

Where are the Animals?

At a horsemanship clinic in 2005, I watched a gifted horsewoman and teacher move through a herd of ten loose horses, stranger to her and each other before the weekend. The animals swayed, frisked and twirled. They were engrossed in each other and the signals passing between them, as challenges were made and bonds formed. The air around them was buzzing. But after a long period of negotiation and play between the horses, one of them began to show much more interest in the solitary human among them, than in its own kind. It approached her curiously, respectfully, but with clear intention. Several times it repeated the approach. “Out of all of these”, commented the woman, “this is the one I’d ride. It’s volunteered.” Wild nature (for horses, through “domestic” keenly retain the instincts of the wild) had become an ally. Before us was an image of dialogue and engagement, and Lesley Desmond (a teacher of some notoriety due to the provocative style of her horsemanship courses) is one contemporary example of such.

The horse recalls for us our primeval origins, in its apprehension of our carnivore instincts, and in its kinship with the plant-eater within us. Because we are so reliant on speech to communicate, and attend so much to its messages, we can often miss what else is passing through the air. Yet horses often respond to, and respond with, the feet and posture, yielding or claiming space in an incessant negotiation. The subtlety of such undercurrents is well demonstrated when we learn, as we can, to move a horse away from a space simply by claiming that space with a mental focus.

In some sections of the equestrian community, a spark of this has always persisted, as in Henry Blake’s Talking with Horses, (9) published thirty years ago. The urge to fan this spark is at present gaining momentum, as you can see, say, in the pages of Natural Horsemanship (10) magazine. Riders look

to the horse to provide something increasingly lacking in contemporary culture – the wild, the ungovernable, the magnificent. Even for non-riders, the creature maintains a powerful charisma, such that recently the highest selling postcard at the National Gallery shop was Stubbs' Whistlejacket. Rider numbers are growing steadily, such that the horse population has now exceeded what it was before 1914. Many of these people are well aware of the irony that humans tend to quell the very wildness which draws them to horses in the first place. In recent years a new wave of horsemanship has grown up which seeks to respect more fully the creature's true nature. And by doing this, it is also expanding the concept of human nature.

In folktale and dream we glimpse an idyllic era in which human and animal spoke a common language. At that time, pacts and alliances were mutually understood and voluntarily maintained. A number of surviving forest cultures, such as the Udegi of Siberia or the Bega of India, still carry traces of this mentality, which even made co-existence agreements with local tiger populations possible. Likewise in Stephen Pressfield's striking novel The Last of the Amazons (1), he imagines the daily life of those women warriors who haunt Hellenic myth, and the symbiosis between the human group and the horse herd. Individual animals emerge from the herd and voluntarily present themselves for partnership with the woman who then becomes their chosen rider. Of this, Lesley Desmond offered an uncanny echo in her workshop. Here, recognition between species is accepted as readily as that between individual humans, and in this lies a freedom and rapture, a memento of Eden.

But in the version of evolution this suggests, an increasingly thick veil then began to fall within the human mind. The primordial language was lost. Does this veil have any reality and any significance for us now? If this veil were to be lifted, would that have a wider meaning? Might this, as well as affecting our transactions with other species, also be relevant to our well-being and sense of self? Might the current mode of psychotherapy be

actually maintaining that veil, succumbing to the same delusion in which our race has persisted in recent centuries? When I survey the pages that therapists have written on the inner life of contemporary humankind, in professional journals for instance, I find the animals largely absent. I submit that there is an anathema here, that what we take as the norm in fact signifies our alienation from realities both physical and spiritual. If psychotherapy is an attempt to answer such questions as “how can we live with ourselves?” and “how can we live with each other?”, can it also avoid asking, “how might we live with other beings?” For even when we overlook it, the question of true relationship with our fellow creatures is as basic as these others.

