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Going to the Dogs and Finding New Hope: An intra-species collaboration

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Abstract

In my own attempt to further a refusal of binary dualisms and embrace and embody the potential of this often messy collaboration with otherness, I attempt to explore a meeting in time and space with a young person, myself as a not so young therapist and canine co-therapist. What I offer are my reflections and thoughts and what I imagine to be Holly the dog's reflections. I wonder how we might be generating new knowledge in practice as we come together in this canine human emergent practice of co-travel. This one small story of intra-species collaboration is not necessarily a new ontology or ideology in of itself. What I wish to highlight are ideas of becoming through an intra-species collaboration of love and hope. I describe some of my thoughts and experiences as I begin a journey with Holly as co-therapist in my work with young people. I explore how the discarding of typological thinking and being open to a movement beyond binary dualisms can enrich clinical practice.

Keywords:

intra-species collaboration,

canine co-therapist,

movement beyond dualism,

co-constituted practice

Citation Link

Introduction

Beaulieu (2011, p. 70) suggests, "An exploration of animality invites a de-anthropomorphisation of the relationships between humans and animals in favour of an undomesticated type of relationship". Beaulieu points out that Animals are ever present in Deleuze's work and such "an integral part of Deleuzian and Deleuzo-Guattarian thought that they created a concept in these animals' honour: the becoming-animal". Deleuze decries how pet lovers have human relationships with their animal companions. Beaulieu (2011, p. 70) reminds us of Deleuze's suggestion that "what is important to have is an animal relationship with animals (*une relation animale avec l'animal*)". Entering the entirety of a Deleuzian ontology is not my intention here. Rather I wish to highlight ideas of becoming through reflections on my practice that now includes what I am describing as an intra-species collaboration of love and hope. I describe some of my thoughts and experiences as I begin a journey with Holly as co-therapist in my work with young people. So how do I begin to introduce Holly? As Canine, as friend, as companion or is this a becoming of a different sort?

According to the American Disability Act (ADA) Network and the American Kennel Club a therapy animal is distinct from a service animal. A service animal is utilised by a person with a disability to perform specific tasks. Separate and distinct from an emotional support animal, which provides companionship and support to a person with mental or physical health issues. The American Kennel Club (2024) describes a Therapy Dog as "a dog who works with their human teammate".

Therapy animals must undergo assessment and often training to ensure they can safely and positively interact with people. Dogs in therapy can assist children and young people's participation in interventions and therapeutic programmes (Jalango and Guth, 2022). The presence of a well-behaved dog can help children emotionally and physically regulate as well as reduce fears and anxieties. A dog's presence in the therapy space may help children and young people feel safer about sharing traumatic experiences or worries. Jalango and Guth (2022) suggest that "The resilience and gentle ways of special animals can support children who have been abused, neglected, or rejected to find new hope". Children often have a natural interest and curiosity in animals, which helps them to open up quickly and form healthy attachment relationships with the animal as well as the therapist and other people. Deleuze and Guattari (2005, pp. 273-274) suggest that children seem to be particularly sensitive to becomings.

Buchanan (2018) describes how Haraway's companion species "differs from companion animals (such as guide dogs for the blind) in this crucial respect: it implies a two-way dependency. Haraway argues that neither human animals nor non-human animals pre-exist their relationship to one another. This is because the relationship is productive or co-constitutive" (Haraway, 2003, p. 12).

The clinical benefits of therapy dogs

> "Companion animals can be horses, dogs, cats, or a range of other beings willing to make the leap to the biosociality of service dogs, family members, or team members in cross-species sports."
>
> (Haraway, 2003, p. 14)

Carefully and well-planned interactions between children and animals have been found to be effective alternative or complimentary interventions by counsellors, therapists and other mental health professionals (Jalango and Guth, 2022). Mental health professionals and school counsellors have teamed up with rabbits, guinea pigs, dogs and other animals in building relationship and connection with children.

