

*Melissa Borden*

There is a silent language that emanates from Nature and speaks to the human soul. It has been considered by poets, scientists, and philosophers alike. The ancient notion of “archetypes” or “gestures” within plants and animals was explored by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in the 18th century.<sup>1</sup> Later, Steiner considered this idea from a spiritual perspective, speaking of “etheric realities” and of an esoteric partnership between human beings and animals. He suggested that “cosmic forces streaming through the zodiac” unfold in the form and gesture of each of the animals.<sup>2</sup> In this way, Goethean “archetypes” or “gestures,” he believed, may be perceived in the human soul. Young children, for whom the animal kingdom is so compelling, listen to the language of Nature with a freshness and openness that allows them to receive benevolent impressions favoring their healthy development. Each of the animals has a unique gift to bestow on the developing human being. This was perceived by the ancients, understood by both Goethe and Steiner, and is harkened to by young children with wise and deep understanding.

### Archetypes in Nature

The medieval alchemist and physician Paracelsus wrote of an inner “signature” or “essence” in plants.<sup>3</sup> Goethe later developed these notions through his scientific and poetic studies of the natural world. Goethe’s “leaf sequence” was followed by a study of animal morphology. He wrote: “Phenomena in Nature possess an ‘inner life’ or integrity that is not easily summed up or explained.”<sup>4</sup> Steiner

explored these ideas, concluding that Nature resonates in the human soul and inspires deep understandings of the cosmos and of human destiny.<sup>5</sup> Homeopathic approaches to supporting human health integrate Goethean concepts and acknowledge the etheric realities described by Steiner. Dr. Edward Bach (1885–1936) drew a direct connection between plant essences and human health with his Bach Flower Remedies.<sup>6</sup> More recently, Dr. Temple Grandin has written and lectured extensively on her own journey with autism, describing the healing path revealed to her through her work with animals.<sup>7</sup>

### Young Children and Animals

Children’s long-standing love affair with the animals of the earth is well documented in song, poetry, and story. Fairytales reveal ancient traditions replete with the charms and alarms of characters from the animal world. An essential quality of each animal strives to speak powerfully through these stories. Modern children’s literature likewise explores the relationship between children and animals with compelling themes of healing, self discovery, and the coming of age. Further, parents and teachers know well the delight young children take in the movement life of the animal kingdom as their little “horses” gallop, their “bunnies” hop, and their “puppies” wrestle in children’s play. Observing growing babies, it has long been said that the child takes a lightning trip through the stages of animal life, swimming like a fish in utero, rocking on the belly like a snake, crawling as a four-

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legged animal, crouching to free the hands like a primate and, finally, standing in human uprightness.<sup>8</sup>

Wolfgang Schad, in his seminal book exploring embryology and animal morphology, writes that human development is “continually recaptivated in creative play as the young child explores gesture and movement.” He adds that “the adult’s experience of nature is quite different from the child’s...

[who] has an almost dream-like awareness of the deep relationships uniting all things.”<sup>9</sup> For young children, this dream-like capacity to take in the world around them is almost meditative, as the child lives in a mood

of religious devotion to the world and, for them, etheric realities are palpable. The inner archetype or gesture of the bird that alights upon a branch or the bee that buries itself in the pollen of a flower is experienced by the young child with openness and sympathy.

In her book *How Children Play*, Ingeborg Haller notes that when “young children are dealing with animals, it can be seen in their eyes that they have compassion for the animals who are so narrowly constrained by their own one-sidedness. It is as if the children can feel the longing of the animals to be freed from their own constraints.”<sup>10</sup> The human capacity to overcome what Steiner described as “one-sidedness” when speaking of the animal kingdom is surely the basis for inner transformation.<sup>11</sup> Our animal brothers and sisters of the earth are linked in some mysterious and profound way to the unfolding of our humanity. Karl König, the founder of the Camphill movement in Britain, wrote: “They are so similar to us that this can hardly be denied. We know we belong

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together.”<sup>12</sup> When Noah set forth on the Ark, the animals accompanied him in a unity of destiny and in service to humanity.