It could of course be argued that animals simply do not figure much in the lives of clients. But could it also be because often this relationship is now both deeply buried and dysfunctional? Indeed, if clients’ and therapists’ relationships with their dogs follows the norm rather than the standards represented by, say, Jean Donaldson (2), it is based on continuous misunderstanding. And if this is so, might a door in the mind remain closed, one that could open onto wide vistas. We eat animals, we wear them, we gamble on their speed and competitiveness, experiment on them and require their numbers to be controlled for hygiene. They populate our dreams. Yet post-industrial man maintains the illusion that we can live separated from or in ignorance of animals. Although psychotherapy often reminds humans of the persistence of primal drives (hunger, survival, sex), yet it often subscribes unwittingly to this illusion, and our relationship with animals has hitherto rarely appeared in its literature. The phenomenon of “Equine Assisted Psychotherapy” (3) is, admittedly, now receiving some coverage in both professional and mainstream media, and is one sign of the growing recognition that this gulf is significant. But at present the unfamiliarity of horses and other creatures for many people is the essential basis of such methods.

For most of human history the connection has been paramount, particularly if we recognise the three hundred centuries of the Paleolithic Age as part of that story. The earliest art we have found does not represent family life or even other people, but a variety of other animals, as if these were the beings of prime importance. Nowadays, in dwellings or places of worship, it is customary to display the images of human relatives or our human shaped Gods. But in those ancient shrines, the caves, the forms portrayed are those of animals.

In much of the world's folklore, animals are major characters, whether they are rascally figures like Coyote, or close allies like the horses and birds of the Russian tale of Kozchei the Deathless. Accordingly, in first-hand accounts from members of tribal cultures, like that given by the Cree, Ron Evans, on a visit to Ruskin Mill, Gloucestershire, in 2004, even the help of earthworms can be summoned in times of crisis! One of the most scathing critiques of Western culture in the age of ecological disaster, John Gray's Straw Dogs, (4) challenges our separation from animals, and our sense of the "specialness" of the human race, an error of which he accuses Judeo-Christianity and humanism. According to his argument, "humanistic" psychology could easily be implicated in the folly. We can characterise most of human culture since at least the first cities as an expression of what it means to be human. Poetry, art, religion, dance, drama, are concerned chiefly with humans' relationship to each other, to Gods, to fate, or to the self. It is rarely concerned with what it means to be one of the creatures. Pre-urban culture, however, reflects this latter question much more fully. In numerous Gaelic tales men and seals marry, and in tales such as the Dream of the Crow and Owl, recounted by the Yahton Nakota, Siya'ka in 1913, (5) alliances with other species are portrayed.

Yet along with the loss of connection, humans also perennially feel the pull towards encounter with the Other. The heights of individual development represent exactly that. In spirituality, creative arts and humanitarian service

some otherness is always touched. In sexual rapture we lose ourselves, give way to the power of the other (both the partner and sexuality itself). Likewise in therapy, the glow which fills us when we reclaim a lost aspect of self or a repressed emotion. Likewise also, the flood of inspiration which seems to arrive from elsewhere when we are struggling to write an article or a poem and it suddenly takes off. There arises that strange mixture of overcoming and yielding, of selfhood and merging, which particularly characterises intimacy. The other is, mystifyingly, also deep within us, and there is a parallel between meeting another being and accepting a part of ourselves which has hitherto felt foreign. It is also thus when we truly encounter an animal. Something deep within us comes alive. We have become more fully what we are, more alert and awake, passing beyond our limitations. Clive Perraton Mountford in his moose encounter (6), Barry Lopez with young wolves (7), exemplify this simultaneous sense of separateness and connection. We are in what James Hillman calls a liminal state, tingling with aliveness. For some, this resonates with our ability to step towards God. And we connect with a heritage from our most ancient ancestors.

