

# ON TORTOISES MONKEYS & MEN

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## ON TORTOISES, MONKEYS, AND MEN

Here in dark subthalamic pools of archetypal memory echo the voices of those cold and hot blooded ancestors who invented the harmony of individuality and community which every animal descendent seeks, to this very day. We humans, off balance and retreating from our natural history, look back in terror. Our schemes and strivings to subdue and conquer nature are driven by fear. Scientist, teacher, politician, parent -- all are afraid of being consumed in the potent exuberance of this elaborate and unknowable universe. Wilderness scares us. We hide from its truth.

We also hide its truth. A few years ago I talked to ethologists and conservationists at an international conference.<sup>12</sup> My main thrust was to get them to loosen up, to report the personal aspects of their involvement with wild animals. When we describe how we face our fears and talk openly about our personal encounters with wildlife, we help the lay person to experience the scientist as a fellow human, and establish the groundwork for an informed sense of interspecies kinship. One scientist declared "if taking a politician to meet a gorilla gets a vote for conservation, it's worth the risk of a little anthropomorphic thinking." Many agreed.

Still, a few argued that "we must never think of animals in human terms, it's unscientific." Ironically, this narrow-mindedness has undermined the natural sciences. Like all forms of ritualized simplicity, the law of parsimony and its correlated demand for severe detachment from and objectification of animals has hamstrung research, dehumanized animal caretaking, and dampened the spirit of conservation.

Fortunately, recognition of the value of personal experience in these domains is growing. Empathy and intuition are again becoming legitimate factors in the understanding and support of other species. This allows us to attest to the secret truth of the scientific community -- most people who study wildlife have experienced profound connections with animals and are deeply aware of the mysterious hidden lives of their animal subjects.

I have collected and analyzed hundreds of anecdotes describing these kinds of natural epiphanies. In addition to being self-defining for the individual humans involved, *profound interspecies events* (PIEs) inspire a transformed world-view that is essential to the reunion of man and nature.<sup>11</sup>

At our core, all living beings are endowed with an innate affinity for the organisms and landscapes through which we evolve. That core must be reached, in order to energize the reunion. This means plunging past the cortex to the midbrain, past the exquisite human elaborations of our mammalian mind to the sublime remnants of our reptilian heritage. Some of the most hardheaded scientists have made this plunge. Many know that the laboratory rat, the desert tortoise, and the wild gorilla are loving, spiritual, thoughtful beings. We are just scared to admit it, or to talk about it.

After fear, the greatest obstacle to understanding these potent events is their ineffability -- the best of poets struggle to write them down. The autobiographies of scores of natural scientists are marked with quick and fitful allusions to these experiences. "Words can't describe how I felt" and "I'll never forget this incident" are used to signify the occurrence of a life-changing natural epiphany. It's not enough.

Having studied with poets and fiction writers, trying to develop my ability to signify these events -- I can tell you it's the hardest work I've ever done. When one has been bred on concise ideas and concrete observations aimed at cool impersonal rhetoric, it is hard to produce the prose and poetics that evoke the actual experience in the reader, as if it were happening now, in the moment. This is especially true for the ephemeral spiritual and emotional epiphanies that highlight our lives with other animals.

Some years ago in a fiction workshop, after reading an excerpt in which I tried to display an orangutan communicating with a human, a more experienced novelist criticized "orangutans don't talk." My first reaction was "of course they do." The workshop leader corrected me -- "yes, but not like that." <sup>1</sup> I had not yet found the words, style, and syntax to evoke a believable sense of "orangutan language" in the reader. But I keep trying. Very few people will meet the ape in its rain forest, or talk to the tortoise as it crawls from its desert burrow. But many can read, empathize, and act with compassion evoked by those of us who are blessed with such experience and the will to express it.

It is that will, that desire to let the truth be known, that compels this essay. With humility, I shall weave together a few tales, starting with my own; to inform and arouse the love and reverence for the animal world that is our heritage and our hope.

My interspecies life began at age seven when I got a turtle named Rocky, and learned the meaning of perseverance. Then I just thought that the creature inside that hard shell sat still on the palm of my hand in order to survive, waiting me out, balancing against the tilts and twitches of my shaky arm. As a child I could only sense the reptile's stability. I was hot blood and he was cool bone. I could not find our common voice.

Thirty years and many moves after Rocky, a big healthy twelve pound male California desert tortoise wandered into the park behind my home in Hermosa Beach. No one in the neighborhood claimed him, so I installed him in the garden and named him Sydney, after my dad. Four years later folks moved next door with a half blind, crack-shelled old tortoise of questionable age and life history. "Let's put them together -- if they get along, you can have her," they said. I was quick to accept the offer.

We sat close by, in the event of hostilities, and placed her gingerly in the dirt by his side. He sniffed. She retracted. He bobbed his head. She blinked. He nipped gently at her shell. She turned. Bob, blink, nip, turn -- they carried on with increasing intensity. We humans chatted about life and love in our garden. The tortoises did the same.