According to London et al. (2020), Animal-assisted therapy can help children with a variety of therapeutic concerns including autism. Further indications are that animal assisted therapy can be helpful where there has been child sexual abuse (Dietz et al., 2012), trauma (Tedeschi and Jenkins, 2019), and attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (Schuck et al., 2018). There is now considerable research to support the inclusion of carefully selected dogs in mental health support services for children and young people. In a systematic review of studies incorporating animals into mental health programmes found the most commonly used were horses and dogs (Jones, Rice and Cotton, 2019). They highlight that of all seven reviews that included psychological variables all found benefits in the use of animals in reducing psychological distress. Jones, Rice and Cotton (2019) concluded that there was evidence of a reduction in depression, anxiety, trauma symptoms and

mental illness and addiction. While they also concluded their findings should be interpreted conservatively they pointed also to the inclusion of animals in psychotherapeutic programmes from the reviews indicated improvements in behaviour, communication and social skills particularly in Autistic Spectrum Disorder (Nimear and Lundal, 2007; Hoogwood et al., 2017; Chitic, Rusu and Szamoskozi, 2012).

Animal Assisted Therapy, or AAT, is described by Jalango and Guth (2022, p. 2), as "an intervention that incorporates an animal with an appropriately credentialed health or human service provider to meet treatment goals". Animal-assisted therapy in counselling (AAT-C) is a subspeciality of AAT where trained counsellors use the human–animal bond in goal directed interventions that are part of the counselling process (Stewart et al., 2016).

Rationale for animal assisted therapy

Animals being included in mental health or psychotherapeutic practice is not new. In a review carried out by Jalango and Guth (2022), four important books were highlighted as providing helpful guidance to therapists seeking to involve animals as their "co-therapists." Parish-Plass's (2013) *Animal-assisted Psychotherapy: Theory, Issues, and Practice* and Cynthia Chandler's (2017) *Animal-assisted Therapy in Counseling*, Aubrey Fine's (2019) edited work *Handbook on Animal-Assisted Therapy* and O'Haire et al.'s (2019) publication focuses specifically on the role animals can play in trauma recovery (Jalango and Guth, 2022).

It is important to acknowledge that animal-assisted therapy is not for everyone. It is not uncommon for people to have a fear of animals, particularly dogs. Not everyone is comfortable with an animal being present and they may not want an animal present during therapy. Therapists must always be mindful of the needs and wishes of those they are working with and careful consideration, planning and negotiation will be required. Therapist must respectfully accept the needs and wishes of the young person without judgement and must not in any way force contact with the therapy dog if the child/young person is uncomfortable with them. This may require a therapist to have a safe, secure place for the dog during therapy with certain clients. According to Fine (2019) successfully integrating animals into the therapeutic alliance between mental health professionals and young children demands forethought, planning, preparation, and thoughtful implementation. Consideration has to be given to the individual child/family, the professionals involved and the organisation and most importantly the specific dog.

In this instance, the specific dog is one of our family dogs, Holly. Even this idea is a struggle for how do I describe Holly's presence in our lives? Holly is so much more than the reductionist idea of a "family pet". How do I honour her agency, presence and what does it say that I assume to write for her. Holly's heritage is that of a Samoyed father and an Alaskan Malamute mother, often described as the unique mix of two majestic breeds. This mix of breed is often referred to as a Malamoyed, the hybrid breed combining the robust strength of the Alaskan Malamute with the friendly and very fluffy charm of the Samoyed (DogScan, 2024). Holly possess a thick double coat that is suited to colder climates and reflects her heritage from two Artic breads. The Alaskan Malamute Samoyed mix, often described as a captivating blend of beauty, strength, and personality, sure to bring joy and companionship to those who welcome them into their lives.

