

Kinship with animals – Unlearning Speciesism

by

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Welcome to everyone! And to the animals that have brought us here by their influence on us, to the spirits of animals who have passed on and who have taught us before and since their deaths.

I have always had a special regard for animals, even stuffed animals, where real ones weren't available. But my current feeling for animals is a legacy of someone who was very special to me. My old friend Molly, a lab/kelpie mix who was thrown over a fence and into my life as a four week old puppy, died about a year and a half ago. Soon after she died, I saw her in a dream. She was sitting facing the far horizon, but she turned to look back over her shoulder at me. The next morning I was standing in the shower, still seeing her in my mind. Suddenly I felt how she loved me in such an accepting way, and knew that the message she was sending me was that I should love myself in the same way. Her parting message to me was to respect and value myself. My pledge to her in return was to do everything I could to understand dogs on their own terms, instead of projecting my human needs and ways of seeing the world onto them.

That has taken me on a wonderful journey since then – in fact it set me back on a path that I was on as a small child. My mother tells me that she used to find me on the back steps of our house talking to flies in pre-verbal grunts. And in a favorite picture of me as a child, I am trying to give a flower to Simon, my granny's old spaniel. Simon's head is turned away, and he looks profoundly disinterested but patiently tolerant of this strange little human. I imagine Simon would be happy that I have since learned more about what dogs really like – they are not, as far as I know now, people in dog-suits, and their delights and dislikes are often different from ours. My present canine companion, Ranger, has taken over where Molly left off in educating me about dogs and humans. As a result of my relationship with him, one of my growing interests is “training the human” in human-dog partnerships. From my experience of myself, I think that what many dog trainers say is true: it is often way more difficult to change the human than the dog!

Connecting with an animal

Before I go further, I'd like to invite you to make a feeling connection with an animal, who might accompany you personally as you read and think about kinship with animals and unlearning speciesism. Although as humans we have much we can share with and teach other, I think we learn best from the animals themselves, if we can open ourselves up to their ways of being.

- Take a few moments, and think of an animal who has meant something to you – it might be an old friend, or a creature you met through happenstance, someone who

- passed through your everyday life almost unnoticed, yet leaving a profound memory trace... If no personal experience comes to mind, you might wish to think of any creature or species that comes to mind right now...
- Allow this animal to come into your mind and welcome him/her with respect and awe, noticing him/her anew, and thanking him/her for coming into your consciousness.
 - Notice a particular quality of this animal that comes to your attention, and acknowledge it. Or remember a story about the animal, or an experience you shared together.
 - Take time to allow your memory or image or feeling experience to teach you something about the animal, yourself, and/or your relationship with him or her.

Now let's go on together ...

Overview

I am going to offer a few of my thoughts on what speciesism is, what kinship with animals means, and how to unlearn speciesism, using a relational approach. I have chosen this approach because it is relationship with animals (and humans who love and understand them well) that is helping me to unlearn the speciesism in which my life has been steeped. Others have arrived in a similar place or are further on down the track, through working for justice for animals from a legal, ethical or other socially active stance. I appreciate all of these approaches, but feel less equipped to discuss speciesism from those standpoints.

Speciesism

Speciesism is a belief system that views human and non-human animals as different in morally relevant respects¹. Obviously we are different from each other, but do these differences morally justify humans treating non-human animals in ways which would be considered immoral if they were human? Speciesism says they do, based on the idea that humans have dominion over animals by virtue of humans' superior intelligence, moral superiority, and so on. As a result, many hundreds of millions of animals are used each year in experiments, some very painful and some lasting for years. They are also factory farmed, killed for sport, used for entertainment, and kept for many other human purposes. Often they are treated and killed in the most neglectful or brutal ways, which are simply not acceptable where humans are concerned. By law, animals are human possessions, and their rights are mostly not guaranteed in and of themselves.

In the introduction to her book, "You can Save the Animals,"² the founder of PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals), Ingrid Newkirk, says that everyone can do something about the situation animals find themselves in on this planet. Although things are changing, millions of creatures still suffer at the hands of humans who believe that

¹ Lafollette, Hugh and Shanks, Niall, "The Origin of Speciesism," *Philosophy*, 1996, pp. 41-60.

² Newkirk, *Ingrid, You Can save the Animals: 251 Simple Ways to Stop Thoughtless Cruelty*. (Rocklin, CA: Prima Publishing), 1999.

animals exist for us, belong to us, and are inferior to us. Ingrid says that if we do something about this, *we should feel good about ourselves.* We should feel happier and healthier in ourselves. I think this is an interesting point. It makes me remember Molly's last message to me, which was to feel good about myself. She didn't tell me to save the animals, or foster dogs, or stop eating meat, or work to stop vivisection and other forms of animal torture. She suggested that doing what makes me feel better about myself (which could be any of those things, but which for me involved fostering homeless dogs and volunteering at an animal shelter) was key. She and Ingrid Newkirk were right. Doing those things did make me feel good, and that has made me want to do more. Things just keep flowing on from there ...

