

Michael Jawer

From Psyche to Scarab: The Emotional Resonance of Animals in Symbolism and Synchronicity

Looking at our animal cousins—who have eyes, ears, mouths, limbs, and skin as we do (or their own versions of them)—we behold beings both like and unlike us. In some ways, they are rather alien, literally beastly. In other ways, we see aspects of ourselves. Together, we populate a “more than human world”¹ in which we are born, mature, live and, eventually, die. While alive, all animals possess bodies with sensory capacities and a metabolism; furthermore, we display energy and some form of intent (even if it appears instinctive). All of this distinguishes us from the vegetative as *animate*. The Latin root of animate, *anima*, translates to liveliness, spirit, zest, vitality.²

Philosophers down the ages have speculated about the relationship of humans and other animals, indeed about the relationship of humans to the rest of nature. Prior to the Enlightenment, everything in nature was seen as interconnected, reflecting a spiritual unity.

In more recent times, Carl Jung developed his theory of synchronicity from the observation of uncanny coincidences between dreams and wakeful existence—at least two of which (noted below) involved animals. Indeed, some of the most intriguing instances of synchronicities involve animals. This should not be surprising since animals hold a good deal of emotional and symbolic significance; they are key figures in children’s stories, in songs, in myths, and in dreams. The fact that animals are sensate, and that many of them have feelings and cognitions similar to humans’ (including the capacity to dream), suggests a basis in our communal sentience for synchronicities and all that they imply.

Here I will examine emotion as the currency of symbolism and synchronicity, and as the key to important similarities between human beings and other living creatures. Emotion, as neuroscientist Antonio Damasio argued, underpins all cognition.³ Feelings form the substrate of our very sense of self, according to evolutionary psychologist Nicholas Humphrey. Descartes’ dictum, the two men agree, should be updated to “Sentio, ergo sum: I feel, therefore I am.”⁴

A Pair of Animal Encounters

Of the following two accounts, the first, reported by Jung, is his most famous short account of a synchronicity:⁵

A young woman I was treating had, at a critical moment, a dream in which she was given a golden scarab. While she was telling me this dream, I sat with my back to the closed window. Suddenly I heard a noise behind me, like a gentle tapping. I turned round and saw a flying insect knocking against the window pane from the outside. I opened the window and caught the creature in the air as it flew in. It was the nearest analogy to a golden scarab one finds in our latitudes, a scarabaeid beetle, the common rose-chafer (*Cetonia aurata*), which, contrary to its usual habits had evidently felt the urge to get into a dark room at this particular moment. I must admit that nothing like it ever happened to me before or since.

Next is a contemporary account by a California woman, where what is inner and what is outer similarly align.⁶



In January, I dreamed of watching a mountain lion give birth. Six weeks later, on a Sunday morning in February, a mountain lion strolled through the oak trees behind my house....The mountain lion is the rarest animal that roams these hills. Sleek, shy of humans, almost completely nocturnal, the big cat is seldom seen....

Mountain lions are this continent's "big cat," a category of animals that has stirred the human psyche for centuries. Listen to Laurens van der Post in his book *A Testament to the Wilderness*: "The lion, not only in the imagination of first man, but even in our day, is not the king of the beasts for nothing...It is powerful. It is swift. It is strong...Above all, the lion is fundamentally the cat that walks alone. In other words, the lion is the individual; it is the symbol of the instinctive and royal individual self."

....In my dream...the big cat was giving birth in a zoo. I was watching with my brother and a friend. We looked right into the cat's vagina, and we could see the folds of its uterus contract, struggling to give forth. The new life hadn't quite been born when the dream ended.

I didn't understand the meaning of the dream until I came across the van der Post passage quoted above. I then concluded that the dream was about my "royal, individual self," which was, in many ways, struggling to be born...



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So when the mountain lion walked in front of my woodpile a month later, I was...aware of a certain lack of surprise, as if some secret part of me had, in fact, been awaiting such a visit since the night of my dream. I had no doubt that this cat had come for me. For me to be at my desk on a Sunday morning and to be looking out the window at the precise moment when a shy, seldom seen, nocturnal predator appeared was too much of a coincidence. For 15 years I hadn't seen a mountain lion, and then I'd dreamed of a big cat *and*

seen one within a six-week period. The synchronicity brought my inner and outer worlds together with such force that it left me tingling for hours...