Suddenly Sydney was hefting himself up her shell. Her turning hastened at first, but he stayed front feet up, rear legs on the ground, maneuvered like an agile athlete, steadily tracking her turns. She slowed. He took position at her rear. She lowered her head and raised her aft, ever so slightly. A penis emerged from his underside, beneath his tail, and in it went. Less than fifteen minutes after meeting, after years of solitude, these ancient beings were working, amiably, to assure their species' survival.

I ran into the house, brought out glasses and champagne, and with new neighbors, human and tortoise, I celebrated a reunion that would change my view of life.

I named that old tortoise Lolita, after my mother. Ten years of summer mating and winter hibernation passed -- five clutches of eggs pulled from the dirt in June, forty embryos incubated, thirteen hatchlings nursed and sealed, grown to healthy youngsters. Burrows were built, stone enclosures and work sheds constructed, trails of fruit, vegetables, water, vitamins and fecal matter laid out and cleaned up, tortoises lost and found, measured and monitored, studied and ignored day after day from then to now.

Yet with all this opportunity in my own backyard, I remained an outsider. I avoided attachment, objectified observation, stifled interpretation, conducted the most practical of experiments, carried on business as usual, as if everybody in Southern California were breeding a 200 million year old endangered species in their gardens. Then, one summer night, it all changed -- events forced me to switch from a detached scientist to a deeply involved humanist, and beyond into the naturalistic discovery of my reptilian heritage. I write this story with all my values showing. This is not a simple tale about a man and his tortoise. It is about how I was confronted with the overwhelming mystery of these stoic beings who live in a world that my species only knows in it's bones and brainstem. This is an allegory about humankind losing and finding the reptile voice.

### Voices We Mustn't Hear

There are voices we mustn't hear. In that wind, an aroma. In that leaf, a sigh. Behind that shadowed knoll, where the green turns to a battered transparency, an untimely death delivers its canto. *I am gone, I am gone.* This winnowed testament awakens me from a night of tossing. It isn't just the fireworks, ratcheting crackles like my grandmother pouring chestnuts into an iron bucket. The explosions are only cover. Something unspeakable wakens me. The hidden moon I think at first; then know better.

It's pitch black this July 4th morning and the spirits are up and about. Kids with restless loins. Lanky poltergeists in torn pants and white tee-shirts, up and out on the railroad tracks, lighting cherry bombs to start the celebration of a biological impossibility. *Independence* -- the word tumbles over my thick tongue. Peering west, across the balcony railing, into night, a smell of fish salt convinces me that Santa Monica bay is still there, though I cannot see it. The sticky fog wall says I could be in Kansas, on a cornfield outside Wichita. The collision of water and sand in my ears, and this trickle of brine on my beard say otherwise.

Voices or not, I'm home in Hermosa Beach and will sleep till first light. I barefoot back to bed, toss another three hours, then pull on shorts to start an early day. We'll be heading for the desert at 7 am -- got to beat the sun to Tehachapi. Chores to be done, kids to dress, animals to feed, tortoise burrows to clean. Down the stairs and out into the yard. I feel it again. A soundless voice, but palpable. Pepper on my tongue. A burning sensation in the soles of my feet. Something is very wrong. I want to swallow, but cannot -- squint and scan the lawn, a yellow-olive tube of dull light slashes by and I blink at the strange flat stone in the dirt just below the back hedge. A flat stone.

We have only round stones, walking stones, stones of Triassic origin pressed in hard shell and thick leather legs like logs, stones that fold their bones and flesh inside at night, stones that dig in before Thanksgiving and don't come out till Valentine's Day. Round stones that never show themselves in twilight, and don't like to expose their flat sides.

At once I know -- that voice, that pepper, that tube of light. That flat stone is Lolita overturned, the mama of all our hatchlings on her back, weak side up and resigned to it, given over to the impossibility of independence. Out I tread, cool feet on damp grass, kneel down, peer in. Then the stench hits me and I see the bubbling liquid in a dark hole where her tail should be. See viscous liquid splattered on dirt under her. See a trail of stringy flesh stretching across the lawn. Liquid and skin, and entrails and god knows what meat and gore that I try to deny -- try to think is some misplaced garbage dragged out by the cat, some lamb flank or ham hock shredded by another carnivore's tooth -- try to believe it's anything but the ripped out vitals of Lolita.

Half blind, crack shelled Lolita who came to me ten years ago, the same year Annie my wife came to me. Lolita who took Sydney on her back after a half hour of bobbing heads, circles and bangs, and gave us eight eggs every other summer.

Yes, it is Lolita and she has been dragged from her lair by some eager claws under cover of fireworks and night. Dragged five yards, hissing first like a snake in the box, then squeezing herself small, to make a rock of her, to become an image of invulnerable. Lolita, torn from her burrow, dying.