Malamoyeds are known for their friendly and social nature and Holly is no exception, Being in her presence is to experience pure unbounded love and joy. Malamoyeds form incredibly strong bonds and close connections with their human companions. As a breed, they tend to be great with families and children. They are known for their intelligence and high energy levels, requiring considerable physical and mental stimulation to stay happy and well. Holly can be stubborn and obstinate and has a strong independent streak but is always eager to play and socialise.

The Malamoyed has a rich and storied history of two majestic breads combined. The Alaskan malamute comes from the Artic, developed by the Mahlemut Inuit for heavy–duty sled work and hunting. A particular feature is their capacity for endurance and strength. Malamutes were essential to Artic survival. The Samoyed originates from Siberia and were bred by the Samoyede people as herders of reindeer but also provided warmth and companionship. These dogs were breed to survive a harsh environment and bring with them a rich heritage of resilience, work ethic, and loyalty. This robust northern heritage stands Holly well in all she brings to our shared environment in the therapy room with young people who have experienced abuse. This is a shared space and place where resilience is the name of the game. In many ways, Holly's heritage is a shared heritage with the young people she meets, where often survival in harsh environments is required.

Just like the young people and families I meet, Holly too exhibits a tremendous capacity to retain a friendly outgoing nature; she is cheerful and quick to give, curious and adventurous. Holly is playful yet protective. The Alaskan Malamute Samoyed mix stands out for its loyalty and warmth in its interactions with humans. These dogs form strong bonds with their families and are known for their gentle and loving nature (DogSane, 2024).

Haraway (2003) describes her "Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness" as a personal account of "a scholarly foray into too many half known, territories"

Haraway (2003, p. 2) offers her writing as,

> "a political act of hope in a world on the edge of global war, and a work permanently in progress, in principle, I offer dog-eaten props and half-trained arguments to reshape some stories I care about a great deal, as a scholar and as a person in my time and place. The story here is mainly about dogs. Passionately engaged in these accounts, I hope to bring my readers into the kennel for life. But I hope also that even the dog phobic-- or just those with their minds on higher things-will find arguments and stories that matter to the worlds we might yet live in".

In my own attempt to further a refusal of binary dualisms and embrace and embody the potential of this often messy collaboration with otherness, I attempt to explore our meeting in this time and space as young person, not so young therapist and canine co-therapist. What I offer are my reflections and thoughts and what I imagine to be Holly's reflections. I wonder how we might be generating new knowledge in practice as we come together in this canine human emergent practice of co-travel.

As I write, Holly is lying calmly on the floor by my feet ready to spring into action. This does not feel like a subservient pose to a dominant master but rather a hanging out with an ally. As each week slips by, I notice how she jumps to attention when the phone on the desk rings. When reception announces the arrival of the young person we collaborate with Holly becomes excitable and eager to go, impatient with me if I am not moving to her pace. I have a deep love for Holly that predates this

collaboration, nonetheless; I experience a deepening of connection occurring between all three of us in the therapy space. What is it that this other than human presence has brought? What has it allowed us to hear, feel and communicate that might not have otherwise occurred.

I hear in our words a real confirmation and commitment through this joint venture to ideas of loyalty, welfare of others both human and non-human and a ground upon which trust can once again flourish for a young person not perhaps ready yet to "trust the adults". There is an undeniable love and acceptance and a joy in our connectedness communicated through, or because of Holly's movements and expressions. She is a reminder that kindness, happiness and love are still possible and can be trusted and received. These ideas, values or experiences have not always been possible for young people in the territory of child sexual abuse. Somehow, here beyond words in Holly's sometimes noisy (Holly can at times can be very vocal and chatty) often soothing and always-gentle presence, joy and love cannot be disputed. Haraway (2003, p. 16) describes the "joint lives of dogs and people, who are bonded in significant otherness".

I wonder at Holly's capacity to attune to the atmosphere and emotional temperature in the room. Placing herself solidly behind the young person and me, as if to say, "I have your back". I feel she has mine too as we enter dark territory where trauma, violation, cruelty and coercion have marked this young person's experience.

