

Excerpt from *Listening with your Heart – Life Lessons I have learned working with animals* by Anne Gordon de Barrigón

1 Listening with your Heart

The animals taught me to open my heart and to truly hear their thoughts through my natural compassion and empathy for them. The first time I remember experiencing the true opening of my heart to an animal was when I lived next door to a 40 stall Quarter horse ranch, just outside of Bothell, Washington. It was late June and I was out in my yard with my animals. At this time I raised wild and domestic animals, such as wolves, deer, a lion, tiger, cougar, raccoons, fox and various other small wild animals that I trained for educational outreach programs in schools as well as to perform in the film industry. All of my animals were either born in captivity or orphans who could not be returned to the wild.

The barn doors at the horse ranch stood wide open. I could hear frenzied whinnying and pounding, like stall walls being kicked. Curious, I walked over to see what could be causing all of the commotion. I found the owners of the stable anxiously watching of their mares who was experiencing an adverse reaction to a standard vaccination. The horse was suffering from the blind staggers; she was spinning and kicking and her body was trembling in total panic as a result of the shot. To make matters worse, she had a young foal, no more than 6 weeks old in the stall with her. Fearing for the safety of the foal, the owners were responding with frantic commands to “whoa.” I stood back and watched, realizing all of the owner’s commands went unheeded by the suffering mare.

When the owners left the barn to call the vet, I stepped forward, offering the horse calm reassurance. I spoke in a soothing voice, comforting her with positive, reaffirming words I continued trying to calm the horse for about 5 minutes when all of a sudden a shock of fear and panic filled my body. I was frozen in place trying to figure out what had just happened to me, I found myself looking into the eyes of a calm mare. Through my concern and natural empathy my heart had become so in tune to the emotions of the mare that I had taken on all of her fear. By the time the owners returned, the mare was back to normal! I was quite surprised and could not explain what had just happened.

A week later I walked back to the barn and was standing next to the arena. On the other side of the arena I saw the same mare on the hot walker. Recognizing me, she whinnied and what I heard in my mind was a big “Thank You”. Prior to this incident, I had never met nor spent any time with this mare. I had seen her around the barn but had no previous contact with her. This first experience of opening my heart to the emotions of an animal was fun, in a thrilling sort of way, and a bit surprising. Unable to come up with a plausible explanation I wanted to dismiss my role as just mere chance. I knew these feelings were real and powerful, but had rationalized that they were beyond anything I could muster up. Or were they?

I have learned that one of the best ways to hear, with clarity, what someone, either an animal or a human, is trying to tell you, is to bypass your ears and your brain and tune in with your heart.

Your ears and your brain deliver messages colored by your personal experiences, your agenda, and your ego. In other words, you hear what you want to hear. How many times have you listened to someone tell you a story only to find yourself judging them and determining what you would have done differently? Or worse, your mind races ahead to the finale and you have figured out the solution without hearing all of the particulars? With an animal who may be making a desperate attempt to communicate something to you, it can be even harder for them to break through the wall of thoughts going on in our own heads. I find that with my own pets it is more difficult listening to them because of the agenda I have concocted for them. I think I already know what they should like and want.

Let's take the example of a zoo animal. In our minds, we know we would be depressed if we were locked in a cage so we assume the animal must be miserable as well. Next time, try listening with your heart to find out what the animal is attempting to communicate to you. To do this you must be present in the moment and experience complete compassion for them. Be the loving grandmother, holding them in your arms, (physically or figuratively), channeling love and support and experience what happens. Try not to get into your head. Simply feel love and compassion. Release any preconceptions. Be the way you would be if your child fell, skinned his knees and came running to you, sobbing uncontrollably. You won't have to think about what to do. Your natural instinct would be to provide simple love and comfort. When you get an impression or feeling that does not fit, be intuitive and trust your empathetic nature. It may be the dog at your feet, or your great aunt Martha in Topeka, or your grandfather who is sending you love from beyond. It is up to you to not only interpret your feelings but it is of the utmost importance to trust those feelings. The more you honor and trust your feelings, the clearer and more frequent they will become. As you learn to trust them they will become easier to understand and interpret.

