

Tele with Animals

by Sara Crane

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I have always loved animals. From early childhood I persistently brought home strays, nursed forsaken fledglings and spent many hours observing creatures in their natural environments.

One of the joys in discovering psychodrama was the encouragement it gave me to expand my psychodramatic animal roles. The steely hawk-eye view and the ancient wisdom of the tuatara serve me well in professional settings.

In the therapeutic work I undertake with children there are sometimes opportunities to utilise the relationships children make with animals to increase their warm-up to a role, enhance their creativity and assist them to come up with enabling solutions to stuck situations.

While in real life we cannot completely reverse roles with animals and know all that they experience, we can do this in psychodrama – using surplus reality to explore the role relationship. The fact that we don't know what animals experience can be

used to develop creativity in children in their relationships with animals. Imagination is often very fully engaged, as the child invents what the animal feels and what it might say.

There is room for a directness in relationships with animals that may be harder to achieve with another human being. A well-loved pet is perceived as not holding grudges and always being pleased to see you. This quality of relationship with an animal can strengthen the roles that bring about self-belief and self-confidence in the child.

Tele is a two-way flow of feeling between those in relationship – which can be positive, negative or neutral. Tele in relationships with animals sometimes has greater simplicity than in those with people. The child feels positive towards the bird as she feels the soft down of a baby chick or gosling. She has the experience of positive feeling coming from the animal as a dog wags its tail or a cat purrs.

I have noticed time and time again how the client's level of warm-up to relationship increases markedly when I bring my dog to



therapy sessions. A withdrawn or hostile child is easily able to respond to a dog they perceive as friendly. Experiencing the dog's presence engenders a new response in the child previously prone to relating to others from coping or fragmenting roles.

However, there are also instances in which negative tele is present in the relationship;

for instance when a child is frightened by a dog who barks loudly or when a cat scratches the child, doesn't come towards them or runs away.

Six-year-old Sharon brought her pet parakeet to visit me.

When Polly wouldn't sit on her shoulder she shouted at her. Her mother yelled at

Sharon and Polly flew up and settled on the curtain. Sharon promptly shook the curtain wildly trying to dislodge her.

I suggested to Sharon that she could have a turn being a bird. She took up the role of the pirate's favourite parrot and, selecting a penguin puppet to help her warm up to the role, she became a very raucous bird. As the bird, she liked being sung to by the pirate's friend, who was cooking sausages. As the pirate she was a determined dictator.

After the enactment I ask Sharon what sort of song she thought Polly would like sung to her. She suggested 'Miss Polly had a dolly' and that we could sing 'sweetly' so Polly would know we are kind and we wouldn't chase her. When Sharon climbed on the sofa and put out her hand the parakeet willingly clambered on her arm and nestled into her shoulder.

Her increased spontaneity and creativity brought out a different response in Polly. If I hadn't intervened at the point when Sharon shook the curtain it is probable that a more negative tele towards Polly would have been established.

People can use their relationships with

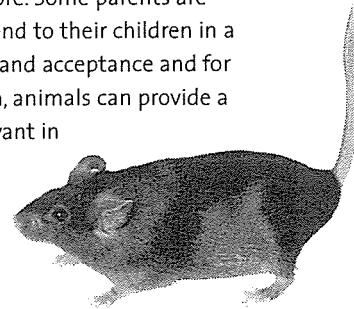
animals to escape from human relationships or as a substitute for human contact. I recall a childhood neighbour whose very aggressive St Bernard dog prevented anyone from visiting her; and how she eventually gave up work to look after the dog.

We may use the relationship with a loved pet to comfort and soothe ourselves in a way that increases and enhances our positive warm up to relationship. For many elderly people who live on their own, pets assist them to live with their human aloneness and act as a focus for meaningful connections with others. Similarly, with children, the right pet can provide a context for needed abilities to develop.

Jason was a large, poorly coordinated six year old who had the overdeveloped roles of boisterous demander, piratical invader and frustrated boxer. With his pet mouse 'Whitey' some embryonic and underdeveloped roles grew. I witnessed a tender nurturer, delicate precise handler and gentle considerate planner. Provided with the opportunity to relate to a vulnerable creature in a new and spontaneous way, Jason started to develop the roles of joyful playmate and cooperative friend with myself and with his mother.

There was a magic moment when he took up his mother's suggestion of giving Whitey a whole small apple to eat. Whitey couldn't get his teeth into the apple and it kept rolling away. So Jason got us to make a hole in the apple to 'start it off' and then wedge it firmly so it wouldn't roll away. This started off a series of creative innovations to the mouse house in which the three of us participated. Jason gave us very clear directions while gently holding and stroking Whitey and letting him know what was happening to his house.

There is something more. Some parents are simply not able to attend to their children in a way that conveys love and acceptance and for some of these children, animals can provide a substitute. This is relevant in therapeutic work with adults.



Frances, a young quiet woman attending her first psychodrama workshop, was setting out her original social atom with a view to speaking out to her father. As she concretised the hostile relationships between herself, her mother and her older siblings, her confidence in herself diminished.

The context for the scene was the farm in Central Otago where she had grown up, so I inquired if there were any pets or animals with whom she had had a positive relationship. Immediately she remembered her dog with warmth and delight.

When she role-reversed with the black and white collie dog, his playful personality altered the emotional tone of the setting. Strengthened by this relationship, she was

able to move forward and address each of her family members directly, using the collie as a supportive double.

During the sharing phase other group members recalled animals whom they have experienced as understanding, listening and affectionate; at times in otherwise sterile environments.

In conclusion, the potential for playfulness and love can be expressed through many varied experiences of relating to animals. The revolting vigour of our pigs' appetites, the mounting tension as harriers scan our valley for prey, the glorious evensong of the bell-bird all feed my joy in life. So in my work with others I carry forward an alertness to this magic.

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