

Better Together

how the animals we love can inspire our creativity
and transform our shared lives

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Acknowledgements

Those familiar with the work of Sanaya Roman (*Living with Joy*) and of Esther and Jerry Hicks (*The Law of Attraction, Ask and It Is Given*) will recognize some of the 'Orin' and 'Abraham' teachings in this abstract. These and many other authors have inspired me and guided my thinking over the years.

In no particular order, they also include Candace Pert, PhD (*Molecules of Emotion, Everything You Need to Know to Feel Go(o)d*), Bruce Lipton, PhD (*The Biology of Belief*), Gregg Braden (*Secrets of the Lost Mode of Prayer*), Pema Chodron (*When Things Fall Apart*), Alan Watts (*This is It, The Joyous Cosmology*), Neil Douglas-Klotz (*Prayers of the Cosmos, The Hidden Gospel*), the many poems of Rumi, and Ursula Le Guin's beautiful translation of *The Tao te Ching*.

You see, the concepts I discuss here are as old as the hills. They just haven't been the predominant 'rules of the game' we humans have been playing. But as Victor Hugo observed:

*"Greater than the tread of mighty armies
is an idea whose time has come."*

Drawn Together

It's a simple fact that we animal lovers are drawn to animals in a way that others don't understand and we can't explain very well. Nor do we feel any particular need to explain. It's just the way we're made, and we wonder what on earth is wrong with people who don't like animals!

It's as if animals have a tractor beam that draws us inexorably to them. We may be moved — our mood brightened, our heart lifted, our mind expanded — by spending time in nature or by music, art, dancing, surfing, gardening, cooking, ... any number of things; but animals hold a special place in our hearts and thus in our lives.

And while we love and care about animals in general, and we may have a decided preference for one species and even one breed, we are inexplicably drawn to certain *individuals* in particular, and we form deep and lasting connections with these special ones.

Often, the connection is instantaneous, such as when a certain puppy or kitten in a litter is so clearly the one for us. Other times, the bond develops gradually. I suspect that what makes the difference is how open we are at the time. That was certainly the case with me and my beloved dog, Miss Lilly. It took me a while to “get with the program” and to care for her so deeply. It took me much, much longer to understand the true nature and value of our friendship.

It is now my view that we are palpably drawn together because we are meant to find one another and be part of each other’s life as mutual friends, helpers, guardians, and guides. In this regard, our animal soul friends are no different from our human soul friends — our *Anam Cara*, as Irish theologian John O’Donohue labelled these precious friendships.

These special animals come into our lives at a time and in a way that is significant and unique to each of us. So, too, their departure. Everything in between is likewise significant and unique to us. Each of our stories is different, but one thing is common to all:

These special animals come into our lives and change *everything*.

Most of all, they change *us*...

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We’d love them anyway, because that’s our nature. But there’s a distinct advantage to having these special animals in our lives: they make our lives more interesting, more fun, more rich, and vastly more satisfying.

In short, our lives are *better* together.

The key element is this:

Loving them, and being loved in return, makes us *feel good*; and *that* changes *everything*.

when I feel good

When I feel good, I’m more creative and confident, inspired and intrepid.

When I feel good, I trust life — and myself — more.

When I feel good, I know what to do, and I know that it will turn out well, even when the process takes me *via* “the scenic route.”

When I feel good, I know when to act. Just as importantly, I know when to *wait*.

When I feel good, waiting is fine; waiting is even an enjoyable state as I eagerly anticipate what it is I’m waiting for.

When I feel good, I revel in the unfolding of my creations, of the things I’m inspired to create. I enjoy the process, including the pace and manner in which it unfolds, the course it takes.

When I feel good, my health improves, along with my sense of well-being.

When I feel good, I’m more kind and compassionate.

When I feel good, I’m a better writer, veterinarian, partner, neighbour, daughter, sister, friend, colleague, customer... *All* of my relationships, with others *and* myself, improve.

