

the HEALING POWER *of* ANIMALS



Creating a bond with our fellow animals enriches our lives and relationships with other humans.

Words by **Katrina Fox**



GETTY

While the human impact of the tragic earthquake in Haiti in January this year could not be underestimated, there were other living beings suffering too. Animal lovers around the world quickly rallied together to make sure the displaced and injured animals of Haiti were not forgotten amid the chaos.

International animal welfare groups formed the Animal Relief Coalition for Haiti to respond to the crisis, using funds raised to provide medical aid, food and shelter for the affected animals – helping to minimise their suffering and prevent their mistreatment during such desperate times. They were also on hand to help the many food-producing animals that are so vital to the Haitian farmers and civilians. Many goats and cows for example, had stopped producing milk due to the stress of the event, so the Animal Relief Coalition stepped in to distribute food to the farmers to tide them over through the worst and allow the animals to recover.

THE HUMAN-ANIMAL CONNECTION

Feeling an affinity with animals – whether it's empathy for a suffering animal in need, or reverence for the might of a humpback whale – can enrich our lives in many ways. “By observing or interacting with animals, I believe we can glimpse other worlds, worlds beyond our human perception and experience,” says Dr Annie Potts, co-director of the New Zealand Centre for Human-Animal Studies (NZCHAS) at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch. “Personally I find this really inspirational. Watching seagulls fly, for example. This is not an experience we can know ourselves, but we can glimpse how this is for another creature, and watching this difference in experience can open our own worlds up to myriad things: compassion towards another being, respect for their abilities, and best of all, we can experience wonder when we truly engage with another species.”

Connecting with an animal can change our lives in many ways. Those of us who are blessed to be the carers of dogs or the support staff of cats ►

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THE LOSS OF A PET

For some, the loss of a pet can be a traumatising and life-altering experience. But what pet owners must remember is that intense grief, as well as guilt, denial and anger are completely natural and normal responses; as are relief and numbness. Because no owner-pet relationship is the same, you must remember that there isn’t just one way of grieving. Family and friends of a person who has lost a pet should remember this, too, and offer their full support of how someone is handling their loss.

It is always advised to not replace your pet straight away. A good measure of when it’s the right time to start a relationship with a new pet is when you have reached the ‘acceptance’ phase of the grieving process, when you are no longer angry, depressed or guilty. Experts warn against getting a pet that looks like your former pet, as this could lead to you and your family comparing your new pet to your old pet.

If you have other pets, be prepared for them to notice the loss, too. It’s not just pets of the same species, either – cats grieve for dogs and dogs for cats. The Humane Society of the United States offers a few suggestions on coping with your grief: acknowledge your grief and give yourself permission to express it; reach out to others who can lend a sympathetic ear; write down what you’re feeling; prepare a memorial for your pet.

know the joy a four-legged friend can bring. If we’re depressed, lonely, stressed, upset or angry, the unconditional love and affection from a pet can help to alleviate these negative emotions.

ANIMALS AS THERAPY

Liam Creed, a British teenager, became a different person because of a dog. In his new book, *A Puppy Called Aero* (Hachette, \$35), he describes how he was able to overcome much of the “bad behaviour” associated with his Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). “Until a few years ago I was trouble,” he says. “I was close to getting thrown out of school ... At the weekends I would get up to mischief and would end up destroying something.” After training a puppy at Canine Partners – an organisation whose dogs go to live with disabled people, helping them in ways similar to guide dogs for the blind – Creed, now 18, was a changed boy. Working with Aero helped his confidence and allowed him to relax and control his behaviour. “Aero helped build the new Liam,” he says. “[The new Liam] is a thoughtful, confident friend, son, student and boyfriend. My transformation and new outlook on life are solely down to this amazing dog.”

The use of pet therapy – or Animal-Assisted Therapy – is not new. Dr Aubrey Fine, a US specialist in this field, has been using the technique for more than 30 years. In his book, *The Handbook on Animal-Assisted Therapy* (Academic Press, 2006), he writes: “In difficult periods within therapy, a client may be in need of comforting and reassurance. The presence of an animal may become that catharsis. The holding of an animal or the petting of an animal may act as a physical comforter and soothe many patients.” In Australia, the Delta Society runs a Pet Partners program where teams of volunteers with specially trained dogs visit hospitals and nursing homes. Julia Peake has been taking her two Delta dogs, labradoodles Lambert and Jedda, to visit residents at an aged-care facility in the central coast for the past two years. “We visit weekly and I alternate dogs,” says Peake. “We spend about two hours a visit. With some residents it is just a quick hello and a pat and others want to get the dogs to do tricks and feed them treats. For the elderly and the dementia patients our visits are a different stimulation from the norm. With the dementia patients, each time you go is the first time for them, so they ask the same questions over and over again, but at



Delta Society volunteer Julia Peake (right) with her dog Lambert visits residents at an aged-care facility in Australia's central coast.

least they are communicating and thinking of questions to ask.” Peake also reaped the benefits of her Delta dogs during a recent stay in hospital. “Just having the dogs visit me and being able to pat and stroke them made me feel so much better,” she says.

