

The Purr of the Cat & the Hum of the Human Heart

One of HAMA's recent sessions in ATT (Animal Assisted Therapy) in November, 2002, at the Mental Health Hostel for Holocaust Survivors at Pardessiyah in Israel, revealed a very moving interaction between one of our "feline co-therapists" and the patients at the Center. HAMA's work with elderly schizophrenic "Survivors of the Holocaust" over the past few years has been empirically documented and published in the *American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*, 9:4 Fall 2001, and represents a milestone in Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) for the elderly everywhere. Yet even here the richness of the experience is never ending, and we as caretakers continue to learn both from our patients as well as from our pet companions.

Cats and dogs are perceived by many people as integral members of the human family, and are for some the bridges to reentry into the human world of interpersonal communication and positive confrontation with reality. This confrontation marks the beginning of "healing", where an agonized patient may yet "rehumanize" an environment which had so devastatingly dehumanized him in the past. For Holocaust survivors dogs represent hostile and fearful associations of that past. HAMA's Pekingese have been particularly effective with this population, in that they are so dissimilar to any of the large Alastians or Rotweillers or Dobermann attack dogs which so terrorized these people as children. The Pekingeses' greatest asset is that they resemble cats in appearance and dogs in behavior.

Cats, however, are far less common than dogs in AAT programs in Israel, because they have long been suspect by many of being capricious, unpredictable and inappropriate for Animal Assisted Therapy. However, they have proven again and again to be one of the great secret success stories of HAMA's Program. Were cats human they would be the great artists, musiciens and bohemians of life. They are truly the great individualists of the animal world. And while it is not easy to raise a "flower child", it is an experience that can enrich a lifetime. Far from being insensitive and egocentric, it is the overwhelming sensitivity of the cat which moves the human spirit in distress. If we can understand this sensitivity, reach out to it and appreciate the softness and subtle signs of feline behavior, we can learn to move those very mountains which block our own paths to emotional recovery and rediscovery.

One of the groups we work with at the Hostel for Holocaust Survivors in Pardessiyah is comprised of Polish and Russian elderly schizophrenic patients who cannot communicate well either in Hebrew or in English. While there is a hospital staff member who assists in translation, most of our communication is non verbal. Our therapists integrate music, movement and animal-human bonding into our sessions, in order to facilitate social interaction between the patients. In one such session we brought the patients recordings of old Russian songs. The response to the music was overwhelming. There was absolute silence

in the room, as some of the patients swayed to the music, while others sat rigidly in their seats crying silently. One of our Ragdoll kittens by the name of “Chanel” was being held and stroked by a patient. The music ended. The room was silent. And then, like the sound of a gentle roar of an ocean wave finding its way to shore, the purring of our young cat was heard covering the silence in the room. One of the other patients stood up, approached Chanel, and rested his ear on her belly, as if he were listening to a sea shell . He was smiling, and he was crying. Struggling in Hebrew he tried to explain to us all.

*“She is calling to her mother.
That’s how her mother used to call to her.
She is purring. She is not angry.
She is sad, because her mother will never come back.
None of them will ever come back,
but she keeps calling them and calling them.
That’s what cats do when they are homesick for their mother.”*

He began to rub his head gently on her belly. Another patient slowly stood up and put his arm around his shoulders. In a place where patients barely co-exist as walking shadows, without knowing each other’s names or venturing beyond their own silent torments, the moment was magical, and the purr of the cat unforgettable.

I felt that for the first time in a long time these old and troubled souls could feel a sense of empowerment, a reaffirmation of beauty and purity and respect and dignity. Most importantly, however, they experienced a longing for themselves as individuals. Many of them were lost children in a Holocaust of fire and hate. I personally felt overwhelmed and humbled by the experience.

By co-existing together our canine and feline friends demonstrate that love expresses itself in many forms. Cats are not the “enemies” or “antitheses” of dogs as often perceived. They are just different in the way they communicate their feelings. There is a ‘mystery’ and ‘beauty’ to the cat which is undeniable. The cat is more introverted than his canine cousin. He is more independent, more comfortable with constancy of place, food, relationships, and more wary of superficial expressions of friendship. Trust, once broken is hard to rebuild. An ‘abused’ feline, unlike his canine cousin, finds it difficult to just “forgive and forget”. Time and true effort are needed to heal the breach of trust.

By living and working together as a family, HAMA’s dogs and cats poignantly and concretely demonstrate their differences and reflect the need for us all to understand our own individuality and need to communicate, to love and be loved in our own special way.

Cats are not “slurpers”. Dogs are not “purrers”. No two people are ever alike. They communicate their joys, fears, anxieties, and love in different ways. The dog’s tail does indeed wag the human heart, BUT it is the *purr of the cat* that makes it hum. It is as simple and wonderful as that.