In short, when I feel good, I’m filled with love and clarity, peace and power.

when I don't feel good

Of course, the *opposite* happens when I *don't* feel good. I know I'm not alone here; for many of us, that's an all-too-familiar state. We don't make good decisions in that state.

When I *don't* feel good, I may be timid or indecisive; and when I *do* decide, I do so out of fear, from a sense of lack or limitation. Or I push ahead, forcing things, when it would have been better to wait.

When I *don't* feel good, I often become impatient, frustrated, and even angry when the thing I want doesn't materialize when and how I think it should. I'm quick to lose faith in my vision *and* myself, in my ability to create the life I want.

When I *don't* feel good, I act from an imagined sense that all I can expect or hope to achieve is only what someone like me has achieved, and no more; perhaps not even that much. Oh, I may fantasize about more for myself, but I don't really believe I can have it, or I might get it only after years of struggle and hard work, and a great deal of luck.

In short, when I *don't* feel good, I imagine a much smaller and far more difficult life for myself.

feel good first

When we take the time to *feel good first*, before making any decisions, before taking any actions, we open to the greater part of ourselves, which is where our creativity and courage reside, and from where comes our inspiration and our impetus to act on it.

When I don't feel good, I immediately dismiss what may be good ideas — or I don't have them at all.

When I feel good, good ideas pop effortlessly into my mind; and before too long, others drop in to support or expand on them.

If I harbor any *contradictory* thoughts about what I want, such as doubting my ability to create it or my worthiness to have it, I slow or even subvert my progress, and the thing I want is either very slow to materialize, or it never appears at all.

But when I feel good, I'm so sure of these good ideas that I enthusiastically head in that direction, proceeding with absolute confidence as I move steadily and inexorably toward whatever it is that I'm wanting to create.

When we feel good, we see all the good things we already have in our lives, and that we are already surrounded by things we love, as we enjoy the prospect of receiving even more.

When I don't feel good, I may not even look around me; and if I do, I see only what I don't have.

When I feel good, I'm astonished by what I already have around me, all without me even trying.

The natural world is particularly good at that cheeky little trick: no matter the season, I'm always surrounded by wonderful things I've done absolutely nothing to create, earn, or otherwise "deserve." We all are. All the time. Whether we notice it or not.

The animals we love are another great example of how we are already surrounded by lovely things.

When we feel good, we see possibilities that couldn't occur to us when we're closed off from this inspiration, when we don't feel good.

When I feel good, I see clearly where I want to go, and I fully expect to get there. I may not yet see the entire path to my destination, but the first step is obvious; and from there, the next, and the next, and the one after that... I know where I'm going, that I will inevitably arrive, and that the journey itself will be wonderful!

When we feel good, worry just can't abide, so we proceed with confidence and enthusiasm.

Enthusiasm is infectious, so when we feel good and act from that confidence, we attract the very people who are best able to help us achieve our goals. Conversations spontaneously occur that create wonderful and helpful connections and which expand our horizons even further as others share *their* inspirations with us.

When we feel good, thoughts arise that hadn't occurred to us before, and impulses to do things that, in the moment, may seem far removed from our goal, but which, in retrospect, were the perfect next step toward our goal.

Once I surrendered to "the scenic route," these unusual or unexpected twists and turns got to be rather fun. Once I learned to trust the process and give myself over to it, things got *very* interesting! And *that* is the stuff of life!

Not only do we not need to fear or resist these unexpected occurrences, we can take them as directions, guiding us to the best path we could take to achieve our goals.

When we feel good, our goals may even change, as we imagine a much bigger life for our self than we ever could have dreamed in our closed-off state of worry, doubt, or other limitation.

When I'm in that open, feel-good state of mind, it's a common experience for me to have thoughts along the way that make what I started out to do even better.

