just heard Jennifer Ackerman interviewed on NPR about her new book, “The Genius of Birds.” During the interview she spoke about Irene Pepperberg and Alex, an African grey parrot. Irene, an animal psychologist, purchased Alex in 1977 when he was only one year old and he lived with Irene until he died at the age of 31.

Alex stands for “avian learning experiment.” For thirty years Irene pushed what was then believed to be the cognitive and emotional limits of birds. At the end of Alex’s life he could recognize 50 different objects and identify quantities up to six. He could distinguish between seven colors and five shapes. He understood concepts such as bigger, smaller, same, and different. In one video he commented that the cob of corn he was given as a snack was “cold” as it had just came out of the refrigerator.

The night Alex passed away he told Irene, as he did every night, “you be good, see you tomorrow, I love you.” Parrots generally live 60 years. Alex’s death was sudden and unexpected and deemed to be associated with hardening of the arteries.

Similar research involved a chimpanzee named Washoe who was able to communicate via sign language. During her life she learned 350 words and taught her adopted son to communicate using ASL.

Washoe lived with her human researcher as a family member. Those close to her believed that she was emotionally sensitive and formed close personal relationships with various humans.

Many years ago I witnessed my cat Hannah grieve the death of her brother Noah. This loss had a dramatic and long lasting effect and at one point I feared for her health. I finally brought home a 7 month old kitten who she rejected initially, then took under her wing as if Mijo was “her kitten”.

What would happen if we believe that animals really can and do communicate with us? What if we believe they are emotionally sensitive creatures with the ability to enter into close personal relationships with each other and with us?

Would shelter euthanasia still be the leading cause of death for companion animals in the U.S.? Would animals be used as research subjects, isolated from each other during life and killed when their usefulness to science is over?

Anthropocentrism is the belief that humans are the central or most significant species on the planet and is used to excuse us from the bad behavior we have practiced in relation to animals. Even indigenous cultures respected and thanked the animals they killed for food. What if we, as a culture, changed the way we relate to animals?

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