LIVING WITH ANIMALS

Freya Mathews

'Without animals,' says Peter, a Maasai nomad interviewed in the *New Internationalist*[1], 'life isn't worth living'.

Sitting here in my inner-city backyard writing this, with a circle of attentive little upturned canine and feline faces surrounding me, and my cranky duck tugging at my shoelaces, I could not be in more heartfelt agreement. But how many people today would share this sentiment? For how many would it be football that makes life worth living, or cars, or opera, or ice-skating? Is there anything to ground the conviction that I want to defend here, that the company of non-human animals is a necessary part of human life, in a way that football, cars, opera and ice-skating manifestly are not, and that we relinquish or forego it at our peril?

There are two parts to this question. The first is, is it important for *us*, for our own well-being or the realization of our human potential, that we live in intimate commensal relations with animals? The second is, is it important for the *environment* that we live in such relations? Does the *world* need us to continue to live in our ancestral communalism with animals?

My view is that our present estrangement, as human beings, from both the natural world (as evidenced in the environmental crisis) and from ourselves (as evidenced in the intense neuroticization of life in contemporary 'advanced' societies) is due at least in part to the progressive removal of animals from our day-to-day urban reality; consequently I shall argue that, in order to address both the environmental crisis and our own crisis of consciousness, we need to find ways of restoring animals to the human household.

I cannot hope here to exhaust the discussion invited by this question, or even to do justice to its larger significance. I shall merely offer several relatively straightforward arguments in favour of human-animal commensality, and then offer a very personal reflection on the deeper

cosmological significance of these relations, as this has unfolded for me through my own experience.

Our Need for Animal Company

Firstly then, are intimate connections with animals foundational to our human well-being? It is by now a well-established research finding that people who enjoy the day-to-day friendship of animals, or who are, according to contemporary parlance, 'pet owners'[2], are healthier in various respects than people who do not: they tend to visit the doctor less frequently, use less medication, have lower cholesterol and blood pressure levels, recover more quickly from illness and suffer less from feelings of loneliness.[3] Indeed, it has been estimated that 'pet ownership' saves the Australian health care system one and a half billion dollars per year.[4]

Why might this be so? One reason may be that companionate relationships with animals defuse a lot of the socially generated pressure in our lives. Animals are non-judgmental friends. They do not compete with us. Hence we can relax with them, and enjoy spontaneous affection and cathartic physical closeness: we can 'be ourselves' in the presence of such companions, since they have no socially acquired expectations of us. They offer us emotional and psychological release.

Friendships with animals may be stress-reducing in a further way. Emotional involvement with creatures who do not share our human goals and aspirations, our system of values, enables us to gain an external perspective on those values. It enables us to imagine how odd or arbitrary our human priorities might appear from a non-human perspective. When revealed in this light, socially-prescribed imperatives have less hold on us - we can achieve a certain distance from them, a certain detachment. We become less driven, less enslaved to abstract ideals and images, and hence more receptive to our actual bodily and instinctual needs, more self-accepting, with all the implications for health and healing that flow from this.

It does not seem too far-fetched, to me, to speculate that there may even be a direct physiological dependence of humans on animal companionship that would help to explain why people who enjoy that

companionship are healthier than others. Some evolutionary theorists are currently arguing that our ancestors' early genetic 'contract' with certain animals - particularly dogs - enabled us to develop the characteristics that now mark us as human. According to this theory[5], it was our association with dogs - which was initiated at least in part by the dogs themselves, possibly as early as one hundred thousand years ago[6] - which enabled our ancestors to dispense with something that is otherwise mandatory for mammalian predators, namely an acute sense of smell: when dogs agreed to join us in the hunt, they could henceforth do our sniffing for us. The advantage for us of delegating our scenting function in this way was that we could thereby dispense with our muzzle. Sans muzzle, we could achieve frontal vision, and hence improved hand-eye co-ordination, where this in turn was a precondition for the development of our tool-making capability. The retraction of the muzzle also entailed the shrinkage and refinement of the tongue, which thereby became capable of the short, highly differentiated sounds required for *speech*. According to this theory then, it was through a functional inter-dependence with dogs that we became human. (This theory adds an amazingly literal dimension to the Aboriginal myth of human origins recounted so beautifully by Deborah Bird Rose in her book, *Dingo Makes Us Human.*[7]) The deal for dogs, in this scenario, was of course that they received board and lodgings; history has resoundingly vindicated the proto-dogs' evolutionary choice.