Those deviations from the original course used to really bother me, as I thought they made me weak-minded, indecisive, or uncommitted. Now I look forward to these occurrences. Whether I'm writing or gardening or cooking or setting out on a hike or treating a patient, I often revise my original thought. My first thought is just that: initial, simply a starting point. A fundamentally good idea that might be made even better, if I let it.

When we feel good, we thus start to become all that we were always meant to be. At first, we may get only brief glimpses, but the more we do it and the longer we stay there each time, the more at home we become with this greater self, this bigger life, and the less we doubt both our worthiness and its inevitability.

The more we give our small selves over to it, the faster our lives change for the better. When we become stable in this feel-good state of mind, being there most of the time, our lives are transformed into something barely imaginable and practically unrecognizable from the meagre perspectives of our small selves.

That is the awesome power of feeling good.

And for us animal lovers, our animals are one of the fastest and surest routes to this feel-good state. They're a path of least resistance for us because we love them.

Better by Choice

To recap, our lives are made better by the animals we love, particularly by those with whom we share a close bond, the special ones. When we let them, they change everything because they help us get back to feeling good, and that opens the door to all manner of possibilities!

However, for many and perhaps even most of us, these moments of lightness — that wonderfully expansive feeling of love and clarity, peace and power, when we relax and smile and feel ourselves to be part of the whole universe — are only *occasional* and *fleeting*.

In our busy and at times hectic lives, with their endless demands and distractions, we too often ignore these beautiful moments. We quickly dismiss them or rush on past them as our scattered mind grasps onto something more "important" or urgent or otherwise compelling. Or we let ourselves feel them only on the weekend or on vacation.

And all too often, we miss these moments altogether.

But once we realize their importance, their tremendous power and their practical value to us, we can choose to *cultivate* these moments — to *look* for them and *revel* in them, as often and for as long as we can.

We can start by simply *noticing* when we feel good, and reminding ourselves of the power and value of this state of mind (and body).

We can then *savour* the feeling, letting it linger for as long as we can before our well-practiced habits of thought intrude and rob us of that lovely, lively peace we feel when we're in that wonderful state.

As we linger, we can let ourselves *slow down* for awhile, and come to some much-needed rest and relaxation, as we contemplate what it is that we want to do next. When we have a question we need answered or a decision to make, big or small, we can deliberately use the time we spend with our animals to help us get back to feeling good. *Then ask, then decide, and then act.*

Taking the time to relax and feel good is a sure way to let inspiration flow, along with the confidence needed to act on any ideas that occur to us in that expansive state. It's the only way that great ideas can pop into my mind. I'm sure I'm not the only one who experiences these moments of expansion and inspiration when I'm in the shower, driving a familiar route, or taking a walk.

"Necessity" may be "the mother of invention," but we still need to create enough space in our mind for something new to be conceived.

The longer I can linger in that space, the bigger or clearer the idea becomes and the more confidence I have in it, and in myself. Before long, other ideas appear which support it, so I'm more willing and able to act on the inspiration. I'm also less inclined to give up too soon when the outcome I envision doesn't immediately materialize or doesn't look the way I thought it would or think it should.

In other words, the more often I find myself in that feel-good state and the longer I stay there each time, the more trust I have in the ideas that occur to me there, and the more likely the thing is to become a reality, because I'm better able to proceed with confidence and competence toward it.

Better in Return

When we feel good, our animals' lives are made better, because they too thrive on feeling good, particularly on feeling loved and cherished. In addition, when we feel good, we're a lot easier to live with. We take better care of ourselves and of everything else in our lives, especially those we love. We're more attuned to our animals' needs and we're better able to attend to those needs. So, all of this works to *their* benefit as well.

I must admit here that I had some help in writing [the book on which this abstract is based]: a fluffy cat, who lives in my imagination, steadfastly sitting to my right, waiting for me to return to the computer and finish the book. Whenever I'd get mired in the mental toil of it, I'd take a break, which sometimes stretched into weeks. No matter what, the fluffy cat patiently waited for me to be ready to get back to it. This cat also kept me on track whenever I got lost in the past. [*Better Together* is part memoir, part instruction manual.]