To faithfully describe our co-travels is a difficult thing to do as just as I feel I have captured a moment it slips soundlessly into the next. I wonder did my co-travellers feel, hear and see as I did. Often I cannot tell what this moment meant to them other than the sense that something outside of our words is happening between and among us. My co traveling young person speaks of how they feel Holly's presence filing the space, taking up a place or position of familiarity and comfort, another heartbeat in our joint presence. They too are an unapologetic animal/ all species lover who describes a more balanced world for them when shared with their companion species of which they have many.

Haraway (2003, p. 12) appeals to my social constructionist positioning when she writes

> "There cannot be just one companion species; there have to be at least two to make one. It is in the syntax; it is in the flesh. Dogs are about the inescapable, contradictory story of relationships-coconstitutive relationships in which none of the partners pre-exist the relating, and the relating is never done once and for all"

This is a demanding space for Holly and often after session she will sleep, not something she ever does during her time at home as a supposed 'domestic pet'. There is never a sense that we are all just hanging out together. Holly takes her own commitment to the therapy space very seriously and is all in for the hour once a week we all share. While there is no doubt that Holly is loved, I have developed a new respect for her, perhaps a new understanding of her, and between us, as I witness her work. At times, I have a sneaky suspicion that she may be better at my job than I am. Yet even as I say this, I realise that hers is an altogether different job one she is teaching me about, but one I feel with shared values. Trust and respect in each other's otherness and in this cross-species venture are I think perhaps what binds the three of us as we travel on.

The young person asks why I have a dog bed and toys present when Holly shows no interest in them. I say that this is so should she wish to, she can go and play, rest or sleep, that she is free to make her own decisions and choices around how she locates herself in the room. We talk about the importance

of having autonomy, free choice, agency and having our needs and wishes acknowledged and minded. We explore what it is like when choice is taken away and control is imposed. We think together about what it is like for any species to have their rights or welfare violated. Themes resonate of what it might be like to feel abandoned, lonely, hurt and mistreated. As we craft this new cross species endeavour we find new ways to consider the hurt, trauma and aftermath of one of the deepest betrayals of trust – child sexual abuse.

I realise that there are other places and spaces where on our daily walks together Holly helps me find ways to "walk off" the hurt and trauma I experience in giving witness to these betrayals. Holly helps me find spaces and places to process without words but rather in companionship, experiences that often lie outside certainly my capacity for language. My questions however are about more than dogs and people they are about how we inhabit their/our travels in our multiple intersections of otherness? What lurks here in terms of potential for transformative practice? What resides here as 'a practice of hope' (Van Lawick, 2022). How has Holly's presence as co-traveller re-enchanted my practice? Jane Bennett spoke about "To be enchanted" is to be "struck and shaken by the extraordinary that lives amid the familiar and everyday". How do we continue to experience the enchantment of our world/worlds and find ways to continue to attend to our being/becoming? What is it we afford value to? How can we create an "us-two" approach to build knowledge with non-human entities (Yunkaporta, 2020), Can our practice and research give agency to "more- than- human" participants and our co-constructed knowledge building?

I experience a subtle difference to the intimacy, an honesty when Holly is present in the therapy with young people. Ideas of mutuality abound in this "kin group in training". How do these encounters shape our multi species world? Is this intra-species encounter providing more than "animal assisted therapy" or is it providing alternative practices for relationship and world building? What meaning and possibilities are being created? Biologist Lynn Margulis talks of 'Symbiogenesis' and intricate and multidirectional acts of association of and with other life forms", proposing interspecies 'love'. Holly brings with her a systemic non-judgemental positioning. She is steady, consistent and insistent on acknowledging her grounding and accepting presence. She possess a respect, a curiosity and acceptance that is conveyed through 'interspecies love'.

