Not a pet: Exploring the intersectionality of spirituality and animal companionship

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Saybrook University
King & Associates Psychotherapy
Objectives

• About Betz
• Disclaimers
• Definition of terms
  • Spirituality
  • Animal companion
• Martin Buber’s “I and Thou” vs. “I and it”
• Eckhart Tolle’s “Guardians of Being”
• Jean Houston’s “Mystical Dogs”
• Qualities of spiritually focused animal companionship (SFAC)
Disclaimers

• This presentation is not theological or philosophical in intent or scope.

• The presenter does not presume to accurately capture or present the totality of
  • Martin Buber’s philosophies
  • The concept of spirituality
  • The religion and spirituality paradigm
  • Spiritual writings about animal companions and the lessons they offer

• The presenter simply invites participants to have I-Thou relationships with their animal companions, while offering the following suggestions.
About Betz

• https://psych.padlet.org/bking227/h32mzeyfrdnp68ot
Religion & Spirituality

Increase of ‘spiritual but not religious’ is broad-based

% of U.S. adults who identify as spiritual but not religious

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2017</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/ethnicity</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2017</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>15</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party affiliation</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2017</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dem/lean Dem.</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rep/lean Rep.</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Animal Companions

• An animal with whom one shares a relationship of mutual regard grounded in the belief that both parties are equal in expressions of divinity. Examples include
  • The animals who share our homes and hearts
  • Animals in our nearby natural world
  • Animals who help us in work, life and play
The intersectionality of spirituality and animal companionship

Relationships with the animals in one’s life which honor the shared sanctity of trans-species encounters while recognizing the inherent sanctity of the relationship.
I and Thou
by Martin Buber

• Existential philosopher known for his philosophy of dialogue (which posited that the fundamental fact of human existence is a dialogue taking place between two people, in what he called the “sphere of between”).

• In 1923, authored Ich und Du (I and Thou).
  • Life finds meaningfulness in I-Thou relationships with others
  • Each person has the divine within
  • To encounter the divine fully, one must fully encounter the other, and be fully encountered by them.
Buber in 10 minutes
(2014) Dodson, E. via You Tube
## I-it vs I-Thou

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pets  (I-it)</th>
<th>Animal Companions (I-Thou)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Speciesism - the assumption of human superiority leading to the exploitation of animals</td>
<td>Sacred recognition of mutuality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A distracted and only partially present focus on another</td>
<td>A fully present encounter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infused by past knowing and shortcuts</td>
<td>Here and now</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An objectifying way of viewing another as a means to an end.</td>
<td>Relational, reciprocal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control seeking.</td>
<td>Spontaneous and vulnerable - All moments of growth require another, and a genuine encounter.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I-it with pet animals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I-it</th>
<th>pet animals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Speciesism</td>
<td>“The emotional support animal phenomenon” – Animal must support person, often to its own detriment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A distracted and only partially present focus on another</td>
<td>Irritation when pet wants attention. Blame when pet has an accident. Use of shock collars and fear tactics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infused by past knowing and shortcuts</td>
<td>Not noticing subtle animal body language messages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An objectifying way of viewing another as a means to an end. Transactional.</td>
<td>Views pet as lesser than human. Pet ownership.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control seeking.</td>
<td>Requires pet to exhibit specific behaviors to receive affection or avoid pain.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# I-Thou with Companion Animals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I-Thou</th>
<th>Companion Animals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relational, include mutuality and reciprocity</td>
<td>Animal gets half the bed (or more!!)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A fully present encounter</td>
<td>Mindful petting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Here and now</td>
<td>Mindful walk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognition of the totality of being and the Divine within.</td>
<td>Views, with deep gratitude, the companion animal as sentient, autonomous and miraculous.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spontaneous and vulnerable - All moments of growth require another, and a genuine encounter.</td>
<td>Playing when invited. Petting when invited. Engaging in a two-way relationship similar to those with other house mates = polite, aware, nurturing, positive, equal.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Guardians of Being
by Ekhart Tolle


• At the age of 29, experienced an ‘inner transformation’ in which he found peace ‘with everything’ and began teaching others to do so.

• Power of Now: a guide to spiritual enlightenment (1977)
• A New Earth: Awakening to your soul’s purpose (2005)
• Guardians of Being: Spiritual teachings from our dogs and cats. (2011)
  • ”Power of now” teachings paired with comic artwork from “Mutts” creator Patrick McDonnell.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_C6CnSNdTuk
Everything natural — every flower, tree, and animal — has important lessons to teach us if we would only stop, look, and listen.
Mystical Dogs by Jean Houston

• An American scholar regarded as one of the principal founders of the Human Potential Movement.

