

# Animals Are People Too

By Pietro Abela

When Sharon booked a session for her dog Lily, though I responded with a willingness to help, I was a little unsure inside. It had been over ten years since I had last worked on an animal in a professional way, and in those days, I would only give straight hands-on energy work to an animal. However, ten years ago I was actively experimenting with finding a counseling modality that would successfully compliment bodywork. I researched incessantly, practicing my body-based communication approach with numerous psychological, emotional and physical conditions. I put particular emphasis on observing the various behavioural nuances and unconscious patterns people used as they lived out their lives. I was finding that the body signals a person gives is far more accurate in telling the real story. That unconscious body languaging was a doorway beneath to discover ways people organize themselves beneath their symptoms, discomfort and lifestyle choices they brought into my session room.

Now I had found my niche. My work had become an extension of a truth, that human behaviour told the stories of people's lives past and present, and BodySpeak, a communication tool I had created to gently influence internal change, had become a second language for me, one I could switch on and off with ease.

But would it work for animals? I had so far not found any limitations for the use of ARC-work. It had proved successful in the primary and secondary support of everyday physical and emotional issues had. As well, it had proved to successfully support conditions of mental health cases, couple counseling, children's issues, extreme pain, disease and discomfort, chronic addictions, depression as well as the myriad of everyday cases involving the variety of stresses that dominate people's lives. But would an animal be able to reach his or her health goals using a behavioural approach? I held uncertainty in one hand, but in the other I held a passionate curiosity. So when Sharon asked me to work on Lily I allowed passion to lead the way, and I accepted.

The first few minutes of meeting a client, especially a new one, is crucial. If there is a switch inside of me that turns on my observational skills, the switch is fully turned onto maximum in the first moments of meeting someone new. I observe such things as the client's walk: how she places her feet on the ground, the length of her steps, the weight put into each step, the gait, the body movement as she walks. Her talk: the intonation, words and syllable that are stressed and may contain emotional charge. I observe face colouration, movement of limbs, how the body is held, the person's overall energy. Am I looking to gain insight into the client's emotional history? No, I am merely gaining a sense of the client's "average" behaviour. It gives me a benchmark upon which to work with. Any change from this average behaviour during the session are probable indicators that some unresolved emotional charge exists somewhere in the client's story.

When Lily presented herself with doggy-style excitement at the front door, Sharon pointed out that this was unusual for her. Normally, I was told, she responds in a more threatened way. Sharon had already indicated to me that Lily had likely suffered some kind of trauma. She was overly sensitive and prone to attacks of traumatized behaviours. She exhibited, at times, fear and withdrawing as a frequent part of her behaviour.

Knowing this, I left my car making sure I modeled myself physically, emotionally and energetically to provide the utmost safety. My grounding was deep and solid, my energy field had been deliberately moved into a lower position, my heart was open and I exuded an aura of parental caring.

Though Lily seemed delighted to meet me within two minutes there was change in her behavioural rhythm. Lily's original movements towards me as she greeted me were what I would describe as linear - a movement forward and backwards. As we walked into the living room, with Lily leading, she began to walk in circular movements: taking a few steps forward, then circling around to see where I was. She did this repetitively. In addition, Lily's eyes had changed. On her greeting, her eyes were straight in their sockets, firm and secure. With the circular walk her eyes now looked up, so much so, the lower whites of her eyes were prominent. While her body was cowering, her eyes were too. Her behaviour was telling me she was uncertain and unsafe. In her own way she was letting me know that she was unwilling to allow me to walk behind her without seeing me and presumably keeping me in her sights. This dog was watching her back. From now on I decided to approach Lily, as much as was possible, head on so that she could see and observe me, allowing her to make choices for herself around me, rather than seemingly be at my mercy.

I now had two clear behaviours to work with as if there were now two functioning personality parts to Lily: the balanced functioning Lily, and now the traumatized Lily who acted out in a way that was grossly consistent to the safe loving environment she now lived in. I noticed when I stood up so that I was standing above her, Lily moved into her traumatized body pose: the circular movement with eyes almost in the back of her head. Now it was more intense. By now, I knew what had happened to her. I raised my hand slowly above my head and left it there. Lily circled, eyes were up and now she moved her belly closer to the floor, almost cowering.

