





Chapter 6:
ALL CREATURES GREAT
AND SMALL

THE BOND IS ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS

DR AUBREY FINE





ABOUT DR AUBREY FINE

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Dr Aubrey Fine is a native of Montreal, Canada. He received his graduate degree from University of Cincinnati in 1982. Dr Fine has been on the faculty at California State Polytechnic University since 1981 and is presently a Professor Emeritus and a licensed psychologist. In 2001, Dr Fine was presented the Wang Award given to distinguished professor within the California State University system (23 universities).

Aubrey has been recognised by numerous organisations for his service and dedication to children, animals and the community. In July of 2016, he received the William McCulloch Award for Excellence in HAI Education and Practice from the International Association of Human Animal Interaction Organizations, in Paris, France. Additionally, he was awarded the Educator of the Year in 1990, from the Learning Disability Association of CA as well as receiving the 2006 CA Poly Faculty Award for Community Engagement.

Aubrey's primary research interests relate to the psycho-social impact of human animal interactions and animal assisted interventions, social skills training and children with ADHD, and resilience in children. Dr Fine is the author of several books including the *Our Faithful Companions*, *Parent Child Dance*, *Therapist's Guide to Learning and Attention Disorders*, *Fathers and Sons*, *The Total Sports Experience for Children*, *Give a Dog Your Heart*, *The Handbook on Animal Assisted Therapy* (5th edition released in July 2019) *Afternoons with Puppy*, and *The Welfare of Animals in Animal Assisted Therapy* (Springer 2021).

He also has had a featured monthly column in *Dog Fancy Magazine* on the human animal bond entitled the *Loving Bond*. He has been a guest on numerous national TV and radio shows including on programs on ABC, Discovery Network, KTLA, NPR, PBS, Fox and CNN. Dr Fine's work has also been featured in the *Wall Street Journal*, *Time Magazine*, *People magazine*, *Allure Magazine*, *Associated Press*, *Los Angeles* and *New York Times*. He was noted as one of the pioneers in *Animal Assisted Therapy* in the *New York Times*.

Dr Fine is the chair of the Human Animal Bond Advisory Committee of Pet Partners as well as the past chair of the steering committee on Human Animal Interactions for the American Veterinary Medical Association.



INTRODUCTION

When I was invited to give a short opening keynote address at the *Nourished Conference* in January 2021, I didn't imagine that a chapter would be constructed from that presentation. Like all of you, we have our own stories. This article is about my personal journey in reflecting on the significance of animals in my life. My journey began unexpectedly, because I was a child who never had pets.

Many of you may recognise that the title of this article is borrowed from the book and famous BBC series called *All Creatures Great and Small*, based on a country veterinarian, who wrote stories about his human and animal clients and their significance in both of their lives. Many years ago, I had a chance to meet James Herriot's grandson in Scotland at a conference. He brilliantly captured some of the wonderful tales that he recalled about his famous grandfather. His talk was brilliant and heart-warming, perhaps just like his grandfather. A quotation I found years later was where Herriot stated "*If having a soul means being able to feel love and loyalty and gratitude, then animals are a lot better off than a lot of humans.*" Many of you, I believe feel the significance of what Herriot was trying to share.

I applied the title of *All Creatures Great and Small* to this chapter because over the years I have shared my life with so many animals, but there were two that had a more significant impact which greatly changed my life. Most of this paper will be highlighting these special beings. My **small** (using Herriot's metaphor) was my first pet Sasha who was a gerbil that I acquired in 1973. She was a gentle soul who serendipitously changed my life. The other animal that blessed my life is a large beautiful Arabian horse that I met seven years ago. Who would have thought that this city slicker would become a best buddy to a horse? Her name is Amber. You will get to meet her in this article as well.

When I grew up in Canada, I was actually afraid of animals. My mother didn't like them, and her reactions towards them had an impact on both my sister and I. If we saw dogs while walking down a street, we would immediately walk away. My mother discouraged any interest or interactions with our furry neighbourhood creatures but as I aged, I decided that I was ready to have animals in my life.

It was 1973. This truly was a serendipitous beginning (as I noted earlier). I named my first pet Sasha. Sasha was a little gerbil, and once we became acquainted, we got along splendidly! At that time, I was

NOURISHED

a College student in Quebec. I was working for an organisation part time and was directing a social skills program for children with learning disabilities. One day I thought I would bring Sasha to the program to meet the children. I thought it would be a unique experience for the children to meet a little creature, but I didn't really plan for what I was about to witness.