I think that we humans are the animals that are in more need of saving than other animals. No other species is as committed to a path of such self-destruction (taking many other species down with it) as we are. There is so much we can do and should do to help animals. But let's not fool ourselves, it is not just for them. As in any move to end the oppression of a marginalized group, action for change is as much for the sake of the oppressor as it is for the oppressed. Humans suffer moral and spiritual impoverishment and bankruptcy, as a result of the terrible treatment we directly and indirectly perpetrate on animals simply because they are "not human." Increasingly, our material and social lives are negatively affected as well, and ultimately our own existence as a species may also be at stake. I wonder how long it will take before we look back at ourselves and feel aghast at what we consider now to be acceptable treatment of the non-human beings with whom we live on this planet.

Kinship

Kinship with animals is about recognizing a family connection between human and non-human animals. It recognizes difference but does not draw an arbitrary line that assigns dominion to humans over animals. Like any good relationship, a positive relationship between human and non-human animals hinges on respect for the other's being, communication, and the capacity to find the other in ourselves. Human-animal communication is based on mutual respect and caring, intuition, and careful attention to the other's signals, rather than linguistic communication.³ We are many of us linguistically impaired when it comes to communicating with animals. Some of us have the ability to communicate with animals directly, many of us have not discovered this capacity in ourselves. Some may develop the capacity with time and effort. Some become bilingual in animal and human modes of communication, as Temple Grandin's fascinating book on her experiences with autism and working to reduce cruelty in the meat industry⁴. But we all have the capacity for mutual respect and caring, and can use it to understand and relate to animals.⁵⁶

³ Boone, J. Allen. *Kinship With All Life*. (San Francisco: Harper), 1954.

⁴ Grandin, Temple, *Thinking in Pictures and Other Reports from my Life with Autism*. (New York: Vintage Books), 1995.

⁵ Smith, Penelope, *The Interspecies Telepathic Connection Tape Series*. (Point Reyes, CA: Pegasus Publications), 1994

A relational approach to unlearning speciesism

Unlearning speciesism, for me, and for some others too I imagine, starts with humans *changing how we feel about ourselves*. Our relationships with animals are often catalysts for this, since animals have a unique way of affecting us. I recently attended a “Sacred Spirit” retreat with Sharon Callahan and Allen Schoen. (Sharon is an animal communicator, Allen is a veterinarian who has written some wonderful books. One of these that I can especially recommend is called “Kindred Spirits”⁷). At the retreat, Sharon and Allen were sharing experiences of their extensive work with animals and they said two things that struck me powerfully:

- 1) Animals, like people, are individuals. The view that “Animals are like this, dogs think like that, horses feel like this” is a limited one. Each animal is an individual. Some like people; some don’t. Some are very willing to communicate with people; some prefer not to or are antagonistic. Some have a purpose helping humans; others feel no relationship to the human world and fear or distrust it. Like any group of people, not all are alike, even if there are similarities to their group’s experience.

Seeing an animal as its whole species is a kind of speciesism – trying to relate to the unique being that is that animal is a way of unlearning speciesism. Anyone can start that today, and again tomorrow, and the next day. The next time you encounter an animal you don’t know (or go home to someone with whom you share your home, if you don’t already do this) look at him or her with new eyes – as his or her own unique self. Try to imagine how he or she is seeing you. Cat, dog, human, mouse, lizard, are categories. Ask the animal “Who are you really, in your own being?” Consider that the animal has its own way of experiencing and viewing the world, and recognize that that viewpoint may not have anything to do with you as “caretaker,” “mum,” “dad,” “superior being,” or however you think of yourself (consciously or unconsciously) in relation to that animal.

- 2) Human ecologist, Paul Shepard, says: “Each species is a master of a particular way of being that foreshadows something about ourselves.”⁸ In relating to animals we relate to ourselves, and we can learn a lot from them, as humans have throughout human history and across culture. But we so often project onto other creatures, as onto other groups of people that are different from ourselves, things with which we do not identify. Projecting particular qualities onto animals is another aspect of speciesism (like racism or sexism). It is natural to project the unknown onto the unknown, to see in some unknown “other” what we dislike or don’t know well about ourselves. Often people make generalized statements like “dogs are unconditionally loving,” or “cats are aloof.” But in reality, some are,

⁶ Williams, Marta, *Learning Their Language: Intuitive Communication with Animals and Nature*, Novato, CA: New World Publishing, 2003.

⁷ Schoen, Allen, *Kindred Spirits*.

⁸ McElroy, Susan Chernak, *Animals as Guides for the Soul: Stories of Life-Changing Encounters*, (New York: Ballantine), 1998, p. 6.

some aren't. Sometimes the way we interpret a behavior (such as a dog's pawing at me, leaning on me, pushing his head under my hand to make me pet him, or dancing around when I come home) is more about our own need than the animal's intention (I feel unconditionally loved, the dog feels he is making me do what he wants). Learning more about the animal behavior and ways of communicating, and making a conscious effort to identify and take back our projections and find out how the particular quality of an animal is also "me," is another way of unlearning speciesism.