I turn her over. She gargles, huffs, hangs out her head, heaves in a breath, gargles. I bend down close, look straight into her face. She blinks, shuts her eyes. I run for a carton, return and gently put her in, climb in the car. With Lolita wheezing in the passenger seat I speed to the only veterinary hospital open on July 4th. In the exam room I take her out, place her on the metal table. As I lift her, blood spills from her shell, splashes the metal, my hands, my trousers. I talk to her -- "It's OK mama tuga, we'll do what we can, we'll keep you if we can." Her neck stretches out, eyes open, and she bobs her head up and down, up and down -- a greeting tendered to other tortoises, never before to me.

"Yes, I'm here, I'm with you". Head bobs again. I find myself nodding back, breathing slow, keeping time with my bones. Thinking, how strange -- she's never looked at me, always shied away, more than ten years shied away. Now we stare straight at one another, no blinks, no withdrawal into the pseudo safety of round shell back-house. No business as usual. Staring brown eye into brown eye, reptile into mammal, blood into blood, being into being, and I feel a pain in our hot and cold hearts, smell the aromas of nightfall and birth, musk of clawed feet scratching a deep hole in the dirt, honey breath of eggs, white and round -- dropping ... one, two, three ... four, five, six ... seven ... eight. I see cracked open egg shells, tiny flat heads poking through, thumb-sized replicas of grown tortoises, pulling for life. I see a dozen orphaned Lolita's, hatchlings grown bigger than fists, scratching their own holes in dirt. I see the eyes of this shy mama tortoise peering into my soul, thanking me for my part in her destiny. I hear the voice, still small, of primordial earth. Then an eerie creaking call bubbles through her throat, mouth opens, a gasp, a bob, a choke, a bob. Mouth closes. Her head drops. She's dead.

My tears are not for Lolita alone, nor just for me, my family, her companion, their offspring, our loss. I cry for all the lost offerings, the beings we've brushed souls with, and not allowed ourselves to know, except in their utility, their service to our trivial tasks.

Lolita the tortoise is all the swamp and savanna of natural history, leaving us behind. She wandered in and out of places like streams and the wind. She lived as part of nature, no matter how civilized the terrain around her. She died the same, preyed on by starving raccoons, strangers in a strange land. Ten years of living epiphany flowed through her, right in my own back yard, and I did not hear her voice till the hour of her death.

I stare at her fallen head, my blood soaked hands. How easily we die. How fast the breath passes. At once I realize that Lolita and all her kind are the most vulnerable animals alive. She cannot run, or fight, after all. She can only stay and hide. Put up a strong front -- seem solid, unsavory, impenetrable. When threatened, hiss like a snake. Then pull inside herself, hide her holes, and pretend she's a rock. I know some people like that. Lot's in fact. I spent years trying to be just like that. A hard-shell stuck-in-burrow techno-scientist who seemed like a rock, but was truly the most vulnerable of beings.

Science is a special kind of construction that cuts off the mind below the cortex, to avoid pain, confusion, excitement, love, fear, elation. It's an adaptive architecture for the very sensitive in a world where vulnerability is not allowed -- the "think-and-act" world. It promotes a kind of hibernation, a mental regimen to keep us cool, no matter how hot the reality. It produces hardheaded rationality and rock-bottom reductionist methodology. We use this thick armor, to protect our soft underbellies from detection by prowling raccoons. But it has severe consequences -- we become cortical tortoises.

Without the reptilian brain we lose the fundamental faith that everything, one way or another, returns to earth. The desert tortoise, and the natural human, suffer mortality without fear. Somewhere below the corpus callosum, between thalamus and medulla, is the locus of awareness that life is transformation from flesh to dirt, dirt to flesh. When Lolita dug in each winter she reentered the womb-grave of our mother, turned cold, and became again the earth. Buried alive for three months, she resurrected in spring. And in her brain, reverence for the transcendence was fixed. Would that it were so for us, warm blooded scientists, terrified of the cold, the dark quiet earth.

For nearly two decades my most constant involvement with any living being has been with the California desert tortoises that have been breeding and burrowing in my back yard. I thought for much of that time that all we had in common was our will to live. Now I know that our underground ancestors have a power far stronger than the simple survival motive. Now I know that these ancient creatures carry out their long and fruitful lives with an unshakable and abiding faith.

My involvement with tortoises is on their terms. They are in their element, their earth, and I watch awestruck by their resilience. To be buried and resurrected every year. To lay eggs without attachment. To eat and fast at the whim of time, at the rise and fall of the sun and prosperity. To die without fear. These are realities that I longed for but could not find as scientist. It took a fundamental shock to my humanity -- the overturned stone, entrails, a shell-backed mentor's nod of farewell -- to open me to the brilliant earthlife that only the reptile voice can articulate.