One day when I was particularly bogged down, I asked this cat what she most wants me to say; what this book is really all about from our animals' perspective. Here is her reply:

"We want you to be happy. We *love* it when you're happy. We *need* you to be happy.

"We are here to help you to be happy, to remind you that your true state is happiness. We have our own lives, our own experiences, our own interests, our own difficulties, our own histories, our own lifespans; but we are here in yours for our mutual benefit and our mutual *enjoyment*.

"Take full advantage of our presence, and it will make both our lives much more enjoyable."

Ahh. So, that would make us *their* soul friends in return. I was Miss Lilly's soul friend, and she was mine. That is, after all, how friendship works.

As the fluffy cat pointed out, our animals have their own lives, and that includes their own stresses and their own needs. Even if we bred them ourselves and thus have known them from birth, our animals arrive with their own histories, partly genetic inheritance and partly acquired through life experience. In addition to the particular requirements of their species, they have their own personalities, proclivities, and interests, their own challenges and difficulties, and their own lifespans and experiences of birth and death.

an example: mast cell tumour

[An example I discuss at length in the book is how a small, raised mass — presumably a mast cell tumour — on Miss Lilly's flank waxed-and-waned over a dozen years or more.]

Looking back, were I to have charted the fluctuations in my emotional state on the same axis as those of Miss Lilly's lump, the two wavy lines would have been pretty closely matched. Whenever we were (which is to say *I* was) particularly and protractedly stressed, whether I was predominantly anxious or depressed, her lump and the surrounding skin became reddened and swollen (signs of mast cell activation). It all settled back down again as things settled down in our lives.

Mast cells are interesting things. In medicine, we're used to thinking of them as being involved in the expression of allergy; and for most of us, that's about the extent of our knowledge and interest. However, mast cells are up to far more than that.

Most of them spend their adult lives at our boundaries, particularly the boundaries between our tissues and the outside world (e.g., in the skin and in the walls of the digestive and respiratory tracts). So, first and foremost they are monitors and sentinels, standing guard and warning against things that might harm us.

Mast cells also play protective roles against parasites and microbes, and they actively participate in wound healing.

Even more interesting are their roles in immune tolerance, which is the discerning capability of the immune system to distinguish between friend and foe, and in the fascinating two-way communication between the goings-on in the gut and the brain (the gut-brain axis).

Unlike most other immune cells, mast cells are normally found in the brain, doing for the brain what they do for the rest of us. There is also a well-established link between the skin, the gut, and the brain. And why not? Everything is connected to everything else in the body, and it all works — and breaks down — as an integrated whole.

So, in the form of a small, pink, hairless lump on the side of her belly, Miss Lilly's highly sophisticated sensory system was sending me updates about how safe (or not) she felt at any given time. And I missed them. Oh, I noticed them, of course; I even worried about them at times. But I didn't appreciate their significance or their value to us.

How interesting that the medical research field pioneered by Dr Candace Pert, author of *Molecules of Emotion* and *Everything You Need to Know to Feel Go(o)d*, is called psycho-neuro-immunology. I read both books while all this was going on, and still I missed Miss Lilly's messages to me, manifested in her skin by her own molecules of emotion.

I occasionally attempted to make the lump or the swelling in the surrounding tissue disappear, because I didn't like it being there; but I was missing the whole point of its existence and its behaviour. Miss Lilly would have been better served by me attending to my own life, to the things that stressed *me*, because *I* became the thing that stressed *her* the most.

Conclusion

We can *transform* our shared lives by making a decision to enjoy *more* of the lovely, lively peace we now only *sometimes* experience with our animals.

The more we do it, the easier it is to find and the longer it lasts. Over time, we gradually change our habitual setpoint to a more positive frame of mind, and all of the good things that flow from it benefit both us and the animals we love. In short:

We are better together.