If this evolutionary story is accepted - and the fact that nearly all known human communities have included dogs helps to bear it out - then it is possible that human beings have a physiological need for contact with dogs. Our bodies may unconsciously respond to certain subtle canine emanations, just as women's bodies, for instance, unconsciously respond to the subtle menstrual signals emanating from their female house mates. If our compact with dogs indeed rested on certain evolutionary imperatives, then it is not unreasonable to suppose that that compact may be reinforced by other more direct, physiological forms of inter-dependency. If all dogs were banished from our cities - and many indignant citizens are calling for just such a ban - a massive malaise in the human population might ensue. Such a malaise might take directly physical form, such as immunological decline; recent evidence that raising children without exposure to ('dirty') animals tends to weaken their immune systems, where this renders them susceptible to allergies, counts in favour of this kind of interpretation. But the malaise might

also take a more psychological form - it might be more akin to the depression which is already present in epidemic proportions in our relatively animal-free 'advanced' industrial civilizations. It might manifest as a vague sense of incompleteness or meaninglessness, leading to emotional neediness and compensating material acquisitiveness. Or it might be experienced as an existential loneliness which no amount of intra-species socialising can assuage.

Consider the latter possibility for a moment. If we have lived in intimate community with dogs, for instance, for anything up to a hundred thousand years, wouldn't it be likely that we would have a distinct psychological need for their company, a need that could not be satisfied by human substitutes? Anyone who habitually walks in open spaces with a close canine friend can testify to the unique appropriateness of dogs as walking companions. Bounding along with infectious interest and joy in their surroundings, they leave us free - free to think our own thoughts and to observe those surroundings keenly ourselves - while nevertheless staying faithfully within our orbit, maintaining an unobtrusive closeness with us. Alternatively, anyone who has spent time in Aboriginal settlements can testify to the feeling of comfort that a dog clan can lend to a community, provided of course that the dogs are not themselves a source of danger. Their constant mingling with the people, their presence at meetings and their forays onto the football field, their barking and carrying on amongst themselves on the margins of human activities, add a safe, convivial and companionable dimension to life, a dimension that has been entirely lost in the larger cities. Nor is it only dogs which provide a distinctive quality of companionship. To sit in the garden with an affectionate duck can afford a uniquely peaceful interlude in the daily round. To travel with horses or camels can give a far richer sense of journeying than can either solitary travel or travel with exclusively human company.

In light of the emotional and psychological satisfactions that we have experienced for thousands of years in the wider social world of the 'mixed community'[8] of humans and animals then, isn't it reasonable to assume that, deprived of these satisfactions, we moderns might feel unfulfilled and obscurely lonely, even if we have never experienced these satisfactions at first hand, for ourselves. And mightn't this unfulfilment and loneliness contribute to the social malaise of modern life?

These are some of the reasons why it might be important for our own well-being to continue the ancient human tradition of living in mixed households or communities. But why might it be important for Nature itself that we honour and maintain our ancestral commensal links with animals?