I walk out onto my balcony, peer down to the yard below, and see Sydney, grown large as a watermelon, bathing in the first triangle of sunlight. When Lolita died, he dug in and hibernated. Did he find her there, underground, spirit to dirt, regenerating? I had to pull him out of the earth eight months later.

Now he is back on cycle -- warming, grazing, warming, sleeping. Perhaps dreaming of his lost companion, and waiting for another. And across the yard, Lolita's children crawl from their burrows, greet the light of another day. What a blessing to have nature so pregnant with historic faith, in my own backyard.

### Colors We Mustn't See

When I look beyond my backyard I am blessed with views of sea and sky. Living at the edge of the Pacific Ocean, I am reminded daily of the depths of our natural heritage. I have swum these cold waters since childhood, skimming the surface. I leave underwater exploration to more adventuresome souls. But I know those that dive beneath the surge have had their interspecies encounters. A friend, Dr. Randy Harwood, told me about an event that occurred while he and a diving buddy were returning to shore from a dive on a sunken ship off Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands. <sup>8</sup>

"I spotted five squid floating in shallow water, near shore. We immediately switched to our snorkels, to avoid scaring them with noisy SCUBA regulators. There were four small six-inch long individuals and one squid nearly two feet in length, perhaps a mother and her offspring. We slowly approached the group until we got about ten feet from them. In unison they all quivered when they saw us and went from pale gray to colorless. The larger one then pulled away and momentarily displayed a spotted-brown pattern of blotches to the group. They immediately responded with a similar pattern. All then went transparent again and the four retreated, while the big squid slowly approached to within four feet of us, tentacles first. She was inspecting us, looking us over, while the little ones watched at a safe distance.

"Suddenly the big squid began displaying with all sorts of spots, stripes, and patterns -- colors shifting from a blush of red, to gray and brown, to metallic blue. She was trying to communicate with us, greeting, questioning -- *Nice day, huh? What are you and what are you doing here? Why can't you speak?* We hung motionless, unable to respond.

"After two minutes of questioning, the big squid became pale gray again, turned around, and slowly bobbed back to the others. She then displayed in deep reds and browns with large blotches and spots. The leader was reporting on the reconnaissance. The little ones replied, repeating messages, matching her colors.

"All five went transparent and slowly, tentacles first, approached us. At four feet distance they stopped, and as a group, large and small, repeated the brilliant displays of the first encounter. It was incredible! They had discussed us and decided to try again. In all the colors of their rainbow, five self aware aliens from another world, talked to us.

As they reproduced the inquiry with exquisite precision, the message boiled down to a simple one -- *"Hey stupid, who are you?"* It was magical -- if only we could have replied.

"Eventually they gave up or got bored and slowly drifted off. My partner and I jumped out of the water and breathlessly told our friends on the beach what had transpired. We were received with skepticism by some and envy and laughter by the others. The experience confirmed my belief that these animals have individual feelings, personalities, and are much more than we normally credit them."

Dr. Randy Harwood has seen colors we are not supposed to see. The corporate powers that harvest the sea, sending squid and countless other beautiful and intelligent beings towards extinction want us to believe that what's fried on the platter is just protein. Harwood makes his living as a dentist, enriches his life as an underwater adventurer, and is in every way a traditional citizen. He doesn't march or lobby for animal rights, condemn medical research, or eat only vegetables.

But if his friends and patients ask him about the uncanny experiences he's had diving the reefs and wrecks of the world, he tells them about the time a family of squid showed him their colors, and hopes they get the message. Harwood says: "We humans must open our minds about all living beings -- not be so quick to destroy their homes and lives for our own pleasure, greed."

The fact that these hard shelled ancestors are cold blooded does not mean they are without affinities. Harwood's squid are as curious as the family dog. Once they recognize that we are not predators, that we care to know them, they return the complement. That the big old tortoise who lives in my garden appreciates me is apparent to any who see him amble over and sun himself at my feet. He's taking my companionship, nothing more. And in so doing, he prepares my eyes and ears for the colors and voices of nature. Secret hues and silent symphonies that the fearful and greedy say we mustn't see or hear. Sights and sounds that rob us of our false sense of independence, and deliver us back to nature.

### The Fastest Route

The fastest route back to nature occurs when animals we consider dangerous, distant, or disinterested surprise us. Wild creatures that *seek a friendly encounter* with a human produce most profound interspecies events -- in my research I call this the **SAFE scenario**.<sup>14</sup> It's rare for squid to do this with humans; not so rare for our fellow primates. Because monkeys and apes are so much like us, we recognize their shows of interest and concern more easily, and respond more openly, than with less familiar beings. The real power behind Dr. Dolittle was, after all, a monkey named Chee Chee. It is through these kindred spirits that many scientists learn to talk to the animals.<sup>13</sup>

My first profound interspecies event occurred in 1963 while working as a research fellow at the UCLA Brain Research Institute.<sup>9</sup> We young scientists were encouraged to experiment with anything, with soft furred rodents, with a lost dog, a litter of alley cats. Most of all we wanted close kin - chimpanzees. But we'd settle for monkeys: rhesus and nemestrina, cynomolgus, and the red faced Japanese macaque. Settle for distant cousins in gunmetal cages, a meter square; tree swingers boxed with barely room to stand.