The program included about 30-40 children, as well as several staff. I still remember that cold morning when I brought Sasha into the program. Sasha was greeted enthusiastically by lots of children. They asked many questions, including, "Why are you bringing this little animal to the program?" "What kind of animal is she?" Some even asked if they could hold her. One boy, Steven (pseudonym), was so convincing in his request that I allowed him to hold her, but I gave him a few specific guidelines that he had to follow. "I'm going to get you to sit down, and you have to promise me you will stay still and not move when I place her in your palms."

Typically, Steven was a very impulsive child but he agreed with my terms, and he sat down with his legs crossed on the ground right next to me. I told him to take his two hands and put them together right next to his tummy with palms up. Then I took Sasha out of the cage, got her comfortable with me first and then placed her onto his open palms. Surprisingly to me, as Steven became noticeably calmer, Sasha appeared more comfortable. Sasha started to meander up his chest to the joy of that little guy. I still remember watching him, with his eyes wide open. His gentle hands were her foundation.

Forty-eight years later what I remember the most, was not the entire interaction, but the highlight of watching a little boy beam with pride as he told me, "You see I promised you I wouldn't move, and I haven't." It was at that moment that I really began to recognise what we conceptualise today as the power of the human and animal bond. It was this incident that intrigued me enough to spend the next 48 years of my life studying not only human animal interactions, but more specifically what is known today as Animal Assisted Interventions.

Let us segue for a few moments from my personal journal to explain the human-animal bond and provide a brief glimpse into the physical and psychological benefits that are derived from our relationships with animals.

WHAT IS THE HUMAN-ANIMAL BOND?

So, what is the human-animal bond? Many of you have likely heard numerous definitions, but perhaps are unfamiliar with the roots of the definition. One should appreciate that the metaphor used for the *human animal bond* (HAB) was initially coined as a term to capture the spirit of the infant-parent bond. The term HAB was borrowed by our early leaders from that unique relationship. The first "official" use of the term "human-animal bond" was highlighted at the *Proceedings of the Meeting of Group for the Study of Human-Companion Animal Bond* in Dundee, Scotland, March 23-25, 1979 (Fine and Beck, 2015).

Perhaps a strong element that exists within the bond is the keen sense of kinship that seems to connect the animal with his/her human counterparts. Many believe that for a bond to be formed the association between humans and their pet animals must be mutual and significant to both parties.

Perhaps the most utilised definition was established by the *American Veterinary Medical Association* (AVMA). According to the AVMA, “The human-animal bond is defined as a mutually beneficial and dynamic relationship between people and other animals that is influenced by behaviours which are essential to the health and well-being of both. This includes, but is not limited to, emotional, psychological and physical interactions with people, other animals, and the environment” (JAVMA 1998 p.1975).

Although the AVMA definition gives us tremendous insight into our desire to interact with animals, some contend that additional traits such as love, admiration and connection must be incorporated in the definition. When writing the book *Our Faithful Companions*, I came across a Greek term that is used to describe familial love which I believe exemplifies that devotion felt within this human-animal relationship. The Greek term is *Storge* (Fine 2014). Recent research by anthropologists have suggested that kinship doesn't have to be a biological relative like a cousin, a grandparent, sister, brother, a parent. But that “kin” could represent individuals in our lives that have meaning to us — for example a person we call our “aunt” might be our mum or dad’s best friend. Similarly, animals whose lives have meaning for us can assume closer familial kinship.

Such familial closeness occurs to me when I come home, and the dogs and birds greet me. Years ago, when we had a larger menagerie of animals in our home, it was such a joyous welcome I received. The dogs were excited about my presence and would bark, and the cockatoo would begin shouting, “He's home!” It is not as if my wife was running to the door and saying, “He's home!” *Storge* encompasses this love that we're focusing on. Over the years I've witnessed this form of familial love, not just in my own personal relationships with animals, but in watching people all over the world and how they related with their animals. Pets were once relegated to being kept in spaces outside the home (garage, backyard) but such arrangements have dramatically changed. Many of our pets are now sharing our living spaces and bedrooms.