### Providing Healthy Soul Impressions

An anthroposophical understanding of human incarnation leads us to understand that whereas the baby in utero swims, so to speak, in etheric substance formed by cosmic realities,

the growing child begins to unite with the earth and the physical body. It is through sense impressions of the world that the nutrition or “food” for this process of incarnation is found. In his celebrated book *Last Child in the Woods*, Richard Louv describes a modern-day

sensory environment increasingly divorced from the natural world. He refers to a growing concern about a generation of children whose sense impressions are significantly formed by electronic experiences and whose relationships to the outdoors and nature are limited. “Nature Deficit” is seen by a growing number of child advocates to be a real concern. Louv and others suggest that nature experiences—that is, access to natural environments where children may play freely—can be seen as therapeutic for many children today. He is an advocate of outdoor classrooms and of bringing Nature into the city.<sup>13</sup>

However, it is not a dynamic between city children and country children that forms the discussion. Rather, it is the drift of cultural attitudes and habits in relation to societal changes and technological advances that is at issue. Sadly, the lives of children reared in rural settings grow more and more like those of urban children with less time spent outdoors and more time indoors with computer screens. As the realities of modern life press upon the lives of children, it becomes

more urgent for parents and teachers to create educational and therapeutic environments that offer children the opportunity to receive healthful soul impressions that the natural world has so long provided.

Waldorf schools have long striven to meet this growing reality with a curriculum that explicitly addresses children's need for tangible experiences of the natural world. Steiner's understanding of the healthful symbiosis between human beings and the natural world can inspire teachers to create school environments that incorporate gardens and nature spaces accessible to the children in their care. It may be asked, though, how teachers understand the role of animals in this work. How are children's hungry souls fed with healthful impressions?

### Pets and Young Children

There are many children today who have never gathered eggs from a hen house, carried a bucket of fresh milk, or ridden a pony bareback. Yet there is no lack of pets in the modern home. Rats, rodents of all sorts, fish, insects, toads, snakes, dogs, and cats abound. The pet industry is booming. For the most part, these animals live in cages, kennels, or glass boxes. They take their pleasures under heat lamps and on spinning wire wheels. These are the animals of the earth that seem to actually fit with some convenience into modern life. On the one hand, they require little care and minimal involvement, and they are fairly inexpensive to maintain. On the other hand, they are creatures who have been completely removed from their natural environment and have no capacity to serve in the role nature has allotted them. They can offer little to the family; in this sense they live strictly, so to speak, on the dole. They can be seen to represent a certain idle hopelessness, being held captive in a cage as they run madly on their wire wheels. If, as Goethe suggests,

there is an inner archetype within all plants and animals that echoes in the human soul, what does the child experience from these captive pets?

Certainly, the human capacity for love is boundless, and the young child may stream sympathy and love towards both snake and rat. But can these pets stand before the children as healthy representatives of their species where a true knowing can unfold? Perhaps they may have something powerful to communicate to their young owners, and yet, how do we understand this? Steiner asks us to consider “the voice” of each animal which

may help us as human beings to understand ourselves and the “riddles of the universe.”<sup>14</sup>

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### A Silent Language at Work

In a series of lectures given in October 1923, Steiner discussed the threefold nature of the animal kingdom with the forms and natures of the lion, the eagle, and the cow embodying the respiratory, nerve, and metabolic systems.

He suggests that the animals of the earth work in an esoteric partnership with human beings in the unfolding of “cosmic lawfulness.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, the form and nature of each animal manifests itself profoundly and significantly. It is perhaps no surprise that young children still fresh from the spiritual world may have an innate understanding of these realities. Developmentally speaking, the young child still dwells in an Eden of sorts—that is, in an unspoken brotherhood with mineral, plant, and animal kingdoms. When observing young children, one cannot help but see that they naturally delight in this fellowship with the animals.