Why Nature Needs Us to Live in Company with Animals

If animal companions help to make us less driven, competitive and acquisitive, as I argued earlier, then their presence in our lives works against the world-destroying ethos of capitalism, with its competitive individualism and consumerism. That is to say, if animals help to bring us down to earth, deflating our modern ambitions and pretensions by exposing them to inter-species scrutiny, then we shall be less anxious to remain in the race for success, wealth and power, where it is this race, on a mass scale, which is driving the engines of capitalism. Indeed, to the extent that we share our lives with animals, we shall not only be less willing but less able to adapt to the regime of order and control, efficiency and discipline, which is a prerequisite of capitalist production: animals constantly disrupt our life and work with unpredictable contingencies - escapes, fights, sudden illnesses, injuries, embarrassing lapses. They bring an element of slapstick and anarchy into the cool, smart, self-absorbed world of business and public affairs. They make us miss work; they muss up the perfect clothes, perfect hair, that are needed to assure our 'professionalism', our presentability, in this public world; they strew shit and dirt around the manicured gardens, and leave paw marks through the tidy houses, that announce our hard-won social status. They gently lead us back from the obsessive quest which is definitive of the modern ethos and which is at the root of the environmental crisis: the quest to usurp and transcend Nature,[9] to place ourselves above and beyond its reach, to inhabit a kind of glossy advertiser's version of Plato's heaven, in which moth and rust doth not corrupt, because they are kept at bay by chemical warfare, and where thieves do not break in and steal, because the place is patrolled by security guards. In other words, by staying in touch with our animal kin, we stand a greater chance of seeing through the dangerous illusions of a world increasingly dedicated to capitalist ideals of wealth, power and success that are defined in stark opposition to, or at the expense of, Nature.

Another reason why, as environmentalists, we should encourage commensal relations between animals and people, especially children, is that such relations presumably help to engender human empathy towards animals in general, including those in the wild. When people discover the unique personalities and communicative capabilities of their animal friends and familiars, they are logically drawn to credit other animals with such potentialities too, and to extend to them, in principle, a degree of consideration commensurate with that which, they have realised, is due to the animals of their acquaintance. In this way, animal companions can serve as 'ambassadors' for animal life generally, awakening in us new levels of awareness and responsibility vis a vis the natural world.

It must be admitted, however, that this 'ambassador' argument is, prima facie, open to objection. In the first place, what of the rural people, whom we have all encountered, who have been in contact with animals throughout their lives, yet who nevertheless treat all animals as totally inconsiderable robots? Then there are the people who enjoy companionate relationships with particular, privileged animals, yet continue to handle the rest with callous indifference. How are we to account for the fact that daily contact with animals has not, in these instances, led to a more considerate attitude towards animals in general?

One way of accounting for this is via the hypothesis that it was the fact of domestication itself, in its more grossly instrumental forms, which led to our cultural objectification of animals. That is, according to some theorists[10], in drawing animals into our domiciliary space, and raising them within the circle of the human clan, and then slaughtering them for food or other purposes, we in fact violated the taboo against violence towards kin. The moral gravity of this transgression then required that we rationalize our action by denying the moral significance of domestic - and by extension, other - animals, reducing them to the status of objects that may be produced and consumed without the slightest compunction. In other words, to justify the utilization of animals raised, like kin, within the human domain, we invented an ideology of animals as objects, which effectively closed our eyes to their otherwise manifest subjectivity. Ideology unquestionably *can* blind us to the subjectivity of others, as is plainly attested by the phenomena of slavery, racism and sexism in the human context. So the mere fact that we keep 'pets', or come into daily contact with other animals, will not of itself ensure that we develop empathy for them. Communication between self and other can occur only

when occlusive ideologies have been exposed and removed. For companion animals to serve as moral 'ambassadors' for the animal world at large then, anthropocentric prejudices have first to be set aside.

If it is accepted that companion animals do induce in us a new moral seriousness about animals generally, then a question arises concerning the status of domestic animals used for productive purposes . Does this new moral seriousness condemn the utilization of animals for such purposes? If so, is it really in the interests of the species in question, since those species owe their very existence, at the present time, to the fact that they are so utilized. How ironical it would be if the dawning of this new moral seriousness led not to an animal renaissance, but to the further retreat of animals both from their present evolutionary strongholds and from our own lives? The question then, is whether it is possible to reconcile empathy for animals with their domestic utilization?

