

Connecting with animals

My attempt to create a personal, evolutionary approach to biology

For as long as I can remember, I've had this feeling. Put into words, I'd describe it as a desire to identify and connect with other animals. When I was little, it came out in daily trips to a dog park. When I was a teenager, I worked at a vet's office, a seal rescue center, a dolphin cognition lab, an animal shelter, and a zoo...While all of these were formative, my feeling didn't find its form until I began to see living things as *evolved*.

Christine Janis helped me develop that lens when I was nineteen. She's a paleontologist and anatomist. She can draw any organ or muscle-group, from any angle. Using everything from illustrations to dissections, she showed me how to make sense of my own bones, muscles, and organs alongside those of living and extinct animals. She helped me use my own anatomy as a tool and reference point. She helped me *see* and *feel* analogies between myself and others, and showed me how evolution can help us understand and connect to the living things around us.

With Christine's frame in mind, I now see life's forms and activities in all their diversity and unity. I'm filled with a sense of wonder, and can use my body to connect—by analogy—to other animals and their experiences. My program of study is about deepening and sharing these capacities.

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I want to create experiences and stories using analogies grounded in evolutionary history to surface intellectual, emotional, and embodied ways of connecting to animals. I believe these experiences and stories can develop in people a lasting sense of admiration, wonder, and empathy for living things. I hope this can make us become better at protecting our biological—and perhaps even our human—diversity.

I hope my program of study will make me better at creating those experiences and stories and will help me understand how they work. That means I'm going to spend my time:

- Observing and connecting with other species, and developing long-term relationships with some
- Learning to really *see* animals' bodies in detail—not seeing just wings, but seeing individual feathers' textures...not seeing just feet, but seeing specific toe geometry...not seeing just fur, but seeing coloration patterns.
- Learning to really *see* their behavior in detail...not seeing just aggression, but seeing teeth-baring, lip-curling...not seeing just mistrust, but seeing a dog's upward look of the eye...not seeing just pleasure, but seeing parrot feathers ruffling and eyes pinning.
- And above all, I want to spend my time making meaning of these observations by:

- *Explaining* these forms and behaviors—articulating where they come from and why they make sense for the animals...
- ...and then *translating* these explanations, incorporating them into powerful analogies and stories which help us use our own bodies to connect to animals' experiences.

I haven't found many people make these experiences and stories. Luckily, there are a few...

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Sy Montgomery in *The Soul of an Octopus*:

"Wilson [a volunteer at the New England Aquarium] turns back to Athena [an octopus] and feeds her the rest of the fish. He hands her one fish after another, three more in all. He deposits each in the suckers of a different arm. I watch in astonishment as the octopus conveys each fish along her suckers, toward her mouth. It seems to take a long time before each fish reaches its destination. Why doesn't she just flex the arm and place the fish directly in her mouth? Then it occurs to me: Perhaps it's for the same reason we lick an ice cream cone instead of shoving it past the tongue down the throat. Taste is pleasurable, and it's pleasurable because it's useful: this is how we know what is good and safe to eat and what is inedible. An octopus does the same with its suckers."

I think it's amazing how Montgomery slows and breaks down Athena's behavior. Instead of simply saying "[Athena] ate three fish," she writes, "[Athena] conveys each [fish] in the suckers of a different arm." She asks: Why? ("Why doesn't she just flex the arm and place the fish directly in her mouth?")...and then relates it to something we can all empathize with, "Perhaps it's for the same reason we lick an ice cream cone instead of shoving it past the tongue down the throat [...] Taste is pleasurable"...all while connecting it back to an evolutionary function ("it's pleasurable because it's useful: this is how we know what is good and safe to eat and what is inedible").

David Attenborough in *Life*:

"[the nose of the star-nosed mole is like] two nostrils surrounded by twenty-two fingers. Fingers that allow the mole to sense the world around it by touch alone."

I'm basically in love with David Attenborough. He gives us analogies we can use to make meaning of animals' behavior. His films are so touching. They bring us so close to animal's lives and they feel intimate and personal. He does this while grounding his work in evolutionary and ecological history. Compare his description of the star-nosed mole's nose in our own bodies terms with Nat Geo WILD's:

"Twenty-two appendages or 'feelers';...Each feeler is covered with thousands of sensory receptors called *Eimer's organs* that make the star one of the most ultra-sensitive organs of any

in the animal kingdom. [All of this is set against dramatic, overdone music and narration, all designed to distance us from the mole, not connect us.]”

From birth we think with and through our bodies. It's concrete. It's personal. And we're much better at using our bodies to think with than I believe most people realize. While it might be nice to know the sensors on that mole's nose are named after Theodor Eimer, when I connect that nose to my *own* fingers, I can connect to another living thing through my own, personal, embodied experience. I believe that this kind of connection is sacred and worth documenting, sharing, and understanding.

But how do we do that? How can others join me?

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I'm not totally sure yet, but here are some of my best ideas so far...We could:

- ...make kinetic sculptures evoking parrots' body language, starting by making GIFs observing all the small tics and movements that make up parrots' expressiveness. In this way we could learn to observe and construct elements of an animal's social behavior.
- ...write short stories from an animal's perspective. What's it like to live underneath a refrigerator as a cockroach? To chase after a squirrel as a dog?
- ...do what Frederick Wiseman would have done if he visited Foster Parrots (the parrot sanctuary where I've been volunteering).
- ...capture footage of the plants we pass by in our daily lives, throwing in extra clips and narration about where they come from, how they got there, and how they solve similar problems in so many different ways.
- ...make a short film of urban rats and how they act, highlighting how they solve problems as they navigate the world. Maybe we could even [comfortably] harness a small camera to some of the rats whose stories we follow?
- ...put together an exhibition of photographs that highlight and take seriously animals' emotions.
- ...write about “cute” tweets of animal videos like [this one](#), trying to get at what's going on.

Even with these ideas, I want to get started now. Over the next two months, I plan to:

1. **Read** Darwin's
 - a. *On the Origin of Species*
 - b. *The Voyage of the Beagle*
 - c. *On The Expression of Emotion in Man and Animals*
2. **Write**
 - a. A blog post deconstructing a cute tweet and really getting at what might be happening
 - b. An analysis of Sy Montgomery's *The Soul of An Octopus* which describes the essential characteristics which I want my stories to emulate.
3. **Make** a kinetic sculpture, puppet, or some other representation which does a good job of capturing one or more parrot gestures
4. **Run a program** where:

- a. we observe local, urban animals
- b. try to capture and describe why animals are the way they are and why they do what they do

As I work on this projects, these questions will be driving me:

- Why do humans see themselves as separate from nature—and, in particular, separate from non-human animals?
- How can we use our human experience to connect to the experience of a non-human animal?
- How do species evolve and how might insight into that process provide points of entry for empathic connections between humans and non-human animals?
- Why do we have the impulse to humanize non-human animals and how does this impede our ability to *see* animals for who/what they truly are?
- What does it mean to *see* and *know* another person and how is that different from how we might *see* or *know* a non-human animal?