Most significantly, children readily understand the constraints under which the animals live, the confines of what Steiner calls their “one-sidedness.”<sup>16</sup> Perhaps this

understanding quickens within children a knowing of their own human potential. Even very young children seem to grasp that while an animal is bound by its own nature, a human being, even a child, can transform and overstep such one-sidedness. Understanding the significance of this, we may deepen our respect for the role animals have long played in a wide range of healing therapies. The silent communication of the soul between human beings and animals may be an education of sorts that leads the child towards a path of self healing. If, as Steiner suggests, the inner archetype of each animal bestows its own wisdom, how can we as educators best draw upon it in our work with young children?

### From the Kindergarten

As a teacher, I have long wondered why it is that certain children are particularly, if not urgently, drawn towards the animals we care for in the kindergarten. Further, I have marveled at the seeming therapeutic role the animals play in supporting the healthy development of many children. Of special interest have been those children with recognizable struggles such as a tendency toward hyperactivity, deep emotional issues, and expressed behaviors somewhere on the autistic spectrum. While most children in the kindergarten take an easy delight in the animals, these particular children are often more powerfully compelled. Indeed, they are most often drawn towards the very animals that in some way mirror a familiar one-sidedness with which these children are struggling.

Fairytales adumbrate this theme in stories about enchanted animals struggling to free themselves and to thereby reveal their true human nature. There are children in the

kindergarten who surely feel themselves to be under a spell of sorts that constrains their own natural development. The inner archetype of each animal, so perfectly expressed in form and movement, may offer some recognizable quality that unfolds in a silent language of

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healing. Caroline von Heydebrand, an early colleague of Steiner's, wrote of young children that they "are no mere guests or onlookers" in Nature. "Everything is absorbed by those creative forces which work upon the child's body for the good or detriment of his future life."<sup>17</sup>

Thus it is that the silent language emanating from the natural world is wisely understood by young children for whom the physical and etheric world is such an education. With this natural

affinity in mind, the following impressions are offered, based upon years of teaching in the kindergarten and on a lifetime interest in understanding the relationship between children and the animals they so love.

### Young Children and the Kindergarten Animals

#### Chickens

Pecking their way around the kindergarten yard, chickens are surely the embodiment of nursery rhyme charm. Their little musical clucks and coos give voice to a mood of homely contentment. Each morning in the kindergarten, their eggs are discovered by the children with wonder and even reverence. From Steiner's understanding of the bird kingdom, chickens may be seen as one of the most earthly of birds, given their limited capacity for flight and eons of domestication.<sup>18</sup> Chickens have long been the comfortable barnyard companion of human beings.

However, the ease and contentment in chickens can be easily disturbed and their



excitable nature readily aroused. An alarmed chicken quickly becomes a picture of hysteria and heedless impulse as it runs around in hectic panic at the slightest provocation. One only needs to invoke the image of Henny Penny running witlessly in circles as “the sky is falling” to picture the excitable nature of a chicken. A clutch of kindergarten children often has an excitable child or two in its ranks. These are the children who startle easily and are often inclined towards impulsive, hyperactive movement and, sometimes, emotional hysteria. It is one of the enduring wonders of teaching to observe a child with these tendencies in relation to the kindergarten chickens.

Naturally, that child's first impulse is to make a wild dash after the chickens in the yard. Not surprisingly, the chickens are not readily captured, as child and animal are an even match for one another. Yet somehow, there seems to be an invisible bond that draws the child towards this animal. One could say, perhaps, that the child recognizes something of his or her self in the one-sided nature of the chicken. If the child is allowed to return each day to the chickens, a profound sympathy for the animals' plight may begin to stir. In addition to the initial impulse to pursue them, there develops in the child a sense of longing and, one might say, a wish to be united with them. Perhaps, too, an archetype speaks to the soul, and the child experiences inwardly what is perceived outwardly. A homeopathy may be at work in which the very qualities the child senses in the animal play a part in forwarding a natural gestalt of healing. Indeed, there seems to be a turning point in which the heart awakens and becomes a guide. The child can begin to discover a new way of moving, a way of breathing and, perhaps, a beating of the heart that ceases to alarm the chickens and thereby allows the child to approach them.