Sharon and her husband had brought Lily home from an animal hospital. She was now six years old and had lived in her new home now for over a year. Sharon told me of incidents that had occurred in her new home, everyday events that indicated her sensitivity to noise, to changes in family behaviour and many inconsistencies in her day.

Using my knowledge of human behaviours from my clients work, I was beginning to suspect that Lily's previous owner was an alcoholic. Alcoholics are often prone to extreme and unpredictable behaviours. When sober they can be the nicest and most affable of people. When drunk a whole other far darker side can emerge. Thus the easy going, quiet, loving man after so many drinks could turn into someone judgmental and highly critical, mouthy and loud, needy and overly sad or angry, abusive and violent. To live with an alcoholic is to live with the unpredictable situation of never being sure when the tide is going to turn. You know it will turn when he drinks, but to what extremes he will go when he does drink is uncertain.

Lily was giving all the body signals of someone who did not in any way trust change and this was due to having lived with someone whose behaviours were highly unpredictable. She was a very loving, caring dog. Almost too loving in a co-dependent way. Almost as if she wanted to love me sufficiently to protect herself from the unpredictable behaviour that could emerge unexpectedly from me at any time. Children and spouses of alcoholics resort to the same self-protecting behaviours also. They hold onto the good times in the day, which may be the morning after the night of drinking, when after a

night's sleep the hangover has worn away and the alcoholic may be actually pleasant to be around. So the child or spouse becomes overly-loving and caring in both a desire to take advantage of the good time and to hopefully provide for his needs and steer him away from the drink and the emergence of that darker side.

Lily fitted that characterization. She had a wonderful loving side of her. I had the impression that she would absolutely anything for me, yet she was constantly looking over her shoulder in readiness for the dark side to emerge. I was convinced that though the previous owner was an alcoholic there had been times when this person showed caring to his or her dog, but there were times – and many of them – when she or he inflicted devastating violence on this poor creature.

When I ran my hands over Lily to assess her physical state of health it was clear that she suffered violence. One of her hips and legs had been damaged in a violent way. It could have been an accident, but from the emotional profile I had, for me, it was a confirmation of the violence she had suffered.

After again facing Lily for a few moments, face to face, showing open hands and stroking her in assuring ways, I placed my hands on the leg and hip, and ran healing energy. Lily sat upright, barely moving for a total of fifteen minutes. There was a sense that she knew what I was doing, that I was there to help her and that she wanted to get well. As I worked I could feel and sense the energy running deeper into her. As I did so there was a sense of uncovering and accessing deeper and deeper layers in time, as if we were both moving into the darker nether-reaches of her history. I began to feel sharp pain in my hands. The pain had a movement to it and was starting to release from her leg. If I was feeling this level of pain in my hand I knew that Lily would start to feel pain also. I had experienced the same working with people many times, that when I felt the pain, they invariably did too. The pain had an undercurrent of trauma attached to it: there was a quality to it that stretched into an emotional realm. For a person this meant that they might recall the memory to which the pain was associated. Lily was, at this point in her session, at a crossroads. If she did as people do, she would either endure a few minutes of both physical and emotional discomfort leading to the relief of a release and a relief, or she would attempt to block it out, sidestep it all and so the pain and accompanying trauma would stay as before, though looser since metaphorically speaking, the soil around it had been disturbed from the inroads made in the healing session.

I waited, while continuing to deeply run energy to see what would happen, to see what choice Lily would make. That she was traumatized was clear, her eyes were up; her body alternating between being up and down in an attempted cower. Would she go through with it now, or did she need more time and space before entering that realm again? The reward could be less pain and certainly a greater level of safety in her life.

Then Lily made her choice. She moved away from me, her body slunk to the floor. It was all too much to face at this time. The trauma was bigger than she was fully able to handle. I waited until she was ready to come back. I faced her with open hands at her level and let her know as clearly as I could that I respected her needs at this time, and no more will occur in this session. We spent the next few minutes just being loving to each other as I explained my findings to Sharon, giving the recommendations of approach to her as I would to the parent of any young child client.

Sharon booked another appointment for Lily. I learn so much from every session I ever give, and it was the same with Lily. But the biggest learning I received in this session was that animals communicate their needs and past histories almost in the same way as people. And that if we take into account the animal's unique physical structures an animal, at least this one, could be helped from a therapeutic angle.

And so I find myself considering whether to add to my business card next to the title of ARC-work Practitioner the title of Bark-work Practitioner. I wonder what Lily would say to that?

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