

Animal encounters and the sense of self¹

Véronique Servais, Pr. Anthropology of Communication

Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Liège, Belgium

v.servais@uliege.be

Abstract

The paper presents the result of an ethnographic preliminary enquiry about the experience of meeting an animal. Six adult females have answered a micro-phenomenology interview about “an encounter with an animal that meant to them”. None of them were animal communicators, nor did they have training in it. Three accounts were about dogs and three were about horses. Only the horse encounter experiences met the criteria of being about a “suspended” or “enchanted” moment, and will be the subject of this presentation. It should be emphasized that these “suspended” moments happened in an everyday situation (i.e. in a barn), while the human beings were not riding the horse. These moments “happened from nowhere”, were surprising, and left long-lasting and vivid memories. They were lived as intense body communication with the horse and a renewed sense of the self. The paper will provide descriptions of the lived experiences and discuss the concept of “pathic communication” as a possible useful concept for their understanding.

Full text

Introduction: the general context

My presentation is based on interviews that I conducted with three people who had a special encounter with horses. It should be emphasized that none of them was an animal communicator, nor did they have training in it. Before I present my research, I want to thank them for sharing their experience with me. Throughout the analysis of the interviews that I made with them, I have been very careful not to distort their words. I hope I have succeeded.

Let me make a last comment about the context of my research: I have a long-lasting questioning about the 'therapeutic effects' of encounters with animals, with this question running through all my work: how do people make sense of the behavior of animals? And how, beyond anthropomorphic projections, does what happens in encounters with animals sometimes open the door to a transformation of the self? As a researcher, I also want to find analytical or conceptual tools that are useful in order to understand what is going on in such encounters. Here, I'll suggest a concept that was proposed by a philosopher, E. Strauss, to refer to the communication that occurs, below consciousness, between living beings: he called it *pathic* communication.

¹ Citations of this work are allowed if correctly referenced. Servais V., 2022, Animal Encounters and the sense of self. Paper presented at the International Multispecies Methods Research Symposium: Shifting Paradigms in Human-Animal Relations. Hosted online, May 24-26, School of Environment and sustainability, University of Saskatchewan.

Method: microphenomenology interviews

The interviews I conducted are a special kind of interview called microphenomenology interviews. These interviews are specific in the sense that it allows the researcher to follow, moment after moment, the experience of a person as it develops in its different dimensions. The interviews focus on a very specific moment, usually of a fairly short duration.

The opening question at the beginning of my interviews was: "I would like you to tell me about a moment in your life when 'something happened' with an animal, a moment that was important to you." The person was then invited to return to that moment, to let it come back to her. Then I asked questions like: *At that moment, what do you pay attention to? What do you see? Is there any sound? Is there any thought? How is that thought coming to you? How is your body? Is there any other feeling or sensation that comes at that moment?* Etc. The interviews lasted about an hour. They were conducted without any specific hypotheses. I just wanted to inquire about the experience itself.²

The Situation where it happened

Before coming to the content of the interviews, I need to say something about the settings in which the encounters occurred. They all occurred in everyday life, but in what I would qualify as a "weakly structured" moment, or in the interstices of a more structured moment: in a barn, during a workshop with horses and during a visit to a horse for a possible purchase.

It means that, during those moments, interviewees were left without the cultural devices that would enable them to easily make sense of the situation.

In other words, these are situations where the work of integrating one's experience from the sensory, emotional and bodily inputs in order to make sense of the whole situation, this work is not ensured by preexistent (cultural) ways of doing things. The person has to do this work by herself. As we will see in a moment, this is important.

Let us now turn to the description of the experience

A "present" moment

First, it is a moment in which something happens, a story is lived, as would say Daniel Stern³, and a different way of relating to the world is experienced. It can also be said to be a moment of transformation. According to Stern, these "present moments" are the real effective moments in psychotherapy, the ones when something happens and when change occurs. These moments are made of a particular density or intensity.⁴

"I see the look in her eyes, I feel like my eyes are looking into hers and hers are looking into mine, her two ears are pointing at me with this music in my hands [the phone], and the fact that she's coming towards me. It's not the phone she's coming towards, it's me. [...] I remember I was thrilled. I had a big smile on my face, I've never forgotten it. I must have been thirteen and I can't forget it. Yet it lasted three minutes... I experienced it as something intense." (Céline)

"What I feel at that moment is an absence of tension, as if she [the mare] was putting me, at a distance, in cotton wool, [...] as if to protect me, as if to say "you must not be

² I made 6 interviews. Of these six interviews, three were with dogs and three with horses. The nature of the experience was very different between the dogs and the horses. Here I will only talk about the horses.

³ Stern, *Le moment présent en psychothérapie, Le monde dans un grain de sable*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 2003

⁴ I kindly acknowledge Jean Vion-Dury for turning my attention to the concept of "present moment" during a Seminar organized at the Ecole Normale Supérieure of Lyon by Magali Ollagnier-Beldame.

afraid of me", that is what I feel. That's what I feel. Kindness towards me, and on a physical level, an absence of muscular tension." (Irene)

The feeling of the relationship

During these moments, the three interviewees experience a kind of materialization of the feeling of being connected. The subjective space of the encounter, like the relational matrix, seems to become tangible and be perceptible. Note that these are not emotional feelings but rather bodily feelings. As if the intersubjective space were becoming "real" in a way, thicker.