This, I understood, was what it was like to live in a world in which inside and outside are one...To experience this feeling—as I did, courtesy of the mountain lion—is to know what it means to live in perfect accord with nature: as if all life, inner and outer, is engaged in a single purpose.

What Vertebrates Have in Common

Eco-philosopher David Abram presents a valuable overarching concept. He views all living creatures as comprising a "commonwealth of breath,"⁷ hearkening back to the observation of the Greco-Roman philosopher Plotinus that "we [all creatures] breathe together."⁸ In this simple way—respiration—we are all one.

Modern neuroscience has a great deal more to add about the similarities between humans and other animals. The late Jaak Panksepp, an authority on the neurobiology of emotion, asserted that "the evidence is now inescapable: at the basic emotional level, all mammals are remarkably similar."⁹ His conclusion was based on several factors. First, biochemicals such as oxytocin, epinephrine, serotonin, and dopamine—which manifestly influence human feelings—are found in other animals, too.¹⁰ Second, the more primitive parts of the human brain, including the limbic portion that mediates feeling, have their counterparts in other animals' craniums and nervous systems.¹¹ Third is the existence of mirror neurons—cells in the brain that fire in response to witnessing the same actions one has performed being performed by *someone else*. Mirror neurons play a key role in empathy, and they function not just in humans but in other species ranging from monkeys to mice.¹² Fourth, most mammals are social creatures—and if an individual is going to live with others, it's very useful to have feelings. Getting along, after all, involves communicating key messages as well as the ability to decode the essential messages others are sending *you*.¹³

That the capacity to feel is common to not only mammals but other vertebrates is borne out by another neural fact. The brain, over millions of years of evolution, grew from the bottom up, with its higher, thinking centers developing out of lower, more ancient parts.¹⁴ From the brainstem—the seat of such basic functions as breathing, metabolism, instinct, and reflex—emerged the limbic structures (where feelings are processed) and, more millennia later, the neocortex. Thus, there was an "emotional brain" long before there was a rational one.¹⁵

Feelings are Felt Intensively by Other Animals

Anyone who owns or spends time with an animal knows, without question, that it has feelings. Pets can show sadness and elation, anger and affection, contentment and loyalty, agitation and fear, perhaps even annoyance, jealousy, embarrassment, and guilt. Such personal observations are increasingly

validated by scientific studies—not just of domestic animals but an array of wild ones, too, particularly elephants, dolphins, and primates.¹⁶

It is even possible that some other creatures are *more* aware of feelings than human beings are, because they possess a “primary” form of consciousness: they are aware of themselves and their environment but less burdened by complexities such as reflection and rumination that typify human consciousness. They live closer to the bone, one might say, than we do.

It is equally possible that, in light of their different living circumstances and sensory capabilities, other species may experience some emotional states that we do not.¹⁷ This speculation calls to mind a question posed by the Romantic poet William Blake: “How do you know but that every bird that cleaves the aerial way is not an immense world of delight closed to your senses five?”

Panksepp’s view is that all mammals, at least, are “brothers and sisters under the skin” since we share the same fundamental neurology and physiology. He further believed that, once we understand the nature of other animals’ feelings, “we will finally understand ourselves.”¹⁸ I suspect there may be even more to discover via a deeper understanding of our shared emotionality—what we might call the “commonwealth of feeling.”

Animals’ Capacity for Empathy and Altruism

The most significant trait in such a commonwealth is that of empathy. The subject is now a widely studied one, with much of the evidence gathered by Emory University primatologist Frans de Waal in *The Age of Empathy*.¹⁹

One example he provides is that of a chimpanzee called Yoni. Soviet-era primatologist Nadia Kohts investigated Yoni, who demonstrated extreme concern and compassion for her. As Kohts wrote:²⁰

If I pretend to be crying, close my eyes and weep, Yoni immediately stops his play or any other activities, quickly runs over to me...from the most remote places in the house...He hastily runs around me, as if looking for the offender; looking at my face, he tenderly takes my chin in his palm, lightly touches my face with his finger, as though trying to understand what is happening.