THE HUMAN-ANIMAL BOND AND ITS HEALTH BENEFITS

I strongly believe that science is catching up to what many of us have believed for centuries: having animals in our lives is good for our wellbeing. Ever since the pioneer research by Erika Friedmann and her colleagues (1980, 1983), multidisciplinary researchers have investigated numerous benefits of pet companionship, including data that petting a dog lowers blood pressure and/or heart rate (e.g., Shiloh, Sorek, & Terkel 2003; McGreevy, Righetti, & Thomson 2005).

Since the early years of this discovery, several other studies have discovered that positive contact with animals can also produce numerous healthy physiological and psychological outcomes, including decreased cortisol (stress hormone) levels, an increase of numerous neurotransmitters as well as altering oxytocin, an endorphin that promotes a sense of happiness (Odendaal & Meintjes 2003). Table 1 synthesises some of the literature and highlights some of the physiological and psychological benefits of pet companionship.

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TABLE 1: HEALTH AND PSYCHOSOCIAL BENEFITS OF PETS

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STUDY DESCRIPTION	AUTHORS/YEARS PUBLISHED
Petting an animal causes decreases in blood pressure and/or heart rate.	Eddy, 1996; Friedmann, Beck, & Lynch, 1983; Shiloh, Sorek, & Terkel, 2003
Stroking a pet can lower heart rate.	McGreevy, Righetti, & Thomson, 2005; Vormbrock & Grossberg, 1988
The presence of a pet dog or cat can lower levels of heart rate and blood pressure in stressful situations such as completing mental arithmetic.	Allen, Blascovich, & Mendes, 2002
The risk factor for coronary heart disease was significantly lower for pet owners than nonowners, particularly for males.	Anderson, Reid, & Jennings, 1992
Lower levels of serum triglycerides (high levels of which are associated with increased risk for heart attacks in elderly pet owners compared to nonowners).	Dembicki and Anderson 1996
Pet owners had significantly lower systolic blood pressure. Pet owners had significantly lower plasma triglycerides.	Jennings 1995
Walking with a dog increases and enhances the opportunities to initiate and sustain chance conversations with strangers than walking alone.	McNicholas & Collis, 2000 and McNicholas 2000
Pets can reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation.	e.g., Headey, 1998
Women living entirely alone were more lonely than those living with either pets or other people.	Zasloff & Kidd 1994
Elderly people with pets have also been shown to have fewer symptoms of depression than those without pets.	Roberts, McBride, Rosenvinge, Stevenage, & Bradshaw, 1996
Interactions with animals can also produce hormonal changes.	Odendaal and Meintjes (2003)



MEETING MY GREAT

Let me switch gears now and return to talking about my **great** and how we met as well as how she changed my life! In May of 2014, I attended a photoshoot to get some pictures of me and a horse. The conference at which I was presenting asked me to have a few pictures taken so they could use them as publicity for my presentation. My University was built on the land of Mr Kellogg. Mr Kellogg, whom many of you know as a cereal magnate, had some property in Southern California where he established his Arabian horse farm. In the middle of the 1930's he donated that land to the State of California and eventually that land became one of the 23 universities of the California State University system. On the campus today, we have about 65 horses.

I remember the day vividly. As I arrived to meet the photographer at the Equine Centre, I could see the horse they selected had a beautiful red coat and was wearing some of her Arabian garb. Although I had previously visited the horse centre on occasion, I really did not have a strong connection with any of the horses. My expectation for the morning visit was to meet one of the horses, capture the moment and just leave.

However, fortunately, that didn't happen. I realised when I met Amber that I did not even have any treats with me to encourage her to relax and become more comfortable to pose with me. Being somewhat perplexed before taking the pictures, I turned to a college student nearby and asked, "Do you have anything I can give Amber, so she may be more interested in meeting me?" The student reached into her backpack and said, "Well I have a pear here would that do?" I smiled and said, "Yes." Not being greedy, after I shared a piece of the pear with Amber, I immediately returned the rest to the student. "Here's your pear back," I said as the student chuckled and said I could keep the rest for Amber.

Who would've thought that my whole relationship with a horse would begin with sharing a pear and taking a picture? I didn't want to be the person that would visit these magnificent creatures just to take a picture and walk away, so I promised the student I would come back and help with grooming Amber.