Holly has helped me to find an alternative way of being with and in my world and my world of practice, which helps to sustain me, that helps to nourish me. We have become a kinship pair in which our "overlapping world making activities of many agents, human and non-human" (Tsing, 2015) has given me courage. I have taken courage from her and left behind for a moment the fear of sharing my imperfect work, these imperfect words in an attempt to find ways to heal beyond the human and in partnership with the non-human.

What would Holly's canine non-anthropocentric story be/ how might she write the story of us, and what we are making together? What we are becoming together and what traces does this leave in the world? In de-centralising the human what is becoming possible? Donna Haraway would suggest that we are "training each other in acts of communication we barely understand" (Haraway, 2003, p. 2). Gail Simon and Leah Salter would suggest, "We are always in the process of becoming-in-relationship and creating social worlds through our engagement with and as parts of the world, human and otherwise. We do not live in ecology, we are ecology" (Simon and Salter, 2019, p. 2).

Conclusion

This one small story of intra-species collaboration is not necessarily a new ontology or ideology in of itself; I take heart from Haraway's (2003, p. 17) idea that "Stories are much bigger than ideologies. In that is our hope". It is I believe a cross species 'practice of hope' (Van LawIck, 2022). Have I been brought 'into the kennel for life'? Or has the kennel breathe new life and possibility into my practice? Perhaps together we are finding new possibilities of becoming. In this land of new discoveries, this undiscovered country between us/among us, there is no division of things into distinct parts, no categories or principals in this collaboration with otherness. Young people who have experienced child sexual abuse so often describe the complex mind, body, heart and soul felt wounds of their experiences. They do not just describe separated physical and non-physical wounds; they do not hold their experiences in a dualistic manner. Why would we then expect their journey toward healing to have a clear distinct relationship between mind and matter? Ideas of dualism position us as being defined completely in relation to the other. This creates a binary representation of our relationship, we become either/or forced into a binary oppositional position.

What is proposed is leaning into the possibilities of becomings as described by Beaulieu (2011, p. 74) a Deleuze and Guattari space where "fixed identities give way to assemblages, alliances, passages and becomings between both beings and things." This is a graceful, playful, messy yet vital ontological movement by and between participants. So how can this discarding of typological thinking and being open to a movement beyond binary dualisms enrich clinical practice? I imagine Holly to say we are different, with different knowledge practices, different rich histories and different movement in the world. It has afforded us a rich space to co-inhabit and allowed an emergent process driven difference to unfold. What does it mean to inhabit this multispecies space together when we meet in this place Holly, young person and I? I believe we embody the connections, histories and heritages of people and dogs that make this intra-species collaboration possible. Opening up practices that go beyond the binary of human and animal, that challenge the anthropocentric to go beyond binaries of what is possible in our encounters.

This raises the question are our parts in this work /world really separate? or can they be considered in a different way, a new assemblage of ways of being /becoming. Holly, young person and I are, I believe, more than a series of opposing forces or ideas and available to us are more than two mutually exclusive choices of how we are in our togetherness. What I hope Holly, young person and I are doing in our intra-species collaboration is breaking down strict dichotomies and finding ways that might better capture our intra relatedness. We inhabit a co-travel that refuses to accept the language of dualism that forces us apart as energies and ideas in opposition rather than entangled interwoven beings with the potential for a shared becoming. Holly, young person and I are not in competition with each other. We value our companionship in what emerges between us, which is often a painful, muddled, place and space to explore the hurt and confusion of abuse and betrayal, which is not bounded by categories. It is not the sum of our parts but rather our togetherness that counts. Our survival depends on team travel. How do we hold the space and resist the pull of dualism and polarisation so that an exploration of this intra-species collaboration and its becoming can find meaning? Dualism pushes us into ideas of opposites. What Holly, the young person and I have engaged in, committed to, was fundamentally different, it was a commitment to a joint exploration, a journeying in togetherness, an 'usness' beyond you and I, animal and human. It became a holding of the space, the tension, the unknown between us.

