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Encounters With Animal Minds

In this article I draw on personal experience to explore the kinds of relationships that can develop between human and nonhuman animals. The first part of the article describes my encounters with wild baboons, whom I studied in East Africa over the course of many years. The baboons treated me as a social being, and to gain their trust I had to learn the troop's social conventions and behave in accordance with them. This process gave me a feeling for what it means to be a baboon. Over time, I developed a sense of belonging to their community, and my subjective identity seemed to merge with theirs. This experience expanded my sense of the possible in interspecies relations. The second part of the article describes a mutual exploration of such possibilities in my relationship with my dog, Safi. I describe how Safi and I co-create systems of communication and emotional expression that permit deep 'intersubjectivity', despite our very different biological natures. In my relationships with baboons, dogs, and other animals, I have encountered the presence in another of something resembling a human 'self'. I emphasize the importance of recognizing and honoring this presence in other animals as well as in humans.

Prelude

In Praise of Ch'an Master Wang
You who Cares for the Bonnet Monkeys around his Mountain Studio

From
Tree after tree
In the undisturbed courtyard
The fruit's dropped
On the frost.

They even love
Entering the thatched hall
To listen to *Dharma*. How is it
Other species know courtesy
And limits?

Coming in each time,
They sit opposite one another
On the meditation benches.

Chi Yuan (Pine & O'Conner,nd, p. 100)

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Introduction

Resting in the shade of a tree, Alex, Daphne and I lazily contemplate the landscape, dotted here and there with herds of zebra and impala. A breeze rises, fluffing up the hair on Daphne's head. I fiddle with a brightly colored stone and Alex leans over to peer at my find. Then he rests his head against the tree and dozes. I look past him at Daphne and our gazes meet. She makes a friendly face and moves a little bit closer. Daphne, too, begins to nap, and soon I'm drifting off as well, lulled to sleep by the sound of her gentle breathing and the birds flitting about in the tree above. My body relaxes completely, secure in the presence of my companions.

Many of us have shared such peaceful moments with dear friends. But my experience under the tree had an unusual twist because Alex and Daphne were baboons, members of a wild troop that for over two years daily welcomed me into their midst. Through this close association, I discerned in each baboon a distinct presence that seemed much like the kind of 'self' that dwells within me. Among scientists, applying concepts like 'self' or 'consciousness' to nonhuman animals[1] is very controversial, both because no one agrees on how to define these terms, and because however we define them, they retain a subjective dimension that makes them resistant to investigation by scientific methods. Rather than enter this treacherous territory, I will pursue two modest goals. First, I will tell some stories to give a feeling for what it is like to encounter a 'self' in wild baboons and other animals. Second, I will propose a preliminary framework for conceptualizing the ways that humans and animals can relate to one another.

Baboons

During multiple forays to Kenya and Tanzania over the past 25 years, the baboons I came to know the best belonged to Eburru Cliffs troop (EC), named after a rocky outcropping in the Great Rift Valley near Lake Naivasha. EC's 135 members moved as a cohesive unit in search of food throughout a huge area of roughly 70 km^2. For two years, I joined the baboons at dawn and travelled with them until they reached some sleeping cliffs at dusk, twelve hours later. With occasional days off, I repeated this routine seven days a week. For several months, I lived alone and went for days without seeing another human. Later, I lived with other researchers whom I saw in the evening, but I interacted with people infrequently while with the baboons.

I came to live with baboons as a result of my lifelong curiosity about animals. Although I entered their world as a scientist interested in primate social behaviour, many of the skills I used to get to know them were inherited from my ancestors rather than learned in graduate school. Until recent times, all humans possessed profound familiarity with other creatures. Paleolithic hunters learned about the giant bear the same way the bear learned about them: through the intense concentration and fully aroused senses of a wild animal whose life hangs in the balance. Our ancestors' survival depended on exquisite sensitivity to the subtle movements and nuanced communication of predators, prey, competitors, and all the animals whose keener senses of vision, smell, or hearing enhanced human apprehension of the world.

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[1] Hereafter, I refer to nonhuman animals simply as 'animals'.

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Each of us has inherited this capacity to feel our way into the being of another, but our fast-paced, urban lifestyle rarely encourages us to do so. During my life with the baboons, I discovered that, plunged back into the wild world from which we emerged, ancient skills come alive, and once again human and animal minds meet on equal ground.

