


Review

Teya Brooks Pribac, *Enter the Animal: Cross Species Perspectives on Grief and Spirituality*

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This is a courageous book. Even today humans are still portrayed in numerous discourses as being a class or three ‘above’ nonhuman animals. It is a widespread and recurring theme, a seemingly unending crusade to ensure that the banner of human exceptionalism is held high. But Pribac convincingly argues the case for the existence of grief and spirituality in nonhuman animals, two things which have long had the ‘humans only’ sign firmly nailed to their door. It seems like an attack on the citadel. It is to be welcomed.

She draws on a wealth of academic work but does not shy away from individual stories and records of court cases as well as her own lived experiences because this is very much about everyday, moment-by-moment being. She builds the technical case meticulously, at the same time ensuring that the non-specialist reader understands the terms used and the contexts of discussions. The book is clear, insightful, and measured and while it is not possible to do it justice here, I will briefly describe a few of the highlights. There is a long-held belief that while nonhuman animals might have some basic perceptions such as pain, a neocortex resembling that of humans is needed to produce feelings, emotions and experiences. But the book describes how deep feelings, emotions and a sense of self and moment-to-moment existence arises from subcortical areas of the brain. And importantly, given the theme of the enquiry, the fact that humans share these brain structures with many nonhuman animal species, carries enormous ethical implications.

These shared brain structures are extremely important in our daily lives but very vulnerable during the young animal’s development. This is where the importance of caregiving styles, and how they can affect

young animals, is emphasised. The importance of a close, caring, physically and mentally present Other, a parent, a sibling or even a member of another species, is important for what might be described as the other-than-cognitive, experiential development of the individual. This relationship is intimately mediated via such things as tactile sensations, sounds and smells rather than cognitive abstractions. It is critical in helping to develop the experiencing self and the self's view of the world. The form it takes has deep and long-lasting effects for good or ill. However, captive animals can hardly ever build the close caring relationships which they need. Pribac points out the example of how pigs normally build nests to be with their young but there is no chance of that when flesh production is the priority.

Using attachment theory (broadly termed) the author describes how different styles of caregiving can have profound effects depending upon whether the carer is attuned and caring, distant, anxious and unpredictable, or disorganised. Whatever the case, attachment is vital in order to thrive but if there is attachment there can also be loss of that attachment through death or some other form of loss. We are reminded that this applies not only to human animals but nonhuman animals as well, and what the author is discussing are deeply sentient and experiencing beings who have close relationships which are very important to them. Given this, and the fact that on some levels grief is essentially an organismic response to loss, it would be very hard to imagine that nonhuman animals do not grieve when they experience loss.

She discusses how grief can arise from such things as the loss of a carer, the loss of children or siblings but also loss of normal behaviour patterns, loss of freedom and loss of place. And again we are aware of the multiple forms of trauma we impose on nonhuman animals whom we use in farming and laboratories, for bearing loads and producing power, for entertainment, and also the killing of free living animals in hunting and 'pest eradication' and our catastrophic degradation of their environment, their homes, which causes unimaginable suffering.

It is often claimed that animals do not experience grief because we observe no signs of it but leaving aside that there are often signs for those who are sufficiently attuned, Pribac points out that grief and the display of grief are two very different things. Displays of grief might not be possible in the dysfunctional situations many nonhuman animals find themselves coerced into enduring.

In a deeply moving parallel, she discusses the women of Alto do

Cruzeiro (Crucifix Hill), an impoverished settlement in Brazil, where there was a very high rate of pregnancies along with high infant and child mortality rates. The desperate conditions in which these women lived meant that harsh survival strategies evolved, including deliberate non-attachment to infants, favouring the stronger child over the weaker, the more active over the less active and suppressing any outward signs of grief on the death of a baby or young child. Non-attachment was a practice, at least outwardly, until such time it was believed that the child was going to survive past their early years. The lack of an external display of grief does not mean the women did not grieve – they surely did – but that the unforgiving circumstances in which they found themselves would not allow for many of their normal social practices, including those related to the expression of grief. They were desperately trying to survive. The animals who are our captives, and in law our property to use as we see fit, can hardly be said to be able to behave in their normal socially and genetically inherited ways and so outward signs of grieving are easily missed or even completely absent as they struggle to survive in grossly aberrant conditions. But we should not mistake this for any lack of grief.

On a more uplifting note, Pribac also describes how there is a strong case to believe that animals experience times of awe, heightened existence, wonder, unity or what we as humans might describe as spiritual experiences. It is an incredible and wonderful idea, taking us deeper into a world of which we have, for so long, been dismissive.

There are many points in the book where it seems important to stop and not only consider what is on the page but the wider implications of what is being said, sometimes leading to inspiring vistas, at others taking us into a bleak and abusive world.

Readers with interests including ethology, psychology, ethics, phenomenology, sociology, law, veterinary science and critical animal studies as well as general readers will find much to interest them here: new perspectives and a vision of a greater world with many signposts for possible further research.