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While an animal cannot conquer its own nature, a human being can. It is both moving and inspiring to observe a child who has struggled for months to catch and hold one of the chickens and who at last succeeds. A sense of peace and satisfaction is perceivable in both child and chicken. It is not the animal that has undergone a change but, rather, it is the child who has taken a step towards conquering and transforming an unsettling inner tendency. Having mastered something within, this child will never again struggle to catch the chicken. An archetypal quality in the animal has, thus, become the servant of the child's imperative towards balance, health, and wholeness. This is, surely, an education.

### Rabbits

A rabbit, with its quick bright eyes and its soft warm fur, represents one of the animal kingdom's most lovable ambassadors. It is small wonder that *Peter Rabbit* is among the most cherished of children's stories.<sup>19</sup> The kindergarten rabbit is universally loved by all of the children and grows fat on gifts of dandelions and sweet grass. However, when one thinks of a rabbit's place in nature, one realizes that this darling creature, along with mice, provides a primary food source for much of the carnivorous world. Rabbits burrow and nest underground where they escape danger and avoid their many predators. A rabbit in the wild must be ever watchful and ready for quick escape. Even when somewhat tame, rabbits project a sense of shy wariness, as their little noses twitch nervously and their little hearts beat wildly when roused in fear.

Children naturally, and with little reminder, tend to speak quietly around the kindergarten bunny. It is, perhaps, no real surprise to observe in the kindergarten that the children who are inclined to be shy, guarded, and nervous are

especially drawn to the bunny whom they love to hold and comfort. These are the children with a gift for calming and settling a rabbit whose little, beating heart can actually be felt through its soft fur. By offering sympathy and care, the anxious children may find a way of calming and assuring themselves. Sympathizing with the animal's instinct to run away and hide, these children rarely chase, but wait patiently for the rabbit to trust enough for an approach. They seem to take special delight in the rabbit's antics as it clicks its hind legs together and leaps wildly about the yard. It is as if the child senses the rabbit's liberation from fear and nervousness. Often, the shy, nervous, or emotionally unsettled child begins the day with the rabbit. Again, it may be said that sympathy for the inescapable one-sidedness of this animal has stirred the human heart and conquered, at least for a moment, a soul struggle.

### Dogs

Which of the many animals of the earth has more entirely entwined its destiny with that of human beings than the dog? This partner in work, this guardian of the home, this companion of the heart has accompanied us through the ages. Naturally a pack animal, the domesticated dog has a wide range of attributes that gives it fine-tuned social capacities. Further, it has been acknowledged that dogs, perhaps more than most animals, project a sense of emotion or feeling that is understandable to human beings. Dogs can telegraph their enthusiasm, happiness, fear, and loneliness to their human owners. There is a wide range of inspiring stories that bear witness to the

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remarkable link between human beings and the dogs they love.

Thus, it is little wonder that the dog is, perhaps, the most cherished animal in the kindergarten. Each morning, the class takes the dog for a walk. While some of the children may take issue with setting off in the pouring rain, there is never any real mutiny because it is understood that the dog needs its walk. (Who, then, really walks whom?) So, the dog's job in the kindergarten begins first thing in the morning. Ever vigilant about his "pack," the dog keeps a close eye on the children, showing evident restlessness when one strays.