The short answer to this question is, I think, that such reconciliation of empathy and use is possible to the extent that utilization is of net benefit to the animals concerned. When those animals are considered as species rather than as individuals, it is clear that productive forms of domestication have been of net benefit to them: domestic animals are some of the few animal species still flourishing in a world of declining biodiversity. However, the kind of empathy induced by intimate relationships with animal companions leads us to consider animals as individuals rather than as mere instances of species. So although reproductive success at the level of species is obviously a necessary condition for an individual's existence, and is in this sense in its interests, it is, equally obviously, not a sufficient condition for the individual's well-being.

To reconcile utilization with empathy, we need to be assured that the life that our exploitative intentions bestow on an individual domestic animal affords both the experiential opportunities and the requisite life span to enable it to achieve a significant degree of the form of self-realization appropriate to its particular kind. This implies that the use we may justifiably make of animals will vary according to their species: what may be an acceptable use of one species with a particular set of needs and sensibilities may not be acceptable for a species differently endowed. In particular, while humane killing of animals who lack any

consciousness of death may be admissible, the killing of animals who understand and fear death, and who grieve for their own dead (as do elephants and perhaps chimps), may be completely inadmissible, involving as it would the systematic infliction of intolerable suffering. Such suffering may, from the point of view of the animals in question, cancel the benefits of being alive. (This is evidenced by the fact that such animals can pine to death when bereaved[11]).

In short, I think the fact that domestic utilization affords evolutionary niches for certain species, in a world of disappearing niches, is a prima facie reason for regarding such utilization as compatible with respect. However a full-blown attitude of empathy - such as we develop through intimate association with animal companions - requires that the forms of utilization we countenance be compatible with the self-realization of the animals used, where this implies that different forms and degrees of utilization will be appropriate for different species. I would also add that, once we have acknowledged the subjectivity and moral significance of the animals we use, and the moral gravity of our practices of utilization, it becomes incumbent on us to develop cultural expressions of respect, gratitude and indebtedness for the lives we have thus dedicated to our own ends. In this way, our attitude towards domestic animals can develop more affinity with the familial attitudes of hunter-gatherer peoples towards the wild species that constitute their prey.

When domestic utilization of animals is subject to the qualifications I have outlined above, I think it is not only consistent with empathetic concern for the interests of animals: it is actually required by such concern. As environmentalists, committed to the maximal preservation of non-human life on earth, yet facing the cold, hard fact that in the 21st century, the processes of urbanization and industrialization that have been synonymous with the disenchantment and tragic devastation of the non-human world are only going to accelerate and intensify, don't we have to admit that one of our best chances for 'saving Nature' is by bringing Nature back into the human domain. We have, for the last few centuries, witnessed the runaway humanization of Nature; now let us inaugurate the wholesale naturalization of human habitat. Our cities are one of the major biological habitats of the future, and our task, as environmentalists, is to ensure that they provide the best opportunities for non-human life that we can devise. We can do this partly by increasing the amount of urban habitat for wildlife. Such habitat can be

created by way of indigenous plantings and by permacultural programs of food production in the city. Buildings can also be designed or adapted to create, rather than exclude, habitat opportunities for wild animals (by way of stork-friendly chimneys, for instance, and roofs that accommodate bats and nesting birds). However we can also increase the urban opportunities for non-human life by finding new ways for animals to 'earn their living' in the city.