Yoni was displaying more than empathy. He was demonstrating *sympathy*, which not only encompasses an awareness of what someone else is feeling but the urge to act to alleviate the other’s plight.²¹ We could equally call it altruism.

The trait is commonplace in dogs. Darwin, in his book *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, noted how a particular dog would never walk by a basket where a sick friend (a cat) lay without giving her a few licks with his tongue.²² Many other species, though, manifest sympathy. One example: experiments have shown that not only do rats become agitated when seeing surgery performed on other rats but that, when presented with a trapped lab-mate and a piece of chocolate, they will free their caged brethren before eating.²³

Most striking is when a member of one species acts to help a member of another. Apes have been known to save birds²⁴ and, in one case, a seal rescued an old dog that could barely keep its head above water in a river. According to an eyewitness, the seal “popped out of nowhere. He came behind [the dog] and actually pushed him. This dog would not have survived if it hadn’t been for that seal.”²⁵

Many species have gone to extraordinary lengths to rescue people or bring their plight to other people’s attention. This honor roll includes creatures as diverse as a beluga whale, a Vietnamese potbellied pig, and a South American parrot.²⁶ Perhaps the best-remembered case is that of Binti Jua, a female western lowland gorilla. In 1996, at the Brookfield Zoo outside Chicago, she likely saved the life of a three-year-old boy when he fell over a railing, 24 feet down, into the gorilla enclosure. Binti Jua cradled his unconscious body and protected him from male gorillas that tried to get close. Then, carrying him along with her own infant, she gently handed him over to zookeepers at the habitat door.²⁷

A Mystery Involving Persephone

Anyone who has lived with or observed animals for any length of time knows that they have distinct personalities. As with people, some of those personalities are truly memorable. Our family’s Siamese cat, Persephone, was one such creature.



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An extraordinary incident with Persephone will provide a striking illustration of Jung’s *unus mundus*: a world that is more than human, more than temporal, and more than merely physical. It is a world in which emotion appears to be a fundamental binding force.

At age 14, Persephone suffered a stroke. She recovered to a great extent but she passed away a year-and-a-half later. In the immediate aftermath, the person in our family who was perhaps most sorrowful was Gabrielle, then age 12. She loved Persephone as much as anyone, had grown up with her, and the two often slept together on my daughter’s bed. In that bed was kept another constant companion, “Daddy Hoo Hoo,” her stuffed gorilla. Daddy Hoo Hoo, aka DDHH, was about Persephone’s size and, also like our kitty, furry and black. Gabrielle had grabbed DDHH for comfort when I’d begun to bury Persephone and kept hold of him as we said a prayer in

loving memory of our feline friend. Later, she went to bed and took DDHH with her.

The following morning, DDHH was apparently no longer in Gabrielle's bed. We thought he might have fallen out (a common occurrence) but there was no sign of him on the floor, in the bed sheets, between the bed and the wall, or anywhere else in our daughter's room. Over the next five days, my wife made it a point to scour the house in search of the missing gorilla. Gabrielle tried to remember where else she might conceivably have left him, and we checked all those places without success.

Several nights later, my wife was consoling Gabrielle at bedtime. She remarked that perhaps DDDH had accompanied Persephone to wherever it is she was bound. Gabrielle appeared sympathetic to the storyline but made it clear "I need him here with me."

The next morning, I went into our daughter's room to wake her for camp. I sat down on her bed and, once she'd awoken, noticed a stuffed gorilla on the floor just by my foot. Thinking it must have been a "relative" gorilla (Gabrielle owned a Mommy Hoo Hoo, Grandma Hoo Hoo, etc.), I gave it to her asking which other one it was. "Daddy Hoo Hoo!" she exclaimed, and indeed it was him.

His reappearance seems truly bizarre because surely one of us would have seen the gorilla in a spot as obvious as next to the bed. In response to questioning, my wife and son assured me they had not moved DDHH. For any of us to have done so would have been wantonly cruel.