BEYOND PETS

It’s not just pets that can enrich our lives. Striking up a bond with so-called ‘farm’ animals can also be rewarding for us, according to author Jeffrey Masson. A former US resident, Masson, who has written several books on the emotional lives of farm animals, now resides in New Zealand. He describes a pig called Piglet who lived on a beach in Auckland and “made the sweetest sounds” during a full moon. “Her emotional life was particularly near the surface,” he says. “She always let you know what she was feeling; most of the time it was obvious from the smile on her face, especially when she was swimming or playing with her small human friends. Perhaps if we listen carefully enough to the songs that Piglet and her cousins sing at night to the moon, we may yet learn about emotions that could bring us a new and utterly undreamed of delight.”

Dr Annie Potts says humans can learn much from our feathered friends. “One of the key things we can learn from animals is how to simply enjoy life and not be burdened unduly by our very human concerns such as career, consumerism, property and so on,” she says. “I live with four chickens. When they go each day to the same section of the garden to dust-bathe, they spend ages preparing a bowl in the soil where they can roll around and scatter dirt all over their feathers. This is clearly an immensely enjoyable time for them: they make happy sounds and close their eyes with pleasure. We have tended to deny the significance of pleasure-seeking, fun and enjoyment in animals and this has been at our own peril. At moments like this, when observing the joy of another creature, I believe humans can connect with our own appreciation of happiness and fun. Animals bring perspective to our lives. They also teach us how to care for others and how to live for the moment.”

Then there are dolphins, renowned for encouraging a healing transformation in humans who swim with them. Rio Rossellini is an artist, originally from the UK, who lives in an eco-house in Kaikoura, New Zealand. So inspired was she by her experience of swimming with these beautiful creatures that she creates art featuring dolphins and other cetaceans. “It’s really hard to describe the emotions experienced during and after you have swum with a wild dolphin,” she says. Each encounter can be different. I can only say that overall you are filled with an incredible elation. It’s quite a euphoric feeling, long-lasting and easily recollected in dreams.”

Using the technique of ‘pointillism’ (where millions of hand-made dots make up the image), Rossellini creates paintings of cetaceans and other animals that she hopes will “gently nudge people’s consciences and inspire others to lead a humane and compassionate lifestyle” and regularly gifts prints of her work to help raise funds for organisations such as Sea Shepherd, Save Animals From Exploitation (SAFE) and the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Agency.

The human-animal bond can be a very special one. If we allow ourselves to feel compassion for all species, it’s easier to open our hearts to our fellow humans. “There are many studies showing that if children learn from an early age, through a companion or other animals, about caring, trusting, respecting and loving another being, they are more likely to also be respectful and caring of other humans,” says Dr Potts. “I believe it is very important for humans to learn how to care for and nurture others, human and non-human.”

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SEE
MINDFOOD GALLERY
View artist Rio Rossellini’s art, which uses the technique of ‘pointillism’, and features dolphins and other cetaceans.

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MINDFOOD.COM
Read an interview with Australian actor Lynda Stoner who gave up a career in the spotlight to campaign for animals.

RECOMMENDED READING



MARLEY & ME: LIFE AND LOVE WITH THE WORLD'S WORST DOG

By John Grogan
Hachette, \$25
Marley came into John and Jenny’s lives a reckless ball of energy. But just as he refused limits on his behaviour, they found his love and loyalty were boundless too.



THE PIG WHO SANG TO THE MOON

By Jeffrey Masson
Random House, \$15
Masson weaves history and scientific research with his own experiences to depict the value and emotional intelligence of farm animals, and the happiness they experience when allowed to live according to their nature.



A PUPPY CALLED AERO

By Liam Creed
Hachette, \$35
Creed shares the story of his struggle with ADHD and how he thought he was sure to be a failure until he met Aero, the puppy who transformed his life and gave him the focus to understand how he could control his own behaviour.