How might we envisage some of these new ways? The usefulness of sheep as lawn-mowers has been appreciated by a church in my own local neighborhood, and there is no reason why other urban land-holders, including local councils, should not follow suit. Sheep have also been used for traffic calming in the Netherlands, and strategic use of horse-drawn vehicles - for tourist rides or milk deliveries, for instance - could serve a similar purpose. City farms afford educational opportunities for urban schoolchildren increasingly distanced from the realities of food production. The possibilities for reintegrating animals productively into urban life are as limitless as our imaginations. However, the principal way in which animals can 'earn their living' in the city is still, I think, via their companionate role. The exclusive reign of the dog and the cat in this connection needs to be challenged, and the adaptability of other species to the human hearth and home investigated. There is immense scope for the conservation particularly of - sometimes endangered - native species in such a program of domestication. Species such as the quoll, or native cat, and the fruit bat, are reputed to make affectionate and contented hearth companions, and the domestic potentialities of many smaller, endangered wallabies, such as quokkas and bettongs, are, so far as I am aware, relatively unexplored. (The quokkas on Rottnest Island, offshore from Perth, Western Australia, have already adapted to the kind of semi-tame, dump-side existence which is, according to certain evolutionary theorists[12], the first step in a species' self-surrender to domestication.) Our reluctance, as 'animal lovers', to countenance confinement of wild animals, and the loss of autonomy that domestication entails, must be off-set, I think, by the recognition that we are just another niche in the biosphere, and hence ourselves a part of Nature (the niche in question being one which many species have in the past successfully occupied of their own free will). This reluctance must also be offset against the as yet undreamt-of possibilities for conservation[13] that domestication offers.

The 'green' city of the future, then, would be a mixed community rich in habitat opportunities for a great diversity of animal species. This reintegration of animals into human life would also help to expand human imaginative and empathetic horizons, undermining anthropocentrism and reinforcing commitment to the protection of the non-human world. At the same time, the multiple contacts with animals that it would afford would enhance the health and sanity of the human population.

To envisage the green city of the future as a mixed community in this way would of course involve considerable re-thinking of current urban and environmental planning principles. Restrictions on the ownership of native animals would have to be revised, and new local council regulations allowing for the responsible keeping of a wide range of 'pets' would be required. Housing would be designed with the needs of both wild and tame non-human occupants in mind. Such demands on design would not in themselves militate against the medium density housing currently favoured by environmental town planners, but they would require that 'urban consolidation' be counter-balanced by large increases in communal green space. Public spaces would also have to be rendered more hospitable to animals, with protection from traffic, and areas designated and set aside for inter-species exercise (dogs would presumably have to be kept apart from donkeys, miniature pigs and quokkas, for instance!). Urban planners who currently concentrate on high density development for the sake of energy conservation and curtailment of urban sprawl forget that, in excluding non-human beings from the city and creating human ghettos, they are intensifying the anthropocentric mind-set of urban populations, and thereby reinforcing the deepest roots of the environmental crisis. The green city is one which not only conserves energy and utilizes existing infrastructure, but also challenges the traditional conceptual division between humankind and Nature, making itself a frontier of ecological possibility and opening its people to the degree of contact with non-human life required to awaken their ecological sensibilities.

A Responsive World: Some Personal Reflections

These then are some of the reasons why I think that our living with animals is important both for us and for them. However, this commensality shapes not only our ethical attitudes towards non-human

individuals and species, but our very sense of the world. I have not yet brought this larger significance of the relationship fully to light, nor can I hope to do so with any pretence of completeness. In order to capture a little of this cosmological significance however, I would like to recount, in these concluding pages, the experiential origins of my own conviction that 'without animals, life isn't worth living'.