However, at the beginning of my study, the baboons and I definitely did not see eye to eye. I wanted to get as close to them as possible; they wanted to keep their distance. Convincing them that I was not a threat was the first major challenge I faced.[2]

I began with the obvious first step: In open country I approached the wary troop from a great distance and halted whenever they began to move away. The baboons gradually allowed me to inch closer, but progress was slow. Then I began to notice more subtle responses to my presence. For example, baboons, ever vigilant for predators, look around a lot while foraging, and I realized that as I drew closer, more of their looks were directed at me. A little later I noticed that even before this happened, females began to issue calls and direct stern looks at their infants to signal them to return to mom, just in case the dangerous human moved any closer. By tuning in to these more subtle signals, I was able to stop approaching *before* most of the baboons got nervous. Soon they let me get much closer, and eventually I was allowed to move among them freely.

When speaking about this process at professional gatherings, I've used the accepted scientific term, 'habituation'. The word implies that the baboons adapted to me, that they changed, while I stayed essentially the same. But in reality, the reverse is closer to the truth. The baboons remained themselves, doing what they always did in the world they had always lived in. I, on the other hand, in the process of gaining their trust, changed almost everything about me, including the way I walked and sat, the way I held my body, and the way I used my eyes and voice. I was learning a whole new way of being in the world — the way of the baboon. I was not literally moving like a baboon — my very different morphology prevented that — but rather I was responding to the cues that baboons use to indicate their emotions, motivations and intentions to one another, and I was gradually learning to send such signals back to them. As a result, instead of avoiding me when I got too close, they started giving me very deliberate dirty looks, which made me move away. This may sound like a small shift, but in fact it signalled a profound change from being treated as an *object* that elicited a unilateral response (avoidance), to being recognized as a *subject* with whom they could communicate. Over time they treated me more and more as a social being like themselves, subject to the demands and rewards of relationship. This meant that I sometimes had to be willing to give more weight to their demands (e.g., a signal to 'get lost!') than to my desire to collect data. But it also meant that I was increasingly often welcomed into their midst, not as a barely-tolerated intruder but as a casual acquaintance or even, on occasion, a familiar friend.

Being treated like a fellow baboon proved immensely useful to my research, because I experienced directly critical aspects of baboon society. For example, I soon learned that the baboons' most basic social conventions entail acknowledgement of relative status through respect for personal space. In general, each baboon has a small invisible circle around him or her that a lower-ranking animal will rarely invade

[2] See Smuts 1999b for more details about adapting to baboon society.

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without first signalling intent (usually by grunting) and receiving from the other an indication that it is safe to approach (usually a reciprocal grunt and/or the 'come hither' face).[3] If the approaching animal is dominant, he or she may or may not respect the other's personal space; it depends on the nature of their relationship and the current context. For example, when a higher-ranking female approaches a mother in order to greet her young infant, she often pauses to grunt and make appealing faces at the infant outside the boundaries of the mother's personal space. This indicates that the female's intentions are friendly, which reduces the chances that the mother will leave with her baby. In contrast, if a female is approaching a lower-ranking mother in order to take over her feeding site, she'll usually enter the mother's personal space without pausing, causing her to move away.

Once I became sensitive to the importance of personal space in baboon society, I realized that the boundaries of personal space could shrink or grow, depending on the individuals concerned and the situation. For example, when a male courts a female, her personal space tends to expand, and to woo her the male needs to be very sensitive to this shift (Smuts, 2000). In a similar vein, if a subordinate, S, has recently been threatened or attacked by a more dominant animal, D, S's personal space in relation to D will expand until they have reconciled (by touching or through vocal communication [Cheney *et al.*, 1995]) or until enough time has passed to neutralize S's fear of D. Sometimes personal space shrinks to nothing. This occurs most often among very young animals, kin, or close friends. In such intimate relationships, no one worries too much about being polite. Thus, the way baboons construct and relate to personal space reflects, among other things, the intentions of each party; their age, gender, and relative statuses; their degree of familiarity; the trust a subordinate feels toward a dominant; recent histories of interaction; and the particular circumstances of the moment.

Primatologists have long recognized the fundamental importance of personal space by considering 'approach–retreat' interactions a valid measure of relative status (Hausfater, 1975). But status is just one of many factors influencing how baboons relate to one another. Familiarity and trust — which allow two individuals to overlap their circles of personal space, regardless of gender, age, or relative status — are every bit as important. In my relations with baboons, these two elements proved more salient than status.