"Something when I am near her [...] as if through the closeness I have with her, there was something totally invisible that came towards me too" ... "like a little cushion of softness that is between us, like a bubble filled with softness and light. [...]" (Celine)

"All of a sudden I felt that we were in a bubble and that I could go and meet him in another way than physically" (Pascale).

"It was as if a part of me dissociated and there was a space, we were in physical contact but there was a space where each part of him and me could come together and were in perfect connection, in perfect synergy. (Pascale)

Cognitive opacity (or the stopping of conscious thinking)

These moments begin with a stopping of conscious analytical thought. This is related to what I said before about the fact that there no usual interpretation of the situation is available.

"Because he stood behind me and I had no view at all, I was forced to.... I didn't know how to think anymore [...] I got out of my thoughts and I was only in the experience of this present moment [...] I didn't think anymore. It was very special. I have a brain that works all the time, but there it was really so much completeness that I didn't think anymore" (Pascale).

"In the situation, it's only her who counts, as if I had no thoughts" (Céline).

"It's a bit like losing my means, as if that was all that mattered, her beauty" (Irene).

In this moment the person can only rely on her own capacity, her own associative resources in order to put together in a coherent experience bodily, sensory and emotional inputs. Sometimes, but not always, this leads to creative new meanings.

Strength and Energy

And the new associations, the creative emergence of meaning is accompanied by strength and energy.

"Being so close to her who was so peaceful, it gave me a great power, a force that was between her nose and my belly, like something that, like a magnet that attracted all my energy, I feel it in my guts. We don't touch each other but it's as if, with that force, we were against each other" (Céline).

"I also have the impression, from all this description I have just given, that it seems very slow and silent, whereas the energy I feel is very high in fact. [...] I feel high, in great shape and able to move mountains, ... I feel full of energy ... yes ... [...] in my whole body and in my whole mind, things are clear, there is no grey area" (Irene).

"The moment before, when he gave that massage, I was living, and the moment after, I was [...]. The dimension of "I am" is immaterial, timeless, there are no limits [...] I am still partly there and that is what carries me now, it helps me a lot" (Pascale).

To understand how it is that energy comes from an encounter with a horse, from being close to it, from looking at it, without even touching it, I relied on the work of the French hypnotherapist François Roustang⁵. For him, this energy is not a mystery at all. It often occurs in hypnosis. According to him, the "power" or "energy" and healing potential of the hypnotic experience comes with indeterminacy. He says that in hypnosis, potentialities that were "stored", "on hold" can be integrated through their freedom of movement, and they expand and intensify the potentialities of the individual.

In hypnosis, "[t]here is strength and energy because the non-control of consciousness and understanding allows potentialities to come to light, to enter into the game, which were previously kept to one side. They were waiting, but also in reserve. They are reintegrated thanks to the freedom of movement that is granted to them, and they broaden and intensify the individual's capacities". (Roustang, p.23, my translation)

We can see strong similarities between what Roustang describes and the experiences that are described by Irene, Pascale and Céline. It seems that the human-horse communication that takes place here has the same potential for creative aggregation of the experience as has hypnosis. It has the same potential to give strength and energy and to offer the opportunity for new meanings to emerge. These meanings emerge from the creative aggregation of experience that takes shape in the moment.

"Pathic" communication

According to Roustang, the "potentialities" are well below consciousness and are present in the form of sensations not linked to a specific sensory modality. This is precisely what "pathic" communication is about. According to Erwin Strauss⁶, who coined the term, *pathic* communication establishes the common background of life and is shared by human and non-human animals (and all living things). Even if it is fuzzy and vague, I think that the concept is interesting because it points to a kind of communication that is not made of signs, is below symbolic and conscious perception, and below specific sensorial modalities. In any case, it is appropriate to the descriptions of the experiences that I have gathered here.

Coming home

Finally, it should be said that the moment we have been talking about mean a lot to the persons. They are important moments when a transformative experience takes place, and the interviewees had a sense of being in touch with themselves.

"It was one of the most beautiful moments of my life, I think, this meeting with this horse. I feel like I'm coming home. That's what goes through my mind, being in contact with this horse, the feeling of coming home, to a place I have always known" (Irène).

For more about it:

Servais, V. (in press). Découvrir le soi dans la rencontre avec un animal. In C., Deslandes & D., Giroux, Parler avec les animaux. Presses de l'Université de Montréal.

⁵ Roustang François (2005) Introduction. In Hegel, *Le magnétisme animal. Naissance de l'hypnose*. Traduit par F. Roustang, Paris, Puf

⁶ Strauss Erwin (2000). *Du sens des sens. Contribution à l'étude des fondements de la psychologie*. Grenoble, Editions J. Milton / See also Renaud Barbaras, 2004, Affectivity and movement: The sense of sensing in Erwin Straus, *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 3: 215–228, 2004.