I was so impressed after our brief interaction that I wanted to get to know Amber a little bit. I don't believe the student really thought that I would follow up but I did and that's how our journey began. Over the years the students have acted as my mentors and babysitters to ensure my initial interactions with Amber were safe and positive. Over time we have become so much more comfortable with each other. I always tell people, you haven't lived until a horse runs full gallop in the pasture, just to come to you to say hi and snuggle.

To capture our early encounters and to synthesise the relationship we have formed, I often think of the quotation from the film *Casablanca*, where Rick tells Louie, "I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship." In so many ways, that quotation exactly captures our enduring relationship!

Amber and I have become very good friends. Our connections have led to a wonderful friendship and that friendship has led to our bond. My priority in our enduring relationship is the friendship we share when we greet each other and just spend time together. Indirectly, all the health benefits we talked about earlier are experienced almost every time Amber and I are together. My wife often tells

ALL CREATURES GREAT AND SMALL

me when I feel a bit down or grouchy to, “Go and visit Amber, she’ll make you feel better.” I know our visits really do make me feel wonderful. Biologically, my oxytocin is flying and flooding me, because of the significance I feel in regard to our connection. Some people who know me, will tease me and call Amber my girlfriend.

A funny story happened several years ago when I found out that Amber was pregnant. I was so excited and eager to get home to tell my wife. I didn't have my cell phone with me, so after spending some time with Amber, I drove home. When I arrived, I ran into the house exuberantly shouting to my wife, “Honey, guess what? My girlfriend is pregnant!”, not realising there were several people in our home, including a contractor who was working in the kitchen. His facial expression was a contortion of shock, genuine surprise, and almost comical “Oscar awards” quality. His face revealed his sense of confusion but he quickly realised that Amber was not a human girlfriend, but an 1100 pound Arabian horse that had captured my heart.

So, our connections really have led to unique friendships that have evolved over the years, even during the restrictions of COVID. My friend Alan Beck once stated, “The indelible bond we share with animals incorporates opportunities filled with empathy, inspired by these connections.” It is with that empathy, that these connections really unite all creatures; Great or small, human and non-human.

Since I shared Amber’s pregnancy, I may as well finish the story. I was very involved with her care during that period and was so excited about having a first grand horse. In fact, Amber's first foal was my first grandchild. Ironically, Amber gave birth two weeks before, my daughter-in-law gave birth to a beautiful child, whom I adore greatly. During Amber’s pregnancy, I had a graduate class on the topic of human-animal relationships and asked the class if any of them would be interested in coming to a horse’s baby shower. We had plans to go to the equine centre for a practicum on horse behaviour and equine assisted services. I suggested they could come early for the celebrations and meet some of the horses, including my dear friend Amber. I must confess that I was surprised at the enthusiasm the students shared.

A few of the students set up baby shower games, including selecting a name for the new foal and guessing how many carrots were in a bottle. They even made Amber a baby shower cake, filled with oats, barley, molasses, carrots and apples. Amber seemed delighted with the extra attention and snacks and shared them with all her friends. It's ironic that after the course was completed, the most significant comment, echoed in many of the student evaluations was that the party helped them conceptualise the importance of the human-animal bond. Some students noted they never realised the significance until they celebrated a baby shower with a horse. “Being part of it made the bond come alive.”

Daniella, my first grand horse is now five years old and I was there at her birth at 2am on the 15th April. Daniella is a gentle giant with whom I also have a unique bond. Daniella has now had her own foal. I was unable to be there, but ironically Daniella’s foal, Fey (barn name) was born on my birthday and unbeknownst to any of the staff, the foal was given the name of my mother (Fae). How eerie, but so special.

NOURISHED

Over the years I have truly appreciated how blessed my life has become because of my Great and Small, and all the other animals that I have been surrounded by (I must confess that each of them is also equally as important). As I conclude, I end with Anatole France's quotation: "Until one has loved an animal, a part of one's soul remains unawakened." I often think of my early years growing up in Canada and believe that perhaps my life and soul were not yet totally awakened, because of my limited interactions with animals. I didn't appreciate the significance of their lives, and how they would have such a strong impact on my life.

Everyone needs a champion and I believe that our champions can be animals. Over the years, both my two special friends (my small and great) have truly been champions for me. We need to celebrate the gifts that we share with them and cherish the times together. These moments will leave you speechless — tranquil portals to other living entities.



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