Every well-trained field worker knows that it is critical not to move too close to the animals one is studying, so as to minimize one's influence on their emotions and behaviour. But less often do field workers acknowledge the subtle and complex issues that arise when the animals regard the scientist as a social subject. For example, as a graduate student I was told by more experienced primatologists that I should always ignore or slowly move away from any study animal who came near me or tried to interact with me (in other words, any animal who entered my personal space). The idea was that, by ignoring the animals, we would discourage them from paying attention to us. The baboons soon taught me otherwise.

One day, when I was sitting on the edge of the troop, a foraging female approached me. When she was about two feet away (an undeniable overlap of personal space), she

[3] When a baboon makes the come hither face, he or she flattens the ears back against the skull and raises the brows to reveal the white skin on the eyelids. This expression conveys friendly intent. See Smuts (1999a) for a photographic example.

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grunted softly several times without looking up. I turned my head to see whom she was grunting at, and, spotting no other baboons within 15 yards, realized that she was talking to me. After that epiphany, I paid much more attention to what it meant to the baboons to ignore another's approach.

I soon learned that ignoring the proximity of another baboon is rarely a neutral act, something that should have been obvious to me from my experience among humans. Whether or not a baboon ignores another conveys a great deal about the relationship. At one end of the spectrum, as mentioned above, baboons who are closely related or good friends sometimes completely ignore each other's proximity, especially during foraging, much as we might disregard a family member who approaches while we are absorbed in a task. At the other end of the spectrum, a female with a young infant will often flee when a male new to the troop merely glances her way. Most relationships fall somewhere between these extremes, and usually when two baboons meet, they acknowledge each other's presence through conventions like grunting, the 'come hither' face, or brief greeting rituals involving body contact (Smuts and Watanabe, 1990; Watanabe and Smuts, 1999). Depending on the context and the animals involved, ignoring another can be a sign of trust (as among close kin), or an indication of great tension. For example, among adult males vying over status, the ability to ignore a rival's approach signals a refusal to submit to him and often provokes even closer proximity as the other male attempts to force the rival to lose his composure (Smuts, 1999a).

Thus, although ignoring the approach of a baboon may at first sound like a good strategy, those who advised me to do so did not take into account the baboons' insistence on regarding me as a social being. After a little while, I stopped reflexively ignoring baboons who approached me and instead varied my response depending on the baboon and the circumstances. Usually, I made brief eye contact or grunted. When I behaved in this baboon-appropriate fashion, the animals generally paid less attention to me than they did if I ignored them. It seemed that they read my signals much as they read each other's. By acknowledging a baboon's presence, I expressed respect, and by responding in ways I picked up from them, I let the baboons know that my intentions were benign and that I assumed they likewise meant me no harm. Once this was clearly communicated in both directions, we could relax in one another's company.

Ignoring an animal in a neutral or mildly friendly situation is usually a low-cost mistake, but ignoring a hostile animal can have grave consequences. I learned this lesson not from a baboon but from a brash adolescent male chimpanzee named Goblin. Shortly after I arrived at Gombe National Park in Tanzania, Goblin began to stalk me. He would materialize before me, give me a hostile look, and then disappear into the vegetation, only to re-emerge minutes or hours later to glare at me again. After a few days of this, he began to attack me. Sometimes, he would charge, slapping me as he passed by. Sometimes he would sneak up behind me, punch me in the back, and then flee. At other times he would lurk in the bushes until he saw me adopt a vulnerable position, such as squatting on the edge of an incline. Then he would throw himself through the air, land on my back, and pummel me as we tumbled down the slope together.

This went on for a couple of weeks. Goblin had not hurt me seriously, but I was bruised, and more importantly, I was a nervous wreck. I spoke to the research director

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about my problem, who recommended that I just ignore him, confident that he would soon tire of his games. Then I found out that another researcher who was small like me had been so tormented by Goblin that she could no longer follow chimps out of camp. I became plagued by imaginary headlines ('researcher foiled by chimpanzee stalker') and feared an ignominious end to my studies.

I tolerated a few more of Goblin's attacks. Then one day he snuck up behind me and stole my rain poncho, which I had looped around my belt. Getting hit was one thing, but losing precious and irreplaceable rain gear was too much. Without thinking, I spun around and grabbed an edge of the poncho just as Goblin twirled to run away with it. I pulled hard. Goblin stood bipedal and pulled at his end. Suddenly, he relinquished his grip, and as I leaned forward to maintain my balance, I swung a hard right. The blow, softened by the poncho covering my fist, rammed into Goblin's nose. I had acted instinctively, without thought. Indeed, had I thought about it I never would have done it, because several of Goblin's adult male allies were nearby. But I was lucky. After I punched him, Goblin crumpled into a whimpering child and went to Figan, the alpha male, for reassurance. Without glancing up, Figan reached out and patted Goblin several times on the top of the head.