If one of our deepest aspirations is to go beyond the human, maybe that is basic to what being human means. We have reached out through religion which recognises other conscious beings – such as Gods and angels, or other planes such as Hades or Nirvana. We have done so through geographical exploration and through the feats of science, engineering and technology which rendered us no longer earthbound. To cross the communication gulf separating us from the animal is a version of what we have always done, but in a realm where in recent centuries we have lost our way and our competence. And this requires exactly the virtues which psychotherapy extols and fosters. Empathy, awareness of communication through body language and gesture, understanding of what we mean to the other and they to us.

For ancient man, I surmise, conversation with animals was closely linked with conversations with other spirit beings. When human culture originated, the animals and the sacred, rather than being contrasting polarities, represented kindred dimensions. Many spiritual beings shared form and attributes with animals. The divine sphere was populated with animal-like presences. Indeed, one of the extraordinary but carefully argued conclusions in Lewis Williams' book, The Mind in the Cave (8) is that all the exquisite forms executed by prehistoric artists on the walls of the famous caves in France and Spain are not physical animals but beings encountered in the spirit world beyond the cave wall. Perhaps we would gain from once again accepting such kinship.

Pat Parelli, who has developed one of the most widely subscribed of the new equestrian trainings, argues that there is great significance in the fact that now, seventy percent of horse owners are women, and that riding is no longer under the dominance of "men, money and the military". Individuals like him enact the power to connect benevolently with beings that are Other. In the immediate situation these beings are animal, but were they instead the forces that mould our destinies, many of the same lessons would apply.

We live in continuous response to forces beyond our control. Sometimes we attempt to escape them, sometimes embrace them. We cringe at the onslaught of poverty, illness, disaster, misfortune and perhaps the mightiest of all, death. Yet in sports and outdoor pursuits, we willingly flirt with danger and the possibility of injury. We challenge the elements. In our creative endeavours, we welcome the arrival of inspirational energy or waves of self-confidence, not knowing exactly where these come from or even, in their more extreme forms, whether they will serve us or destroy us. And in moments of deep equanimity, we see that such forces actually offer us a reflection of our own hearts, we feel reconciled by the swings of the pendulum. We see that the duality, by which these forces seem sometimes hostile and sometimes benign, is somehow a unity. The horse, who can

serve us, thrill us or kill us, readily becomes an embodiment of such forces. The quality of our response to the horse exemplifies our response to all mighty beings.

A growing chorus of voices challenges our misapprehension of animals and the dullness of our transactions with them. Lynne Sharpe's Creatures Like Us (11) and Raimond Gaita's The Philosopher's Dog (12) represent this chorus, their widely differing styles and approaches exemplifying its diversity. What underlies all this, though, is not just a renewed appreciation of animals' sensitivity and our capacity to achieve mutual recognition with them. It is that without this, there is a gap in our knowledge of self, a need which remains unmet, a region of soul undiscovered. There is an imprisonment which we have unwittingly laid upon ourselves and which keeps us from our true homeland, a place of wonders.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Stephen Pressfield (2003). The Last of the Amazons, Bantam.
2. Jean Donaldson (2005). Culture Clash. James and Kenneth.
3. Clare Pointon (2005). Horses for Courses. Therapy Today. September 2005.
4. John Gray (2002). Straw Dogs. Grantan.
5. Smithsonian Institution (1997). Stories of the People. Universe.
6. Clive Perraton Mountford (2006). Dr. Rogers and the Moral Umbrella, Open Ended Ecosophy. Self and Society – March–April 2006.
7. Barry Lopez (1978). Of Wolves and Men. Touchstone.
8. David Lewis–Williams (2002). The Mind in the Cave. Thames and Hudson.
9. Henry Blake (1975). Talking with Horses. Souvenir Press.
10. Natural Horsemanship Magazine. Vowley Farm, Binchnoll Lane, Wootton Bassett, SN4 8QR.
11. Lynne Sharpe (2005). Creatures Like Us. Imprint Academic.
12. Raimond Gaiton (2002). The Philosopher's Dog. Routledge.