



Deconstructing Fido

Can humans really communicate with animals?

By Eli Gottlieb

UNTIL RECENTLY, I WAS NEVER particularly fond of dogs. They always seemed faintly pathetic in their desire to please, ingratiate, and swindle you out of love. I saw them as fanged con artists, working a heart-angle. (Full disclosure: I was bitten several times by dogs as a child.) In any event, for the last years I've been more of a cat man. Felines, I believed, were what an animal should be, keeping safely on the far side of the species divide and not trying, in some fashion or another, to be you.

Then I moved to Colorado, into a large house. Children arrived, along with a yard. A dog, obviously, was not long in coming. The end of the story was preordained. Bibi, a female goldendoodle puppy, came into my life, and I was gone. Sick in love. A teenager with a crush. An appalled friend, visiting from Japan, said, "Do you know you're talking to your pet in complete sentences?" My partner, shaking her head sadly, added, "Please remember that the animal is not a lesser primate. It's a dog." What I couldn't say in my self-defense, because it was too embarrassing, was that no simple creature could possibly look at me with that obvious depth of understanding. Neither could it know just when to come up to me during a very low moment and give me a consoling lick, nor cock its

eyes in the precisely sultry manner that would override my exhaustion and make me, despite my fatigue, take it out for a walk. Bibi smiles at me. She yawn-giggles. She pouts. She looks at me sometimes with the disapproving glare of a homeroom teacher. She *communicates*.

OUR PROJECTION of ourselves onto our pets is visceral. It is also inevitable. We want to be friends with creatures that witness us at our most vulnerable and intimate. More than that, we dream of somehow breaching the black box of an animal's brain and entering into real living dialogue with beings that lack the musculature to speak but are clearly thinking and feeling. That desire has probably been around in one form or another since that moment, around 12,000 years ago, when the brown wolf first came in from the Neolithic cold and began the long process—through genetic intermingling—of becoming Fido. In recent times, thanks to television shows like the *Pet Psychic* and assorted horse and dog whisperers, a boom field has grown up of people professing to chat with creatures that were formerly only eaten, ridden, or caressed.

Off to one side of animal psychics exists the somewhat more serious

category of animal communicators. These "interspecies telepathic communicators," as they call themselves, have their own loosely formed guild, their own code of ethics, and their own founder, a woman named Penelope Smith, who opened up the field back in 1970. Her website (www.animaltalk.net) has an approved list of communicators, each of whom was vetted and required to furnish testimonials of his or her mental powers.

In distinction to pet psychics, who merely read the thoughts of animals, communicators enter into live, two-way conversation. The idea of your formerly inscrutable pet—a floppy-eared beagle, perhaps, or a portly goldfish—opening up like a guest on Jerry Springer has proved irresistible to owners and caused this small corner of the \$38 billion American pet industry to catch fire. In the words of Kate Solisti, a well-known animal communicator from Boulder, "Things have changed. In the beginning of doing this work it was very fringe, but in the last five years it's grown exponentially. It coincided with people wanting to learn about holistic alternatives for their pets. As they began to look for alternatives, they began to look for all alternatives."

MY DOG HAS MOODS. Like most other living creatures Bibi isn't all unalloyed joy, but is sometimes pensive and withdrawn. She mopes occasionally, and at such moments seems to be gazing, with her long-lashed eyes, into some lost home world. Is she thinking of the siblings from whom she was separated? Is she pondering the fate of her vanished mom? Is she giving the thumbs down on the new liver-flavored kibble?

Curious to know the truth about this canine cogitation, I called up a prominent Colorado animal communicator named Terri O'Hara. O'Hara, 47, is a cheerful, plainspoken woman who is not interested in selling you on what she does. Nor does she need to. Her success speaks for itself. "I don't try to convince people," she says. "I don't want them to sit there on the other side of the phone with their arms crossed, and say, 'I want you to tell me if she eats out of a blue bowl or a pink bowl.' I tell people that if within the first 10 minutes of the phone consult they're not happy with what I'm saying, they can terminate it there and get their money back. (Her fees start at \$55.) I've done over 2,000 consults, and had that happen exactly twice."

I agreed to accompany her on a house call, the better to see her work from up close.