DDHH's return provided, on the one hand, a kind of closure and, on the other hand, a hint of an ineffable mystery. But the puzzle may not be as baffling as it seems. What our family members felt for Persephone—and what she felt for us—is at the core of what all mammals (and perhaps other sentient creatures) have in common. The feelings that flow within us, I contend, connect us to one another in ways both tangible and intangible.

Emotion as a Fundamental Connective Force

When I shared this story with veterinarian Michael Fox, author of the nationally syndicated column "The Animal Doctor," he related his concept of the *empathosphere*, a universal realm of feeling that can transcend both space and time.²⁸ As an illustration, Fox attributes the stunning accounts of pets that traverse long distances to reunite with their owners he attributes to the empathosphere. He suggests that non-human animals are more empathic than people and partake of this natural realm of feeling more readily than human beings.

The same concept has a counterpart in other terms. *Telesomatic* was coined by psychiatrist Berthold Swartz and popularized by author Larry Dossey. It refers to spontaneously feeling the pain of a loved one at a distance, without the conscious knowledge that the other person is suffering.²⁹

An example is that of Melanie, 21, a college student, who was jogging across a bridge when she was hit by a truck and hurled onto a concrete embankment. At approximately the same time, 3,000 miles away, her mother jumped up in the middle of a business meeting and said to her husband,



Michael W. Fox/drfoxvet.net

"Something's just happened to Melanie." (The interruption was recorded in the meeting minutes.)³⁰

The *psychosphere* is a parallel concept of Bernard Beitman, a psychiatrist at the University of Virginia. He conceives of the psychosphere as "something like our atmosphere—around us and in dynamic flux with us. We breathe in oxygen and nitrogen and water vapors, and we breathe out carbon dioxide, nitrogen, and more water vapors...Our thoughts and emotions contribute to the psychosphere and our thoughts and emotions are influenced by it."³¹

What I find so arresting about situations akin to what my daughter and my family experienced is their intimate connection with *feelings*—and not just surface feelings or feelings that quickly pass but more profound feelings that relate to the bonds between people, or the bonds between people and their pets. As Dossey points out, telesomatic events "almost always take place between people who are loving and empathic with each other—parents and children, siblings (particularly identical twins, spouses and lovers)."³² Just as with synchronicities, these experiences arise wholly unexpected; when they do, they make an indelible impression.

There is good reason to suppose that non-human animals play as much a role in the empathosphere or psychosphere as human beings. For one thing, all mammals are remarkably similar emotionally—we come equipped with the same fundamental neurology and physiology. The variations among us are, as Darwin posited, differences in degree rather than kind. It's bad biology, therefore, to assume that a capability we possess another sentient creature does not.³³

Biophilia and the Deep-Rooted Symbolism of Animals

Animals may be deeply embedded in the empathosphere for another reason, related to what's known as biophilia. This is a concept advanced by Edward O. Wilson and the late Stephen Kellert. Their term, biophilia, comes from two Greek roots: *bio* and *philia*. Biophilia thus means “love of life” or “love of living systems.” Or if not love in the colloquial sense, then a filial connection—even a subconscious affiliation—between humans and the rest of life.³⁴

Biophilia is why so many people have houseplants, or enjoy gardening or going for a walk in the woods. It explains why we long to hear the sound of ocean waves or smell the scent of the rain, watch the sunset or gaze upon cute baby animals frolicking on the internet. Biophilia is reflected in literature throughout the world, including the Bible. As Psalm 23 relates, “God maketh me to lie down in green pastures, He leadeth me beside still water. He restoreth my soul.” Henry David Thoreau spoke of the “tonic of wilderness” and, in the past several years, the term “Nature Deficit Disorder” has been coined as an explanation for psychological and behavioral problems that plague people—especially children—deprived of the chance to spend meaningful time outdoors.³⁵

Kellert elucidates:³⁶

This built-in appreciation of nature reflects our biological origins as a species...For more than 99 percent of our history, our fitness and survival depended on adaptively responding to the ongoing demands of the natural environment, which drove the development of our senses, emotions, intellect, and spirit.