I later realized that Goblin had been treating me just as he was treating some of the adult female chimpanzees. He was at the age when a young male chimp climbs up the female hierarchy as a prelude to taking on adult males. Goblin apparently viewed me (and the other chimp-sized woman he had so badly intimidated) as another female to dominate. He had already subdued every chimp female except Figan's sister, Fifi, and the biggest and toughest female, Gigi. One day when Goblin was harassing Gigi, much as he'd harassed me, she turned and smacked him hard and I realized that my instincts had been on target. A female chimpanzee being harassed by an adolescent male will either submit (removing the reason for his attacks) or, like Gigi, fight back. By ignoring Goblin I had failed to send a clear signal either way, and so he persisted. After the poncho episode, he did not bother me again.

The baboons never attacked me, fortunately, since the males' two-inch-long razor-sharp canines can inflict lethal wounds. People sometimes ask me, 'Weren't you scared?' In fact, while studying chimps at Gombe, I was initially terrified of the baboons who shared the park, because they were so unfamiliar to me. However, by the time I got close to Eburru Cliffs, I felt confident that, if a baboon felt like attacking me, I would know it. The degree to which they accepted me among them suggests that they felt much the same about me.

Because I wanted to minimize the ways in which my presence might change their behaviour, I did not cultivate personal relationships with the baboons or encourage them to cultivate such relationships with me. I turned away from juveniles who invited me to play, and when a baboon touched me, I waited for a moment and then slowly moved away. Over time, such overtures became less rather than more common, suggesting that my low-key responses reduced the baboon's curiosity. The mutually respectful but somewhat distant relationships we developed provided ideal circumstances for my research.

Although I didn't relate to the baboons one-on-one (aside from the nuanced responses described above), I did develop a feeling of intimacy with the troop as a whole. I spent most of my waking hours with them. I ate my own food and drank my own water, but otherwise my routine was identical to theirs. I walked wherever they

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did, and I rested when and where they rested. Often, during siesta time, there were only a few big trees in sight, and it seemed natural to for us to share the shade.

After doing much of what they did for some time, I felt like I was turning into a baboon. A simple example involves my reactions to the weather. On the savanna during the rainy season, we could see storms approaching from a great distance. The baboons became restless, anticipating a heavy downpour. At the same time, because they wanted to keep eating, they preferred to stay out in the open as long as possible. The baboons had perfected the art of balancing hunger with the need for shelter. Just when it seemed inevitable to me that we would all get drenched, the troop would rise as one and race for the cliffs, reaching protection exactly as big drops began to fall. For many months, I wanted to run well before they did. Then something shifted, and I knew without thinking when it was time to move. I could not attribute this awareness to anything I saw, or heard or smelled; I just knew. Surely it was the same for the baboons. To me, this was a small but significant triumph. I had gone from thinking about the world analytically to experiencing the world directly and intuitively. It was then that something long slumbering awoke inside me, a yearning to be in the world as my ancestors had done, as all creatures were designed to do by aeons of evolution. Lucky me. I was surrounded by experts who could show the way.

Learning to be more of an animal came easily as I let go of layers of thinking and doing that sometimes served me back home but were only hindrances here. All I had to do was stick with the baboons and attend to what they did and notice how they responded. After a while, being with them felt more like 'the real world' than life back home.

Baboons are nothing if not highly idiosyncratic individuals, as distinct from each other as we humans are (Smuts, 1999a,b). But, they also exist as selves-in-community. This aspect of their being is particularly salient in certain contexts. For example, when baboons respond to a neighbouring troop's intrusion into their home range, they move together toward the enemy. They most vividly convey a sense of group spirit when they share a highly pleasurable experience. Once, after few days of heavy rain, we stumbled upon a plethora of newly emerged mushrooms — a baboon delicacy that normally evokes competition. This day, however, there were enough mushrooms for everyone. To my amazement, before anyone dug in, they all paused to join in a troop-wide chorus of food-grunts, their bodies literally shaking with excitement. In that moment, I realized that collective rejoicing in celebration of sustenance must have begun long ago.