Jolting along back roads en route to her appointment at a sprawling country mansion in Evergreen, O'Hara explained a little bit of her own background. "I had a cat as a child growing up in Michigan," she said. "When the cat would run away, my family would say, 'Oh, we hope Benji isn't dead.' I'd say, 'No, he'll be back Thursday at 2 p.m.' 'That's nice, honey,' they'd say. But then Benji would come back on the appointed date and time. When I was a teenager, I decided I was a freak. I could hear the animals, and no one else could. I would have to look away from cats and dogs and birds to not get too involved in their lives."

When we reached our destination, the family bustled out to meet us, greeting O'Hara affectionately. The mother, Betsy, and her daughter, Katie, had taken O'Hara's "animal communication for kids" class about a year ago, and Katie, a gap-toothed, freckle-faced girl of 9, now confided, "It's really fun because we were just recently at Discovery Cove, in Florida, and I could communicate with the dolphins, armadillos, and two-toed sloths. They said they were very happy and loved their owners, but they couldn't talk much because they had to work. You kind of talk to them with an open heart, and they talk back to you."

The mother nodded approvingly, as O'Hara leaned forward to clarify. "Each animal," she explained, "has a different feeling, a personality. I've talked to poodles who were quiet little things, and others who thought they owned the world. If an animal is joyous, then you feel their joy. If you're around them and you feel anxious and worried, then that animal is probably anxious and worried."

At that moment, Astro the droopy hamster was brought out. His button eyes were dull, and he lay listless on his bed of wood shavings. "He refuses to eat," said E.J., his concerned 8-year-old owner. O'Hara, looking at the animal up close, went into what she calls "telepathic space." Her eyes closed a moment, the lids trembling. Then her eyes popped open. "I'm not feeling well," she said. "My stomach is burning. Something in my food is dyed and making me sick." The family gasped. The food was brought out, and the diagnosis confirmed: small dyed pellets of green had been placed in the meal by the manufacturer to draw the animal's attention.

And so it went. The striped tree frog, originally scooped out of a backyard pond and currently rather glum, was brought out in a terrarium for O'Hara's inspection. "He wants to go back home. He's asking, 'Can I go back

to my natural world and die there?'"

At this, E.J. burst into inconsolable tears.

The fish, in the small tank, signaled, "I'm too hot."

Out on the nearby paddock, the beautiful Arabian horse was brought out. "My left elbow hurts here," O'Hara said, speaking for the horse but indicating her own elbow. She continued as O'Hara: "That would mean the horse's left front leg would be hurting in the fetlock."

The owners nodded in agreement. The animal had recently been bruised there. "Could you ask if she likes the new bridle?" they asked.

"Not that much," O'Hara responded. "She prefers the old. She also says she wants rubber on the ramp leading up to her stall."

O'Hara turned to where I was standing rather uncomfortably amidst the cantering giant animals. "The horse just said, 'I'm done,'" she said. At that moment, incredibly, the animal docilely turned and walked to the other end of the paddock.

WE GROW UP TRUSTING the data of our senses. We are taught that the observable universe follows immutable physical laws. And then we see things like what I saw during my afternoon with Terri O'Hara, which give these assumptions a seriously hard shake. Yet science itself, surprisingly, is beginning to provide some explanations. According to Marc Bekoff, a professor emeritus at University of Colorado-Boulder specializing in cognitive ethology (the study of animal minds), recent work in neuroscience tends to bolster the claims made by animal communicators that channels of knowledge likely exist between sentient beings which are not immediately graspable. "In the '90s," says Bekoff, who has collaborated extensively with renowned primatologist Jane Goodall, "scientists discovered mirror-neurons, which work to produce empathy. When a monkey picks up a pen, certain neurons fire in his brain. But when another monkey sees a monkey pick up a pen, a similar set of neurons, called mirror-neurons, fires in his brain as well. Apparently, there is a neurobiological basis for certain kinds of empathic connections, which allow entry into areas of the mind where people haven't wanted to go for fear it was too 'fluffy.'" Bekoff continues: "A man by the name of Rupert Sheldrake has done controlled, empirical work on dogs knowing when their owners are coming home. Doubters would like to debunk it, but they can't."