I grew up surrounded by loving animals on what today would be described as a hobby farm, situated on the rural outskirts of Melbourne, Australia.. These animals included dogs and cats, ducks, geese, hens, and, at one stage, a turkey. There were brief episodes with sheep and cows. The main focus of my entire childhood, however, was my ponies. My first pony, and the horses that came after her, were my day-long playmates and confidants. It was to them that I recited my earliest poems, and to them that I ran when I was hurt or excited. They nuzzled me in the same soft, considerate way whatever the occasion. I chose their company not for want of family and friends, but for its own sake. The form of intimacy that grew up between us was qualitatively different from anything that could have developed between myself and human persons. It was a kind of uncluttered closeness, or being-with, which existed despite the fact that our subjectivities were, in terms of content, mutually unknowable. We took it for granted, on either side, that this unknowability did not matter, that our psyches could touch and pervade each other, without need for explanations or self-disclosures, such as those conveyable by language. These animals were, for me, 'primary others', in the psychoanalytic sense; they were not substitutes for, but additional to, significant humans, nor could humans substitute for them. My subjectivity - my sense of self and world - was constituted through my 'object relations'[14] with these animals just as fundamentally as it was through my relations with primary human others.

Domestic animals were not the only non-human influences shaping my sense of self and world in those early days. There were also kindly ancient gum trees on our land - we knew they dated from before colonization because they bore canoe scars in their trunks. And there was the creek, steeped in elemental mystery for me, yet at the same time busy and loquacious, swirling with news of other unknown yet connected places. These, together with my animal family, and the wild birds and snakes, all contributed to my sense of a world of communicative presences beyond the circle of human concerns.

Nor was my childhood home the only place which turned my psyche outward in this way. There was also an old sheep station on the vast western plains of New South Wales, which I occasionally visited in school holidays. It was no ordinary sheep station, but, even in those days, a relic of an earlier era. The owner, an old timer with eyes as wide as the blue desert sky, had been born in the homestead and raised on the property, and he ran the place in the pre-mechanical style, with the aid of stock ponies, dogs and horse-drawn buggies. We children were out all day in the searing sun on the saltbush plains, lunching out of battered tuckerboxes, racing our ponies, chasing kangaroos, emus and wild pigs with delirious excitement. Back at the homestead, animals filled our every waking moment: there were sheep and lambs, of course, as well as the ponies, most of whom spent the main part of the year in a large herd out on the range, only coming in for a tour of duty now and again, as the need arose. (These tough but happy little horses lived to extraordinary ages. One died recently at the age of forty-five!) Cattle, pigs, tribes of chooks, ducks and geese, a flock of diminutive long-haired bush goats, an army of dogs, and at different times tame emus and kangaroos all congregated around the homestead. An old white goat named Snowy and a cocoa-coloured hand-reared filly clattered about on the wide back verandah. A sack containing a recently orphan joey usually hung from the clothes line over the enormous wood-fired stove in the kitchen.

Compassion and fondness for animals jostled, in the daily round, with unabashed slaughter and brutality. From my saddle, I witnessed mother kangaroos being torn to shreds by dogs, 'for fun'; emus, in flight from our young stockman friends, failing to clear a fence, becoming entangled in the wire instead, and being bludgeoned to death with a fence-post; and back at the homestead, pigs uttering torture-chamber screams as their throats were cut and their still-convulsing bodies dropped into troughs of scalding water. I sat with the other kids in the back of a jeep on a kangaroo-shooting excursion, and as the bodies piled up under our feet, I remember the blood of the kangaroos soaking my green felt boots dark red. The cruelty shocked me to the core - in fact, it was this which first made me aware of my core, a still, silent, inner place of watching, beyond speech. But it did not diminish the overwhelming sense of enchantment that this place awakened in me. (Much, much later, I was to discover that the old station had had a similar effect on many of the people who had been associated with it.) For the enchantment, and the

heightened feeling of being alive that accompanied it, arose from the fact that animals - and the uncompromising land which decided their fate - were the almost exclusive focus of everyone's life there, and the carnage, for all its horror, was part of that all-consuming involvement.