Once back from the walk, it is the dog's job to put the chickens back in their pen and then is allowed to indulge in a well-deserved nap. For the children, it is a great privilege to be allowed to walk, feed, and groom the kindergarten dog. Though every child in the kindergarten takes great delight in the dog, there are certain children for whom this particular animal assumes a very important role. These very special children often struggle with sensory integration, being alternately loud- and noise-sensitive. They are often restless, easily distressed. They may be unable to read social signals and can find themselves to be at a loss socially. These children manifest some of the characteristics associated with autism, often finding school settings overwhelming and distressful. There are a growing number of organizations that train service dogs to be the companions of children with more acute symptoms of autism.<sup>20</sup> In her book *Thinking in Pictures*, Temple Grandin describes her own autism and the frustrating limitations she experienced as a child and later, particularly with regard to

understanding language and the processing of social information appropriately.<sup>21</sup> Dr. Grandin has followed a path of self-understanding that began with a passionate attachment to animals. This led to her career as an animal biologist and a spokesperson for animal therapy.

Penetrating the mystery of the relationship between the dog and the human being is surely a life's work. In the kindergarten, we can see that children who manifest characteristics associated with what may be considered high-functioning autism often connect readily with the animals—and particularly with the dog. Perhaps the soulful expression in the eyes of the dog stirs a sense of sympathy in these children. A dog may project emotions to a child who can understand that, because this companion is unable to speak, communication does not rely upon the burdensome complexities of human language. A different, perhaps more innately understood language between child and animal will serve this relationship, as sympathy and love from the child and trust and devotion from the dog unfold. The child may settle into a mutually comfortable relationship with this kindergarten companion who offers much-needed solace and steadfast loyalty.

In time, the child may begin to interpret the dog's behavior to the other children and to the teachers with comments such as, "He must be sad" or "I think he is wondering why everybody is being so loud." Giving language and order to feelings is something with which these children struggle. Through love and sympathy for the dog's limitations, its one-sidedness, the child may find healing. Again, the animal cannot conquer its own nature and the child comes to know this. A child who feels imprisoned in his or her own one-sidedness can experience a profound loneliness; the companionship of a dog can be solace to the lonely heart. A child who may be considered on the autistic spectrum can take an important step towards

inner balance and wholeness. As we watch service dogs at their work, we know that the dog has linked its destiny with that of the human being and that the journey towards healing is one that the dog will walk with us.

### Future Research

Rudolf Steiner tells us that each animal has its own voice.<sup>22</sup> While this may be understood most naturally by young children, it is through Goethean observation that we adults can hearken to this silent language. My own work with animals has suggested to me that there is surely a deeper and broader understanding yet to be granted to those who seek to penetrate these realities. The chickens, rabbits, and dog already help support the educational objectives of our work as teachers; however, we may yet profit from expanding our research as we consider a broader range of animals with whom today's children may have limited exposure.

### Conclusion

As we are inspired by Goethean observation and seek to understand etheric realities which may unfold quietly but profoundly, it may be valuable to deepen our consciousness as teachers around the relationship between young children and animals. We may observe a homeopathy of sorts at work in which the young child strives to achieve inner balance and to loosen the spell of one-sidedness that so confines. The mysterious doors separating the kingdoms in nature from adult awareness may be opened more readily by the young child who lives in natural sympathy with the surrounding world. It may be observed that there is an inner imperative calling the child towards health and wholeness and that, instead of turning away from the challenge of transformation, the young child only too readily engages.

Perhaps this is why children are so charmed by the animal kingdom and why some are so

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particularly drawn to certain animals. However this may be, each child and every human being is born into an unfolding earthly destiny. Steiner tells us that the natural world is deeply entwined in the narrative of human life, which is “born out of nature” and also “bears nature within.”<sup>23</sup> From time out of reckoning, the human imagination has striven to encompass this reality, and the animal kingdom has united itself to our endeavors. The beauty and mystery of the Neolithic cave paintings at Altamira, Spain attest to a long and profound relationship between human beings and the animals of the earth. Stretching through the ages, these evocative images bear witness to an ancient brotherhood and speak so eloquently in a language understood by the human soul:

Come forth into the light.  
Let Nature be your teacher.”  
—William Wordsworth, 1798

### Endnotes

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