In 1993 I worked on the television remake of "The Yearling" in South Carolina. Another animal trainer had hired me to provide deer for the show. I had two adult does and two fawns with me. Several hound dogs also appeared in the show. The trainer for the hounds was new to the film industry and had been instructed to adopt untrained hounds from the animal shelter for use on the film. He had also been told that the dogs would be on a leash at all times. The one thing you can count on in the film industry is to be prepared for constant change.

Contrary to what the dog trainer had been told, the dogs were almost never to be on a leash. One of the hounds was a one year old, un-neutered Blue tick hound named Blue. He was as wild as a hurricane, as fun loving as a mischievous child and as out of control as any dog coming straight from an animal shelter could be. It was not unusual to pull off the scene with this dog, but catching him afterwards was a big nightmare for the trainer and a great game for the hound. Blue had a blast playing keep-away from all of the trainers and it became a contest, complete with great bragging rights, for any crew member who could catch him. One day the dog trainer found himself in full pursuit of Blue on a golf cart. The chase finally ended two miles from the set with the trainer having to dive onto the dog from the moving cart! The dog's trainer was not the only one who incurred Blue's hound-doggish ways. Blue went so far as to try to hump the leg

of the star of the movie, Peter Strauss. Try delivering serious lines with a hound humping your leg!

One night, Blue had to be in a poignant scene between Peter (the father) and his on-screen son, played by Wil Horneff. In the previous scene, the dog had encountered a run-in with a Grizzly bear, suffering serious injuries. Now, Blue was supposed to be lying near death in front of the fire while Peter and Wil had a very long and touching dialogue. No one believed Blue could lay still long enough to carry out the scene. The dog trainer tried everything, including wiring his collar to the floor. Nothing would keep Blue down and quiet. In utter frustration, the director called for a break and sent Blue and his trainer out of the room to see if the dog could calm down. Realizing that the trainer was frustrated and stressed, I asked if I could sit with Blue. The trainer was more than happy to take a break. I sat down with Blue, placed my arms around his neck and through telepathy, began telling him what was expected of him. As if our two minds had become one, I saw a flashback of Blue's life story. I saw him as a puppy, happy and bouncing, romping with two children in a backyard. He had loved it there. I could feel how happy Blue was at that time in his life. Then I saw him as a bit older and larger dog, still trying to play and bounce with the children. But at this stage he was too big. In his playfulness, he kept knocking the children down and they did not want to play with him anymore. The children's parents ended up tying him in the back yard and no one ever came to play with him anymore. He became sad and confused. Then one day the father loaded him into the family car and drove him to the pound and he was even more confused. All he wanted was to play and have fun. Then the trainer adopted him and put him through basic obedience classes. For Blue, it was good to be out the animal shelter, but he did not enjoy the obedience training. The trainer then packed Blue in a truck and drove him across the country from California to South Carolina to work in this movie. His story was one of complete confusion and helplessness. I listened to his story and just sat with him. I tried to tell him what we wanted him to do and why, but he did not want to listen. When they called Blue to come back on the set, I asked the trainer if he minded if I it a try. At this point the trainer was willing to try anything.

I took Blue to his position in the scene and all I did was ask him to lie down and stay down until the scene ended. He understood and did as requested. Without any further incidences, we got through the scene. I am not saying I was a better trainer. I was just a better listener. I listened to Blue's story, showed him I cared and the dog was grateful. Blue wasn't interested in what *I* had to say. In the end, he just needed to be heard.

Sometimes we all just need to unload our troubles to someone we trust. We all need to be heard by someone who loves us. When an animal or a friend wants to unload their troubles all they want is a listening heart and a loving embrace. Too often our first inclination is to offer advice on how we would want to solve their troubles. However, more often than not, all they need is to be heard.