I remember tough muscled monkeys pacing in small circles, rocking on red rumps, sucking thumbs. Hear them chatter high pitch at me in the morning when I troop into the lab. I inhale the thick brown musty smell of flaked skin, matted hair and sawdust soaked in urine, caked to lumps of feces, burnt-bronze, texture of wet Purina monkey chow. I snicker back, smile my big teeth, huff thanks to turned backs, their shows of submission. If time allows I accept their invitations to put a forearm against the links, let brown fingers scratch for invisible ticks, let pink tongue lick salt from my skin. Those monkeys taught me how to talk with animals. For years we groomed and gestured, cooed and smacked. And for years I also restrained, invaded, implanted, and shocked.

Then one day a frightened janitor tracked me down in a colleague's office to tell me that a pigtailed macaque had escaped from his cage and was ransacking my lab. This had never happened to me before. Handling a scared monkey in cage or experimental chamber was one thing; catching an escapee was another. I became terribly nervous as I walked through the long dingy corridor. I entered the room and peered through the haze and clutter; a familiar smacking sound drew my eyes to the far wall. Snicky, a three year old male, starred down at me from atop a bookcase, hair on end, eyes wide, teeth bared. Half terrified and thinking him hostile, unsure what to do, I mechanically smacked my lips at him, our usual morning greeting. He shuddered through a kind of tension melt-down and at once jumped from the shelf, leapt into my arms and held on.

In the distance he had seemed so huge, imposing, wild. Now in my arms he was small, vulnerable, dependent. I sat on the linoleum floor with this animal in my lap -- cleaned the scab that edged his dental cement skullcap, checked his implanted electrodes to be sure they hadn't loosened, and examined his dilated eyes. I remember thinking "after all I've done to him, he wants my friendship more than his freedom." I cried. This profound experience turned me away from medical research. I had become too bonded to continue. How could one experiment on his friends? I managed to complete my research and moved into a field where I could work with people in creative innovative endeavors -- as far as I could get from the laboratory lives of trial and tragedy.<sup>10</sup>

Scientists who study monkeys and apes in the wild have a better chance of keeping detached and staying focused on their inquiry. But epiphanies come rarely to the scientific mind-set. Professor Carl van Schaik has been tracking wild animals across the Indonesian archipelago for many years. I was thrilled by his precision when he described orangutan tool manufacturing -- a behavior never before seen in the wild.<sup>16</sup> It takes particular knowledge and experience to empathize with the profundity of a discovery such as his.

Carl Van Schaik reports that, in the peat swamps of western Sumatra, when conditions are right -- enough holes in trees; enough sweatbees, ants, and termites in the holes; enough hunger to stir the curiosity -- then an orangutan will manufacture chisels. He describes with a palpable excitement how he and his assistants watched wild apes perform this chain of behavior time after time: break twigs off just the right size, chew one end into a sponge, bite a wedge off the other end, grip the wedge end in front teeth, push the sponge into the hole to sop up insects, drag out and gobble up enough soaked ants to fill the belly with protein to last 'till the fig trees go to fruit.

Dr. van Schaik's hard-sought findings about the conditions for invention in our ape ancestors are fantastic, but what I find equally exciting is the relentless appetite the man has for discovery that sends him scurrying deep into the rainforest, slugging through mud, liana and leeches for days and months and years upon years just to watch orange apes poking around for bugs.

The scientist's appetite for discovery was rewarded by observation of wild orangutan behavior that has been missed by all other observers. This is the kind of epiphany that scientific researchers live for, in which the animal *exhibits natural reactions which illuminate crucial hypotheses (the ENRICH scenario)*.<sup>14</sup> The conditions for wild orangutan invention and the persistent scientist had not intersected before, in the forest. By staying sufficiently detached and returning again and again, van Schaik and his research team proved something profoundly important to students of evolution.

Of course, everyone who works with orangutans in captive settings know that they are tool makers. The capacity is exhibited daily in zoos and rehabilitation centers. Some discount this as mere mimicry of humans. Others rebut -- mimicry is something else orangutans and humans have in common. In science, one person's epiphany is another person's target. When Randy Harwood returned to shore to tell his friends about the close encounter with squid, some were envious, others skeptical, others laughed. If Dr. Harwood were a marine biologist, he might never have told his story again. But he's an adventurer, willing to accept the possibility that the world holds mysteries we cannot explain, but can know only through empathy and intuition.