Jon Katz's recent book, "The New Work of Dogs," describes his study of residents of his hometown, Montclair, New Jersey, and their dogs, over several years. In his book, he says, "Animals are not a substitute for people – they can show us things we lack in ourselves, and yet they need us to be us too."⁹ "Nothing that happens between humans and animals is separate from what happens in every other aspect of our human life. Who we are with animals mirrors who we are – our fears our joys, our dreams, our actions – in every other arena of our lives"¹⁰. Animals are not a way out, an excuse to avoid other people or ourselves. Our companion animals often allow us to do this, but they also carry a heavy burden in doing so. Becoming aware of this and trying to do our best to understand and value them for the unique beings they are, with their own nature, purpose, needs and wants, is another way we unlearn speciesism in our everyday lives.

Jon Katz observes in the book:

"Dog owners ... live in closer emotional proximity to dogs, I think, because we need them more than our grandfathers did. Because we are increasingly discontented, disaffected isolated, needy. Because we are lonelier. Because we feel powerless and vulnerable, removed from the people who run our work and civic lives. Because many of us hate our work and resent the people who make it so insecure. Families scatter: friends can let us down. More and more, we've turned to dogs when we need love or despair of unfulfilling lives, or face death"¹¹

Yet, as Katz also observes, we know so little and want to know so little about dogs, even when we live with them every day. Dogs have never been more regulated, controlled and separated from humans as they are now. Humans see them as people when they are not, attribute human emotions to them, overfeed them, under work them, make large, active dogs live in small apartments, refuse to train and educate them, beat them, abandon them, and prevent them from doing almost everything they naturally enjoy¹²

⁹ Katz, John, *The New Work of Dogs*, (New York: Villard Books), 2003.

¹⁰ McElroy, Susan Chernak, *Animals as Guides for the Soul: Stories of Life-Changing Encounters*, (New York: Ballantine), 1998. p.6).

¹¹ Katz, John, *The New Work of Dogs*, (New York: Villard Books), 2003. p. 207

¹² *Ibid*, p. 207.

Conclusion

There is so much more to be said about our relationship with animals. There are all kinds of relationships that we can have with them. These need not be intense, intimate, informative, meaningful. They may be casual.¹³ But I think that unlearning speciesism in large part hinges on relationship and communication, prompting us to reflect on where we need to change, and grow in love and acceptance for ourselves.

It is undeniable that animals need our help. But on the other hand we need their help too. In many ways, animals provide for us and our lifestyles, domestic animals these days often provide emotional and psychological services, as well as physical assistance and the work in the world that they have always done. I think that we need to acknowledge how much our society depends on them, and how much we owe them. Buddhist monks believe that it is not necessary to say thank you when they go on their rounds and beg for their daily food. It is a gift to enable others to give by receiving what is given. Like the people who give to the monks, animals give without expecting thanks. We enable the best in ourselves and the best for animals, by receiving their gifts and giving back to them, as ancient indigenous cultures have done for so long.

In his book “Kinship with the Animals,” Michael Tobias says that an “alternative to the nightmare of speciesism” is a “renaissance of interspecies communication and love”¹⁴ which, while idealistic, is also practical and expedient. Tobias speaks of the need to find “a willingness to confront the fantastic mystery of earth’s wilderness, right here, right now, to fall in love all over again with the *countless nameless others*” (my emphasis). Like Tobias, I see this as an invitation to start anew, rather than to try and reverse history or castigate ourselves for what has been done in the past.

The following exercise returns us to a connection with animals, as our ongoing guides and teachers in unlearning speciesism.

Exercise:

1. Close your eyes, and imagine that you gradually lose the capacity for normal communication as a human. You cannot speak or gesticulate, or make any facial expressions.
2. Silently send out an invitation to the “countless nameless others,” all the creatures of the earth. Invite any who so choose to come and spend time with you. It might be a creature whom you have positive feelings for, or one you have previously feared or disliked. Allow that creature to float out of the tide of thoughts and imaginings ...
3. Try to receive the gift of that creature, observing and absorbing his or particular way of being. Notice everything you can, who is this creature, what is he or she like (physical

¹³ Tobias, Michael, & Solisti-Mattelon, Kate, *Kinship with the Animals*. Hillsboro, Oregon: Beyond Words Publishing, 1998, p.315.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 317.

characteristics, energetic quality, movements)? How does he or she interact with you (or not)?

4. If you are both willing, see if you can join the creature in its way of being, move in the same way, see through the same eyes, smell, hear, taste, breathe the way the creature does.

5. Look at yourself through the creature's eyes and see if anything comes to your mind or heart...

Allow this to serve as a teaching to guide you in deepening your sense of kinship with all living beings.

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