When I was fifteen, my family moved into the inner city, and both my rural life, and my visits to the sheep station, ceased. However our new home overlooked extensive parklands, and I set up house with a dog in an old Victorian loft in our backyard, so the transition was not unduly traumatic. It was not until I was eighteen, and I abandoned my home and my country to live in London, that a keen sense of loss and deprivation at last set in. I moved in with a friend who leased a top-storey studio in the Kings Road in Chelsea, and for various reasons I was soon trapped in the life I had reluctantly chosen to lead there. The apartment was without a garden, without the slightest glimpse of green from its high windows. The grand old building in which it was located was legendary as one of the nerve-centres of the London 'underground'. Artists, writers and rock musicians congregated there, and every night, till dawn, the entire building was shaken with musical reverberations from the nightclub in the basement. People were embarked on what were for them exciting adventures with sex and drugs. The joint was unquestionably jumping. With comings and goings at all hours, residents and visitors alike were charged to the eyeballs with the fizz of glamour, the intoxication of notoriety and celebrity.

I alone, it seemed, languished. I felt deadened. Without any trees in sight, with all presence and memory of animals expunged from this world, without even a proper sky above me (the London sky appearing more like a low ceiling than the soaring invitation to infinity to which I was accustomed in Australia), I felt truly 'underground', buried alive. My spirit, with its lifelong habit of expansiveness, had to submit for the first time to grey urban confinement, to a world built exclusively to human specifications, in which no court of appeal existed beyond socially-prescribed perceptions and perspectives. There was here no turning out to a wider world of subtle voices and signals, a world of myriad, at first indiscernible, but with patient attention increasingly differentiated, responsive presences. Rather, there was a turning in, and a turning up of the volume of human-generated and human-directed self-infatuated cacophony and chatter. This turning-in found its ultimate expression in the essential project of the counter-culture: to transform reality into an

inner picture show, a spectacle of hallucinatory images and sexually induced sensations orchestrated for our private entertainment. This project was, in fact, nothing more than a hip rendition of the old transcendental idealism, or solipsistic anthropocentrism, of the Western tradition, which places reality in us rather than us in reality.

I had no words, at the time, to name this human introjection of reality, or to justify my sense of exile from a world that was truly alive, and, unlike the one in which I found myself, a source of true enlivenment. I especially had no words to challenge the high claims of Art on which the counter-culture rested. Instead, I kept some snails and bare twigs in a jar in my room, and gazed at them for months. I retreated into a state of fantasy and intense creativity, writing and drawing obsessively, calling up from my own deep unconscious the images and motifs I needed to survive. I composed song cycles, and stories of origins, before I had heard of Aboriginal dreamings. I hung around old book shops and antique stores, seeking out illustrations and folk tales that could be threaded into my nascent mythologies. I haunted the Natural History Museum in South Kensington, with its layer upon layer, colonnade after colonnade, of magical animal statuary. Whenever I found a numinous image - an old French engraving of a lone seal, for instance, or a Chinese painting of wild geese - I enshrined it, hanging it as a religious icon in the gallery of my mind. Out of such gathered fragments, and out of my own memory, imagination and dreams, I tried to recreate the sense of enchantment that had always been the essence of my experience of the world, and without which I did indeed find life scarcely worth living.

From the viewpoint of Western psychoanalysis, this sense of enchantment is regressive, and signals a failure of individuation in infancy. But to adopt this point of view is, of course, to beg the metaphysical question. Looking back on my early years now, it seems more plausible to me to assume that the ample opportunities for close communion with animals that were available to me throughout my childhood had opened me to a larger world, a world astir with presence or presences that vastly exceeded the human. It was this direct contact with unknowable but pervasive presence which instilled in me a sense of the sacredness or enchantment of the world, and the potentiality for 'magic' within it. 'Magic' was, in this context, just the possibility of the world's response - the possibility, indeed probability, that the world, when invoked in good faith, *will* respond, though not necessarily in the