Why are we excited to find that wild orangutans make tools or that squid confer among themselves about floating humans? Other animals are not likely to teach us much we don't already know about tool use, or about language. Those are human specialties. But they can show us the depth of fascination and affinity every living being has for its environment, and the animals in it, including the human interlopers. Other animals have biophilia too. That makes us feel akin to them -- and kinship is profoundly satisfying.

### The Near Life Experience

The longer a scientist stays in the wild, the harder it is to remain separated from the individual animals seen every day. It's one thing to advance scientific knowledge or to experience the wonders of nature with aplomb. It's another to watch orphaned apes suffer the loss of their mothers and homeland to poachers and woodcutters. Biruté Galdikas has watched many such events, and had to respond. Twenty five years ago Galdikas, like Dian Fossey and Jane Goodall, took the Louis Leakey challenge to study great apes in their rain forest habitat. Before that she had only seen orangutan in photos.

Galdikas first contact was with macaques housed in the basement of the UCLA psychology department. As an undergraduate, she groomed and talked to the curious animals, when the scientist who was working with them wasn't there. She didn't know then, that I was that scientist. We met three decades later at an international conference on orangutans: that's when we discovered our earlier connection, and common interests.

Biruté was immediately taken by my observation that the profound moments in human-animal interaction follow measurable and predictable patterns. When I suggested that the most powerful natural epiphanies seemed similar to the mysterious Near Death Experience (NDE) -- a kind of "crossing over" from one world to another, Biruté became very animated and enthralled.

"Yes, you are right -- I believe you have done what every scientist longs to do -- identified an important phenomenon and given it a label. I am sure what you call the Profound Interspecies Event (PIE) is real, and you definitely must study it." <sup>4</sup> A year later after tracking in the Borneo rain forest where Birute had done her early research, we met again in Los Angeles. This time I turned on a tape recorder, and we spent an afternoon talking about our major moments observing and interacting with orangutans and other wildlife. From that interview I have selected an excerpt which is especially revealing of the power of these interspecies epiphanies.

Biruté and I had been talking about about the Dyak concept of "ghost" as it applies to the orangutan. I asked her if the time that her wild orangutan daughter Akmad brought a newborn baby ape to Camp Leakey after being unseen in some far off forest for a year was like a ghost coming through the barrier between two worlds. <sup>5</sup> This led to a series of remarkable insights into the profound interspecies event. Here's the verbatim interview <sup>6</sup> :

Galdikas: " As I understand the Dyak cosmology ... the ghost is something totally unpredictable because it's not of this world. This creates a huge barrier."

Rose: "Then we may seem like ghosts to other species?"

Galdikas: "Of course, I operate in a different world, and the orangutan, the chimp, the zebra or giraffe has to get past that barrier too."

Rose: "Then would you say Akmad came through that barrier to visit mama ... did you think yourself fully as mama then?"

Galdikas: "Oh absolutely. I had this relationship where she was very close, stayed with me, touched me, clung to me. She obviously wanted that closeness once. But that all disappeared with adolescence. This distancing had occurred, and suddenly, with this experience ... I was allowed through. It must be like physicists talk about these wormholes, that allow for time travel but they're the size of one electron ... a wormhole from one universe to the other ... and that's what it was."

Rose : "Who had traveled through?"

Galdikas: "In this case I traveled through, but she had allowed me to travel through. ... she allowed me to pass into her world."

Rose: "Can you describe what it felt like? Was it fast, or did it happen slowly?"

Galdikas: "It was more like a freefall down the wormhole. You know the Doors' song -- *break on through to the other side?* All those images come to mind, and came to mind at that time. I'd been studying orangutans for 15 years. I had actually been there, I already was there, but that incident ..."

Rose: " It took the last bit of you in and said you are there..."

Galdikas: "Right. But she allowed it. She was the one that did it. It wasn't me."

Rose: "Can you describe what she did that allowed it?"

Galdikas : "She wouldn't allow Mr. Achyar to touch her baby. It was when she attacked him, that's when it occurred. I had never seen Akmad like that ... she's basically a wild orangutan who entered the human life for a short while, and then left. When she attacked Mr. Achyar, that's when the *PIE* occurred. ... *She told me I was in her world and Mr. Achyar wasn't.* Mr. Achyar was astute enough to know what had happened -- he's had those PIE's. If we could access the depths of his soul ..."

Rose: "You'd get plenty of them."

Galdikas: "Yes ... his whole life has been shaped by them ... .."

Rose: "And yours .. and Akmad's ... when she came back?"

Galdikas : "Yes ... it was mutual..."

Rose: "You were both in a mutual place ... and zap ..."

Galdikas: "... that's really true, that moment was truly profound, that moment was one of those moments -- the nanoseconds when you see the eyes of God, you're one with nature ... It's so intense that it must have physical or physiological correlates ... and you're experiencing God!"

Rose: "Akmad let you know that you were God?"

Galdikas: "That she was God ... it came through her."