• LSD research

• Foundation for Mind Research with husband Robert Masters

• 2004 Mystical dogs
  • Mystic Evelyn Underhill’s 8 stages of the mystic’s path & shows how the dogs across her life were her teachers.
Mystical Dogs by Jean Houston

1) Awakening – Chickie, Corgi-Collie, in childhood
   • awareness of interconnectedness

2) Purification – Champ, Fox terrier teen & young adult
   • Removing obstacles of the unexamined life

3) Illumination – Titan, 230 pound bull-mastiff
   • A blissful state of oneness

4) Voices & visions – Oliver, Airedale
   • Extra sensory perceptions become available

5) Contemplation & introversion – Zingua, Mastiff and Barnaby, Akita
   • A turning inward, contemplation

6) Ecstacy & rapture – Moondog “rare white boxer”
   • An ecstatic reception of the Divine

7) The dark night of the soul – Nova, Xolo (sholo)
   • Remaining shadows and habits of ‘lesser self’ are faced

8) Union with the One Reality. Luna, white German Shepherd
   • Non dual existence.
**Bodyhood and Being-With**  

*Being-With* refers to the ways in which women honor the spiritually holy moments of their daily life while negotiating the polarities of their existence.

- Awareness of the Hallowed-Here-and-Now
- Recognition of Sacred Relationships
- Synthesizing Polarities
Personal Bill of Rights*

1. I have the right to ask for what I want
2. I have the right to say no to requests or demands I can’t meet.
3. I have the right to express all of my feelings, positive and negative.
4. I have the right to change my mind.
5. I have the right to make mistakes and to not be perfect.
6. I have the right to follow my own values and standards.
7. I have the right to say no to anything when I feel I am not ready, it is unsafe, or it violates my values.
8. I have the right to determine my own priorities.
9. I have the right NOT to be responsible for other’s behaviors, actions, feelings or problems.
10. I have the right to expect honesty from others.
11. I have the right to be angry at someone I love.
12. I have the right to be uniquely myself.
13. I have the right to feel scared and say “I’m afraid”.
14. I have the right to say “I don’t know”.
15. I have the right not to give excuses or reasons for my behavior.
16. I have the right to be playful and frivolous.
17. I have the right to be healthier than those around me.
18. I have the right to be in treated with dignity and respect
19. I have the right to change and grow.
20. I have the right to be happy.

Spiritually focused activities to share with animal companions

- Intentional petting, brushing, caressing
- Animal-led walks
- Enrichment and play activities
- Sharing feelings with the AC
- Accepting love from the AC
- Giving love to the AC
- Understanding AC’s communications accurately (training)
- Including AC’s in family rituals and traditions, and honoring AC’s rituals and traditions
Spiritually focused rituals and traditions to share with AC’s

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Human rituals and traditions</th>
<th>Animal companion rituals and traditions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Holidays</td>
<td>• Food rituals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Birthdays</td>
<td>• Play rituals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Seasonal traditions</td>
<td>• Others?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Vacation traditions and rituals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Seasonal enrichment</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• End of life rituals</td>
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Kukar Tihar

• **Kukur Tihar** - an annual Hindu festival originating from Nepal, falling on the second day of the festival of Tihar (around October or November). On this day, people worship dogs to please Yama, the god of death, as they are considered to be his messengers. Dogs are decorated with tilaka (a red paste) and wear flower garlands around their necks. Worshippers offer them various foods including meat, milk, eggs, and dog food. It is considered a sin if someone acts disrespectfully to a dog on this day.

Here’s a lovely example of that ceremony -
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WWvMrbULz48
Spiritually Focused Animal Companionship (SFAC – King 2022)

• Recognizes that companion animals (AC’s) are sentient beings with free will.
• Recognizes AC’s as equals rather than subordinates.
• Recognizes AC’s as family members rather than possessions and
• Recognizes the autonomy of AC’s while also keeping them safe.
• Recognizes that human-animal interactions with AC’s can be spiritually informed encounters
*Spiritually focused animal companionship requires a COMPANION

- C – Considers AC a sentient being with free will
- O= Observes & responds to AC’s feelings.
- M= Mindfully interacts with AC in the present here & now moment
- P= Pursues ongoing training in AC communication and body language
- A= Allegiance to AC is a protected promoted core value
- N= Nurtures ongoing enrichment activities with AC
- I = Interdependency and mutuality of relationship is honored.
- O= Observes AC’s body, body language, elimination and habits closely
- N= Nourish AC’s body (food) mind (enrichment) and spirit (love & wonder)

*Spiritually focused animal companionship (SFAC) King, 2022