Haraway (p. 100) asks,

> "How can general knowledge be nurtured in postcolonial worlds committed to taking difference seriously? Answers to these questions can only be put together in emergent practices; i.e., in vulnerable, on-the-ground work that cobbles together nonharmonious agencies and ways of living that are accountable both to their disparate inherited histories and to their barely possible but absolutely necessary joint futures. For me, that is what significant otherness signifies".

What is occurring in our relationship goes beyond language and discourse. We are not a human dog dyad we are as Haraway (2003) suggests bonded in "significant otherness". What Holly's presence demands is that together we continually ask what is emerging here? The development I hope of an ethical intra-species collaboration. Haraway (2003, p. 50) described this 'ethical relating' as a connection "knit from the silk-strong thread of ongoing alertness to otherness-in-relation". A solidarity in our commitment to ideas of listening, attending to, being present to and respectful to the other in our intra-species differences. We are a work in progress our relating never done. This work between Holly, young person and I has helped me re-examine my commitment to living with difference. It has expanded my ability to trust in each other's otherness in the face of complexity and challenge. Jointly we hold difficult histories and here we attend to them with care. We embrace their nuance and many layers, while attempting to attend to them with intent listening, respect and love. Sometimes we explore this through a wagging tail, a licked ear or a gentle stroke. Our movements learn a new co-ordination as we co-constitute this emerging practice knowledge.

I imagine Holly to hold a complete irreverence to ideas of dualism and binary constructs. She is not concerned with these differences or overlaps. Holly does not engage with the concepts, her love and joy is not bounded by ideas of division. Holly does not enter relationship with the world through distinct categories or principals. In an absolute commitment to trusting our 'otherness' she will force her way into relationship with you through love, kindness and an energy driven by a desire to connect and be connected. She is not concerned with gender, race or identity. I imagine her to say what we are doing is beyond these, what matters is our combined presence and what we allow it to become. There are I believe new possibilities yet to be realised in the 'we' we are creating beyond anthropocentrism and the ideas of dualism. What Holly privileges is trust in each other's otherness. Holly demands loyalty and steadfastness in the face of division. For a young person who has experienced the most egregious breach of trust Holly reminds us that trust can be restored to relationships and once again, safe connection seems possible. Our trustworthy companion and our shared companionship has generated possibility and restored hope.

What I am experiencing in the therapy room with my co-travellers goes well beyond a knowledge community produced through language. It is an embracing of our significant otherness. It is a reimaging of how knowledge is communicated and who holds knowledge. The dialogical alone binds us I believe in an anthropocentric position leaving us trapped in our own defined dualism. What we are creating I hope is a new knowledge community that has relationality at its heart, where change and transformation are generated through our joint becoming and our 'interspecies love' enriches the clinical practice.

I believe what is occurring is an 'expansion of our world's experience'; it speaks about relationships, what is occurring in relationship, and what is becoming in and through relationship. What Haraway

(2003) calls a "messy relationality": we have become "mess mates". Our time together is a beginning. It reflects our combined/conjoined capacity for a new allyship, friendship and love. It is a re-imagining of an age-old relationship inviting possibilities and a way forward. It embraces and expands Anderson's (2012, p. 8) call "toward becoming a more relationally responsive practitioner" and forces us to reassess how we see our relationships with the human and nonhuman, the uniqueness of all things living and non-living and how we find a way to create new landscapes of transformative possibly. Holly's generous sharing of her robust strength, gentleness and love honours ideas of safety, agency, presence and trust in our otherness that has allowed a deepening of our bond in this canine human emergent practice. This movement beyond dualism created a deepening sense of safety, trust and respect where the sharing of trauma experiences became safer in our co-constituted relationship and deepening therapeutic alliance. Holly had assisted us in creating a world where hope once again flourishes. Certainly, Holly makes mine a more liveable world. I try to remember all she has taught me beyond the therapy room. This need for care and engagement in all our complexities and "significant otherness" is required not just locally but globally in our world making.

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