Increasingly, not only pet owners but

licensed vets are availing themselves of options formerly thought kooky or so out of the mainstream as to be unthinkable: massage, acupuncture, and animal communication. Coloradans, a notoriously dog- and cat-crazy people, are leading the charge.

According to Diana Roberts, a veterinarian with nine years' experience in the Evergreen and Aspen Park area, "Vets are growing frustrated with the number of cases that Western medicine doesn't have an answer for. Allergies, chronic muscular pain, and other problems such as arthritis, to name a few. Coloradans, for their part, have lately grown a lot more open to holistic medicine and, more importantly, to doing whatever it takes to keep their animals healthy and happy."

Take vet Brenda McClelland, one of the new breed of DVMs who is equally at ease talking about things like "healing touch" and "energy blocks" as she is syringes and antibiotics. She and her husband, a veterinarian, run the Pet Wellness Clinic in Fort Collins. It's a bright, cheerful place whose orientation is announced by the space-filling New Age music, the carpeted, gently lit examining rooms, and the mini-fountain trickling soothingly in one corner.

On a recent visit to the clinic, one of those examining rooms was nearly filled by Angel, a great Pyrenees dog with a white coat like a shag carpet, a head the size of a toaster oven, and two meltingly warm eyes. A huge shaved portion of the dog's left hindquarter revealed an ugly, large patch of pink skin stippled with the dark dots of her radiation "suntan," as McClelland called it.

"She's got a soft-tissue sarcoma on the left thigh," she explained. "She went through radiation at CSU. In the aftermath of that, she started 'acting weird.'"

"She was not acting like our dog," said her owners, Steve and Karen Hastings, a couple in their 50s, also in attendance. "She was erratic and restless."

The dog was then on a cocktail of drugs designed to kill the pain of her radiation, to suppress further growth of the tumor, and to relax her, but the drugs were in fact having just the opposite effect. "At our first session," said McClelland, a girlish thirtysomething woman with startlingly large green eyes, "Angel told me that a drug called Gabapentin was making her anxious. I'd felt her anxiety from the moment she'd walked in the door. It literally felt hard for me to breathe. I should make it clear that to my knowledge as a vet, there are no side-effects to Gabapentin. But I stopped the drug anyway."

"And she relaxed on the spot," said Steve Hastings, leaning forward and fiddling with his glasses, "and it never came back."

When the time was right, I popped my question: "Can the dog furnish proof of animal communication to me?"

With a nod, McClelland shut her eyes, passed her long hands over Angel's hulking, alabaster body, and then began to knead a place under the animal's neck. Minutes passed. The fountain trickled. The dog, meanwhile, conked out, appearing to snooze. Then suddenly the dog stirred, sat, grew agitated.

"First of all," McClelland said, looking at me accusingly, "your question made her upset. I gave her the question and she said, 'He wants me to answer that question like I'm on display.' She also said, 'If people can't see past the fluff, that's their problem. For those people who don't believe, go away.'"

Holding my eye, Brenda McClelland then repeated, not unkindly, "go away."

WHAT WOULD OUR own dogs say to us, if they could talk? What treasured-up insights would they confess to us about we their owners? Canines live in an olfactory universe so intense that it's nearly three-dimensional. Does Bibi, for example, think it odd that our boys spend half their waking life after school writing with lead sticks on folding objects (notebooks) that smell like trees? Does she like the soap I use? Does our dirty laundry gross her out?

While we arranged an appointment with a communicator, the better to answer these and other burning questions, I continued my inquiries into the larger issue of whether or not animal communication works. On the plus side of the ledger is the large mass of anecdotal evidence. Owners regularly explain that after a visit to the communicator their animals were calmer and more understanding of them, and that they themselves were more aware of the impact of their own behavior on their formerly uncommunicative pets. Animal communicators provide crucial information for bereaved owners contemplating euthanizing pets, by giving those owners the sense that the animals are participants in the decision. And, as incredible as it may seem, they often ferry messages from deceased pets to grieving owners.

I had several more encounters. I went with Kate Solisti to see a woman whose cat was tearing up the house. Kate, a trained animal nutritionist, is a striking, lively woman who's been practicing since 1992. ("It's fun working with horses because they're so idealistic.")