Rose : "Through her?"

Galdikas: "That she was the wormhole to God."

It is instructive to examine this report carefully. At first I interpreted the published story of Akmad's return from the wild with her baby <sup>5</sup> as a powerful *humanistic* event, like mine with the macaque or Harwood's with the squid, in which an animal *seeks a friendly encounter* with a human. That seems a fair reading of the incident, from the orangutan point of view. But focusing on the spiritual power of the report, I began to see the event as akin to my experience with the death of our mama tortoise -- an awe inspiring *naturalistic* event in which I was ***shown an extraordinary element of nature (the SEEN scenario)***. <sup>14</sup>

Of course Birute's experience was awesome and spiritual. But what was affected her most was the contrasting hostile reaction of Akmad to Mr. Achyar -- an empirical detail that informed a moment of profound *scientific enlightenment*. Biruté's humanistic response to her orangutan daughter's return with an ape grandchild was catapulted to an epiphany when Akmad demonstrated that it was Biruté, and no one else, that she had come to share her baby with. That is when Biruté felt herself being taken through the tunnel to face a suddenly proven Truth -- that she and this orangutan were in one world, pure kindred spirits in union within the original and evolving Creation.

What is important to all of us here is the fact that a wild animal, cared for during a difficult time in childhood, may return to live in the wilderness yet retain affinity for particular members of its foster family. So much affinity that when the ape has her own child, she brings it to show to one foster human parent, while enforcing the distance of others. Again, those epiphanies which are characterized as scientific and naturalistic by their reporters have a central humanistic component. The discoveries and realizations that move us most, that we never forget, always seem to tell us something personally important about ourselves and our kinship with the other animals.

### The Ultimate Epiphany

Early in this journey Jane Goodall <sup>7</sup> sent me to see Marc Cusano. Marc worked for seven years as caretaker of over thirty chimpanzees living on five moated islands in the Lion Country Safari wildlife park in West Palm Beach, Florida. Cusano's fame among primate caretakers is earned. With heroic effort he managed to befriend chimpanzees that were exceedingly hostile to all other humans. Powerful apes that once chased or threw him off their islands, came to accept him. The occasion when the ostensibly mean alpha male named Old Man ran to rescue his human friend, threw off four other chimps who had Marc pinned down and were biting him fiercely, and helped Marc get back to his boat and off the island, is often told as the ultimate interspecies event.

In his home in Florida, Marc told me that this event, which Jane Goodall has described in two books, while incredibly profound, was just one of many peak experiences in his career working with chimps. <sup>2</sup> As I listened to Cusano I realized that he may be the only human alive who has become an integral part of chimpanzee society. Sunrise to sunset, and often into the night, Marc Cusano worked and played, fought and reconciled, ate and slept with these different bands of apes.

From teaching the apes how to scare hippos and cattle off their islands to convincing them that his skin was too thin and they had to pull their punches to play with him, Marc Cusano has as much to tell about our own primate nature as anyone I've met. At the end of six hours of stories I was hard pressed to decide what was his greatest natural epiphany. He wouldn't say.

I think Marc's most wonderful experiences happened later, after all the animals had accepted him, during the years when interspecies conflict had subsided and enduring friendship emerged. Marc remembered countless afternoons when he had fed all the chimps, cleaned up trash, repaired structures, and had a couple of hours left to play with the guys. He describes how they wrestled, raced and climbed, him keeping up as best he could, them helping best they could. If it was hot, they tired faster.

The alpha male climbed into the shade of a culvert in the center of the island. Two other males were already there grooming. Marc, who was second in the hierarchy, secured his boat, then walked over, sat down and began grooming his friend. The others made space for him, as usual. Then one chimp lay over and fell asleep, leaning against Marc. Marc lay down by him, and another animal came to join them. Marc dozed, and soon there were five chimps with him, all asleep. Perhaps a half hour later he woke up -- the others had gone, save one who slumbered beside him in perfect peace.

Marc talks about "a kind of tranquillity I never felt anywhere else, certainly not with human friends." I imagine the deep peace he must have experienced, heavy with the contentment of unquestioned brotherhood, smooth skin and coarse hair pressed together, the smells, the heat of bodies, the soft breathing -- his absolutely wordless ape mind in total communion with the beings around him. Marc had worked day after day, sunup to sundown, and beyond into dark nights, to reach this point that no other human has ever experienced -- all chimpanzees, all brothers under the sun and stars.

These animals did not want to be with Marc merely to play, to groom, or to eat. They truly valued his presence -- who he was mattered to them. They loved him, and they could affirm their love of him by laying down beside his sleeping body, and slumbering with him -- communing serene in their common home. Twelve years ago Marc had to leave his chimpanzee friends. He hasn't seen them since, but they still haunt his dreams. If he ever goes back, I want to be there. It will be a reunion!

