

[ [September/October 2002](#) ]

## The Healing Power of Animals

by Dr. Glenn Key

*Animals forgive and forget so quickly. Maybe God did give them to us to teach us love like we have never known.*

In spite of all that is written about love, there are millions of people who rarely, if ever, say the emotion-filled words, "I love you." There are millions more who never hear those high-energy words, and still more who never feel love. Dr. Dean Ornish based his best-selling book *Love and Survival* on a single but powerful idea: that "our survival depends on the healing power of love, intimacy and relationships."

The healing power of love is not limited to human love. Indeed, because of growing interest in alternative approaches to healing and wholeness, researchers are now exploring the healing effects generated by dogs in convalescent homes, tropical fish as stress busters for the anxious and depressed, and animal relationships for people recovering from heart attacks.

### Who's Healing Who?

Larry Dossey cites a study at Duke University that involved Hugh Brady, a young boy who kept homing pigeons as pets. Hugh always put an ID tag on each bird's leg to identify it. Once he found a wounded pigeon in the garden and helped him heal. Hugh became ill the following winter and was rushed to a hospital two hundred miles away for surgery. One bitter cold, snowy night he heard a tapping at the hospital window. When the nurse opened the window, a pigeon flew in and landed on Brady's chest. Checking the leg tag, Brady found it was the same homing pigeon he had befriended. However, the pigeon had not traveled home, but to a place he had never been -- exactly where his friend needed his love and healing.

In *Horses Don't Lie*, Chris Irwin recounts many instances where working with horses has produced love and healing. One story involved Linda Myers, a counselor for troubled adolescents and one of the first certified therapists of Equine-Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA). One afternoon, Linda arrived late at her indoor riding arena and found Sherri, a girl who had been sexually abused as a child and currently recovering from chemical dependency, being held upside down and made the brunt of sexual jokes by some boys.

Linda's class that day was to learn how to make a horse go forward by approaching from the back end and how to make the horse stop by standing in

front of it. The boys learned quickly how to make the horse go, but none of them could make the horse stop. When Sherri planted her little feet in the sand and held out her arms, the horse couldn't move. Sherri learned she could say "NO" to the horse and also to her peers. The love and respect she gave and received from the horse helped to heal her previously troubled life.

### **Live Longer, Get A Pet**

Dr. Michael Roizen believes that pet owners stay younger longer. During research for a book on the subject, he recalled a 1980 study of heart attack survivors that found the survival rate within the year of the heart attack was 94% for pet owners and only 72% for non-pet owners.

Everyone, including animals, have some wounds that need healing. While cures for a variety of illness are available, real healing comes from within, often when a willing person or animal reaches out for love. Almost every animal lover has a story of a beloved pet that made a profound difference in his or her life.

Becca had just finished her Master of Library Science degree in Missouri and was moving to Texas to start her new job. The men who were coming to load her belongings were late in arriving. In frustration, Becca ran down the stairs to meet them. In doing so, she fell and tore all the tendons in her right ankle.

Becca arrived at her new home popping pain pills and wobbling on crutches. While the movers unloaded the truck, they pulled out a chair for Becca to sit and supervise. She had not been sitting long when a small tuxedo-colored black and white cat with white whiskers jumped into her lap, purred and went to sleep. Though Becca always loved cats, she had planned to get two pedigree cats, not some stray. Settling into her new house, Becca fed the cat, but kept the door cracked so he could go back where he came from. The little cat never left. It was not long before another stray cat "figured out that she ran a good bed and breakfast" and moved in. Becca now has her two new cats. Although neither is the pedigree she expected, both cats gave Becca the healing love that not only helped her wounded body, but the trauma of a major move and new job.

Ruthie had been a dog trainer and had shown dogs in many events. Her personal favorite was her 150-pound, five-year-old, Newfoundland dog. When her marriage of seven years ended in divorce, Ruthie had many periods of sadness, loneliness and crying. One day, while lying on her couch crying, Ruthie's huge Newfoundland dog jumped up beside her and licked her tears. Ruthie realized that with the love of her favorite pet, she would never be unloved.

### **A Two-Way Street**

Although animals can provide healing love for their owners, sometimes the owners have to be the first to give the love. Beth calls Calico her miracle baby. When the cat showed up on Beth's doorstep one morning, she was emaciated, sullen and withdrawn. She looked as if she had been nursing, because she was so thin and folds of skin hung down from her stomach. The cat was unable to connect with people except when she was being fed, which was often. In fact, food had to be monitored carefully because she ate till it looked like she would pop. Calico did not like to be petted, except when she wanted water. In addition, she did not know how to bathe herself or do any grooming, which is unusual for a cat. Calico did not associate with anyone and slept alone.

Britches, Beth's other cat, is very fussy, clean, affectionate and desirous of lots of attention, especially at bedtime. Calico began watching Britches' actions and the affection she and Beth shared. Beth made a special effort to talk to Britches and pet her when she saw that Calico was watching. Calico soon became a copycat, and seemed to release the trauma of her past. She began to ask for attention and got it. Calico is now a loving, affectionate cat. In fact, she cleans not only herself but, at times, also Britches. Although Beth does not know what had happened to Calico, she does know that this cat's remarkable healing and changes in personality and behavior were the result of the love extended to her.

Is it possible that God gave us pets to teach us unconditional love? We can scold, punish, and isolate our pets when they have not been as good as we think they should be, and yet when we go back to them in just a few minutes they are eagerly licking our faces or purring in our laps. Animals forgive and forget so quickly. Maybe God did give them to us to teach us love like we have never known. What a wonderful healthy group of people we all would be if we could forgive and heal and love as quickly as our pets!



*Dr.*

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