Biophilia gives rise, in Keller's view, to the very human capacity for creating symbols. “Whenever we deal with the real in nature,” he writes, “we almost simultaneously create a symbolic image and representation of it.”³⁷ Nature is clearly the most potent source of metaphors for human beings to describe and explain life to ourselves. It is part and parcel of our everyday language. We “blossom like flowers.” We “stand like oaks.” We “run like the wind.” We can likewise sing like birds, be as wise as an owl, as clever as a fox, busy as a beaver, speedy as a mustang, and lovely as a swan.³⁸

This symbolic immersion in animalia begins early in one's life. Fairy tales, for example, typically employ animal imagery to confront difficult issues of maturation and identity, security and independence, authority and morality. Dinosaurs, for example, clearly stand in for powerful adults with their various temperaments. Such stories reveal a universal tendency to use nature as symbol.³⁹ Nature thus provides much more than a touchstone—it is the matrix in which our concepts of ourselves and the world around us actually form.

The late anthropologist Elizabeth Lawrence summed up the matter beautifully:⁴⁰

The universality of animal symbolism throughout the world and over eons of time indicates the profound significance of this inherent form of biophilia. Vestiges

of the ancient beliefs of our ancestors retain their place in our minds, inextricably interwoven into the human condition because we are evolutionarily and physically, as well as aesthetically, spiritually, psychologically, and emotionally tied to our animal kin.

Animals in Dreams

For all these reasons, animals hold a perennial place in our psyche. Their attributes manifest in humanity's art, in our songs, poetry, religion, myths, and stories—not to mention our dreams.



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In *Dream Animals*, the late depth psychologist James Hillman cautions against pat interpretations of what a given animal appearing in one's dream “means.” He advises withholding judgment, suggesting that these imaginal creatures come to us of their own accord, for their own purposes, not as the products of individual unconscious minds. According to Hillman, “We do not invent these images, arrange for their arrival, or manage their autonomy when they come.”⁴¹ What is *their* need, he asks, *their* reason for coming into our sleep?⁴²

Hillman exhorts us to consider the image as animal, beginning with the “significance and power of the displayed form.”⁴³ Such an appreciation will include all the aspects that the living animal presents. We can study what it does, how it lives, where it goes, how it looks, how it moves. In this way, the creature is not reduced to a given meaning or set of meanings, a static image or a pat interpretation. A mouse, for example, is much more than just “mousy”—it is alert, it listens intently, it's hidden, it's quick, it's timid, it's brazen, it's vulnerable, it's quiveringly alive.⁴⁴

Ultimately, Hillman holds, animals—including dream animals—are teachers of the multiplicity of meaning. “The imagination itself,” he suggests, “is a great animal, or an ark of images that are all alive and move independently.”⁴⁵

The Weave of Emotional Imagery

Let's unpack that statement—imagination as animal—as it encompasses quite a bit of significance.

First, in a neurobiological sense, it's likely that imagery is being produced continuously in the limbic part of the brain, i.e., in the older emotional structures. During wakeful consciousness, this stream of imagery is ignored by the neocortex but, at night, we are opened to it.⁴⁶ The obvious analogy is the way the stars are always "out" but we see them only when the light of the day is dimmed. Second, imagery is intimately connected with feeling—as any artist will attest. Like feelings, imagery flows: it is a weave of simultaneous textures and meanings. The particular images evoked can be highly personal, highly communal, or both at the same time. Third, as we have seen, the evidence is strong that other animals *feel* more intensively than human beings. They likely live closer to the marrow of life.

Putting this trio of elements together, the characterization of our imagination as "a great animal" implies that the background "canvas" of feeling that emanates beneath wakeful consciousness connects us with the immediacy and intensity of life, and with all the meanings that may be found both within us and outside of us.

Ultimately, synchronicities—especially those involving other animate creatures—indicate, as Jung intuited, that we are powerfully and soulfully connected in an "unus mundus"—a more than human, more than temporal, and more than strictly physical world.

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