### **Acts of Reunion**

Albert Einstein wrote that the enlightened person "looks upon individual existence as a sort of prison and wants ... to feel the sublimity and marvelous order which reveal themselves both in nature and in the world of thought." <sup>3</sup> Natural scientists like van Schaik, Galdikas, and Goodall, adventurers like Harwood, animal caretakers like Cusano -- have felt that sublimity and marvelous order. They have risked total immersion in their corners of wilderness, and have experienced the reunion of humanity and nature. George Schaller speaks from deep experience when he says that "The recent decades have been a turning point, indeed a revolution in our relationship with animals. Humans have begun to overcome cross-species barriers, achieving intimacy with hump-backed whales, chimpanzees, lions, mountain sheep, wolves ... the gorilla, of course, is more than an animal. These apes are part of human heritage. Our kin." <sup>15</sup> In this essay and this volume we struggle to bring that kinship experience to the world of thought.

These worlds where we evolve, that primordial ooze, the sea, the beachhead, the swamp and savanna, are home to us and to all our common ancestors. We commit countless acts of reunion. From the fleshy tunnels and watery caves where we are conceived to the mud holes and mouths where we die, all forms of glory on this planet blend in mysterious ballets and symphonies, all minds and voices contribute, all eyes and ears are tuned to the numinous interplay of life. The biota of earth is interwoven in an ever-changing *biosynergy*, like threads on a multidimensional loom, the tapestry of nirvana. Tortoises, monkeys, and men -- we are all strands of blood and bone, spirit and feeling, informing the dance of many, calling out in the voice of all.

-- *Namaste* --

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**See next page to learn more about the author - Dr. Anthony L. Rose**

## About the Author



Anthony Rose is a social psychologist, writer, and organization developer who has studied macaques, apes, and humans; taught animal behavior, group dynamics, and human psychosocial evolution; and consulted in the private sector and government on forest management, military diplomacy, religious community development, educational innovation, and health care quality assurance. He now devotes his professional efforts to influencing the human dimensions of wildlife and wilderness conservation.

Dr. Rose has written three books about the human-wilderness connection, lectured to international conferences, published articles in scientific anthologies and journals, and studied people and primates in Africa, Central America, and Asia. His inquiries into the bushmeat crisis have focused on commercial hunting and conservation values in Cameroon, while his research on human-primate interaction has covered most of the world where apes and monkeys live. Rose's original studies of natural epiphanies demonstrated the crucial factors that affect human values and expand world-view from ego and human centered to eco and life centered. His efforts to curb the commercial slaughter of endangered wildlife

have been supported by a host of organizations including - Conservation International, International Primatological Society, American Zoo Association, International Fund for Animal Welfare, Zoo Atlanta, Disney's Wild Animal Kingdom, Bellerive Foundation, Gorilla Foundation, Save the Species Foundation, and Newman's Own.

Anthony Rose developed and taught the first laboratory course in animal behavior at UCLA (1961) and earned his doctorate in experimental psychology in 1967 while serving as research fellow at the UCLA Brain Research Institute. He then spent a decade with renowned humanist Carl Rogers, co-founded and directed Center for Studies of the Person in La Jolla, California, wrote about the realization of human potential, produced educational games, films, and an award winning TV documentary on drug abuse prevention. Rose worked 20 years as consultant in strategic development areas for industry. He served seven years as director of organization design and research in the Kaiser-Permanente Medical Care Program in Southern California and Hawaii. He is currently a member of the IUCN/SSC African Primate Specialists Group, an organizer of the Southern California Primate Research Forum, and a founder and steering committee member of the Bushmeat Crisis Task Force in Washington, D.C. He also teaches conservation psychology at Antioch University Southern California.

Dr. Rose founded the Biosynergy Institute in 1994. The Epiphany Project began at that time, to document the profound events that return people to a synergistic relationship with nature. In 1996 he established The Bushmeat Project to address the wildlife crisis in equatorial Africa. In 2000 Rose founded the Wildlife Protectors Fund in partnership with The Gorilla Foundation, and serves as Director of WPF/GF - a US nonprofit organization working to rebuild humane values and behavior around the world. Rose's new book, *Consuming Nature*, featuring the award winning photography of Karl Ammann, was published in Fall, 2003.

**For more details, request Dr. Rose's CV at [rose@biosynergy.org](mailto:rose@biosynergy.org).**

### **bi·o·syn·er·gy** *n.*

1. The interaction of two or more biological agents or forces so that their combined effect is greater than the sum of their individual effects. 2. Cooperative interaction among species, especially among the individuals and groups in an ecosystem, that creates an enhanced combined effect. 3. The theory that organisms cooperate with passage of time in the same ecosystem, mainly as a result of natural biophilia, so that biosocial structure and dynamics change to assure the vigor of all life forms. [Greek, from *bios*, life. From Greek *sunergia*, cooperation, from *sunergos*, working together..)