After listening to the owner's complaints about her cat, Solisti explained to the woman that the animal was reacting both to its diet and to her husband, who thought it the height of fun to lock the animal in the closet. But I could see no mountaintop moments of communication pass between Kate and the rather dim-looking tabby. I spoke to other vets around Colorado, most of whom, if they didn't outright support animal communication, reluctantly admitted there "might be something there."

Then there's the case of Rebecca Gershten, a 46-year-old woman who owns Sixth Avenue Pet Source in Denver. She happened to be in the store that cold afternoon two years ago when Brent J. Brents, the serial rapist who held Denver in his demonic thrall for weeks, strolled in. She was raped and robbed while her beloved Jack Russell terrier, Henry, looked on.

Two years later, on the phone, her voice is level but clearly filled with emotion as she recalls that day. "It was about 4 p.m. that he came in, raped, and robbed me. The first thing the next morning I called my animal communicator and left a message, telling her what had happened, and asking to talk to her and try to get a description of the assailant out of Henry. I'd given a description to the police already several times, but I wanted to know if there was anything else I'd missed. The communicator 'contacted' the dog telepathically, reviewed the film of what had happened through his eyes, and then described the assailant in detail—descriptions that jibed with my own. I relayed all this to the police, who were receptive." The dog also said that Brents would strike again soon and be caught by the end of the week. The dog was right.

Her voice grows congested with feeling as she goes on. "When I was first grabbed, at knifepoint, Henry barked, and I channeled everything in my being into this dog, begging him to remain quiet through the entire thing. I could tell it was killing the brave little guy not to intervene, but he didn't, and through that I was able to keep him alive."

What can one make of stories such as these? One can disbelieve all one wants, and seek safety in "hard" science and indisputable cold facts. But what, finally, is one to make of them?

ON THE APPOINTED DAY, our family gathered on the bed, with Bibi at the center, lying in her favorite pose: on her back with all four legs straight up in the air, like an overturned kitchen table. Terri O'Hara, per our agreement, was already on the speaker phone. She had been e-mailed a photo of Bibi, the boys

had drawn up their questions in advance—we were each allowed four—and the session began smoothly, with her making some initial observations. “Bibi has a wild teenage girl energy in her,” she said. Yes, I thought, she does. “She knows that she’s the apple of your eye, and a beloved family member.” Well yes, I thought, of course she does.

About 15 minutes in, with O’Hara having meanwhile made many interesting but somewhat general deductions about Bibi (“she doesn’t want another dog in the house” or “she wants to thank you for the walks you go on”), something happened that was either conclusive proof of communication or not. During a discussion of a serious accident in which Bibi jumped out of the moving car of a family friend and was mopey for weeks afterwards, O’Hara said, “She’s showing me that she was jumping out of fear, that she was trying to get away from this person who she didn’t know. She spun on the road, she’s showing me, and she tore the nails on her right rear foot pretty badly.”

At that moment, the seemingly asleep Bibi, while all of us were looking on, *shook her right rear foot*.

The session concluded 15 minutes later with all of us feeling faintly exhilarated. The million-dollar question is: Does all this mean anything, aside from a fun family adventure with what was a single moment of either amazing coincidence, or not? O’Hara made several other points that seemed just a touch too specific to have been merely accidental, noting, for example, that the dog found the backyard of our new house “less intriguing” than the old (which gave onto a river and was canopied with raccoon-friendly trees), or that she has “some digestive issues and a sensitive stomach” (a fact that all of us, cleaning up after her, have duly noted). Would these insights of hers have held up in a court of law trying the veracity of animal communication? Probably not. But we’re not in the realm of scientific proof. We’re in the realm of emotional proof—the same realm, by the way, that includes all the world’s organized religions. Animal communication is a felt phenomenon. Scoff all you want at it, but the Angels and Henrys and Astros and, yes, Bibis of the world, with their innocent eyes and wagging tails, seem silently to refute popular skepticism. There *is* something there. I’m sure of it. If you still have doubts, just ask your pet. ▲

Eli Gottlieb is a contributing editor of 5280. He has not yet read this article to Bibi.