manner one anticipates or with the results for which one hopes. One should certainly not, in my view, rely on this world to fulfil requests or afford protection, but if one entreats it simply to reveal itself, to engage in an act of communication, then, in my experience, it will generally do so, though in its own ever-unpredictable way. I learned this as a child, through the receptiveness that my animal familiars created in me, and it filled my whole being with a sense of being accompanied, of never being alone, a sense of background love, akin to the background radiation of which physicists speak. This is a 'love' which has nothing to do with saving us from death and suffering, or with making us happy. From the viewpoint of the world, death and suffering are just inevitable concomitants of individual life. The point for individuals, from this perspective, is not to seek to evade these inevitabilities, but to reach beyond them - to call into the silence beyond human selfhood in search of a reply. This is the moment for which the world has been waiting, and in which it will rejoice: the moment when we ask it to speak. To receive its reply is to enter a love far greater than the kind of protection and indulgence that our traditional importunate forms of prayer expect, for that reply signifies that we belong to an animate order, a pattern of meaning, from which death cannot separate us, and to which suffering only summons us.

I offer these concluding reflections, not as argument, but as testimony relating to my own personal sense of the larger import of human-animal commensality, especially when that commensality is established in childhood. To engage with the unknowable subjectivities of animals, and to experience their response to us, is perhaps the principal bridge to communication with the unknowable subjectivity of the wider world. To experience the world thus, as an ensouled or spiritual thing, will not only direct the course of our own self-realization in the most fundamental way; it will also ensure an attitude of profound mutuality and awed protectiveness towards the world itself.

Notes

1. Nikkivan der Gaag, 'The Maasai and the Travellers', *New Internationalist*, 266, (1995), pp. 24-25.
2. Throughout this paper I shall avoid the demeaning term 'pet', as well as the problematic assumption that we can 'own' animals.

3. Information supplied by Australian Companion Animal Council.
4. Reported on 'The Science Show', third episode of a series entitled 'Animal Friends', written and narrated by Dr Jonica Newby, broadcast on ABC Radio National on 15 Feb 1997; also reported on 'Australia Talks Back', ABC Radio National, 12 February 1997.
5. Reported on The Science Show, first episode of the series, 'Animal Friends',1 Feb 1997.
6. The theory that many of our present day domestic animals initiated the process of domestication themselves, in pursuit of their own evolutionary advantage, has been explored at length in Stephen Budiansky, *Covenant with the Wild* (William Morrow, New York, 1992).
7. Deborah Bird Rose, *Dingo Makes Us Human* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992).
8. 'Mixed community' is Arne Naess' term. See Arne Naess, 'Self-realization in Mixed Communities of Humans, Bears, Sheep and Wolves', *Inquiry* 22, (1979), pp. 231-241.
9. Many works could be cited in support of this account of modernity; see, for instance, Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature*, (Harper and Row, San Francisco, 1980); Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (Routledge, London, 1993), Chapters 1 and 2; Freya Mathews, *The Ecological Self* (Routledge, London, 1991), Chapter 1.
10.. James Serpell, *In the Company of Animals* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996), Chapter 11.
11. See, for instance, the account of elephant's consciousness of death in Joyce Poole, *Coming of Age with Elephants* (Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1996), Chapter 19; for a more ambivalent account of chimpanzee attitudes, see Jane Goodall, *In the Shadow of Man* (William Collins, Glasgow, 1971).
12. See Budiansky, op cit.
13. I am not of course implying here that the movement to maximize urban biodiversity should replace wilderness preservation and the promotion of wildlife refugia. I am only suggesting that in a world in which competition for 'undeveloped' space is progressively going to intensify, we need to begin to tap the ecological potential of the 'developed' space.
14. The term 'object relations' is deployed in a branch of psychoanalytic theory, known as 'object relations theory', to designate the kinds of relations with primary others that an infant internalizes in the process of developing its individual sense of self. It is associated with the work of D.W. Winnicott, and later feminist theorists, such as Nancy Chodorow.

Biography

Freya Mathews teaches feminist and environmental philosophy at La Trobe University, and is dedicated to the development of ecophilosophy

both within and outside the academy She is the author of *The Ecological Self* (Routledge, London, 1991) and numerous articles on ecophilosophical themes.