The baboon's thorough acceptance of me, combined with my immersion in their daily lives, deeply affected my identity. The shift I experienced is well described by millennia of mystics but rarely acknowledged by scientists.[4] Increasingly, my subjective consciousness seemed to merge with the group-mind of the baboons. Although 'I' was still present, much of my experience overlapped with this larger feeling entity. Increasingly, the troop felt like 'us' rather than 'them'. The baboons' satisfactions became my satisfactions, their frustrations my frustrations. When I spotted a gazelle fawn in the distance, I apprehended it as prey, and if the baboons succeeded in catching one, my mouth watered while they tore flesh from the bones, even though I don't eat meat. When on the cliffs after dark, the baboons warned each other of a predator

[4] Some notable exceptions include Jane Goodall (1990) and Aldo Leopold (1949).

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drawing near, my body tensed up as if I, too, were in danger, even though my rational mind knew that there were no predators large enough to attack me within many miles.[5]

I sensed the mood of the troop as soon as I arrived in the morning. I could usually tell whether we were going to travel a short or long distance that day. Often, I anticipated exactly where we would go, without knowing how I did it. Even though no one had yet changed direction, I knew when we were about to head for the sleeping cliffs. When we got there and the baboons lay around in soft green grass in the glow of the setting sun, I lay around with them. They had eaten their full, and I had gathered my day's observations. With nothing more to do, we shared the timeless contentment of all social animals relaxing in the company of their friends. After I left them each night, I felt strangely empty, eager to join them again the next morning.

I had never before felt a part of something larger, which is not surprising, since I had never so intensely coordinated my activities with others. With great satisfaction, I relinquished my separate self and slid into the ancient experience of belonging to a mobile community of fellow primates.

There were special occasions when the experience of community intensified. Once, when I was travelling with baboons at Gombe,[6] I lost the troop during a terrific downpour. Far from camp, I ran to the lakeshore and crawled into an abandoned fisherman's shelter for protection. The inside of the hut was pitch dark, but I soon realized I was not alone. About thirty baboons were crowded into a space the size of an average American kitchen. When I entered, some baboons must have moved slightly to make room for me, just as they would do for one of their own. But they didn't move far. Baboons surrounded me and some of them brushed against me as they shifted their positions. The rain continued. The hut filled with the clover-like smell of their breath, and our body heat transformed the hut into a sauna. I felt as if I'd been sitting this way, in the heart of a baboon circle, my whole life, and as if I could go on doing this forever. When the rain stopped, no one stirred for a little while. Maybe they felt the same contentment that I did.

Another time, when I had a bad cold, I fell asleep in the middle of the day, while baboons fed all around me. When I awoke at least an hour later, the troop had disappeared, all but one adolescent male who had decided to take a nap next to me. Plato (we gave the baboons Greek names) stirred when I sat up, and we blinked at each other in the bright light. I greeted him and asked him if he knew where the others were. He headed off in a confident manner and I walked by his side. This was the first time I had ever been alone with one of the baboons, and his comfort with my presence touched me. I felt as if we were friends, out together for an afternoon stroll. He took me right to the other baboons, over a mile away. After that, I always felt a special affinity for Plato.

One experience I especially treasure. The Gombe baboons were travelling to their sleeping trees late in the day, moving slowly down a stream with many small, still pools, a route they often traversed. Without any signal perceptible to me, each baboon sat at the edge of a pool on one of the many smooth rocks that lined the edges of the

[5] At this particular field site, there were no lions or leopards, the only predators large enough to take on an adult baboon or a human.

[6] After studying olive baboons in Kenya for several years, I returned to Gombe and studied the same species there.

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stream. They sat alone or in small clusters, completely quiet, gazing at the water. Even the perpetually noisy juveniles fell into silent contemplation. I joined them. Half an hour later, again with no perceptible signal, they resumed their journey in what felt like an almost sacramental procession. I was stunned by this mysterious expression of what I have come to think of as baboon sangha. Although I've spent years with baboons, I witnessed this only twice, both times at Gombe. I have never heard another primatologist recount such an experience. I sometimes wonder if, on those two occasions, I was granted a glimpse of a dimension of baboon life they do not normally expose to people. These moments reminded me how little we really know about the 'more-than-human world' (Abram, 1996).

Animals As Individuals

Although animals had always fascinated me, my time with baboons and chimps in Africa greatly enhanced my awareness of the individuality of each animal I encounter. Before Africa, if I were walking in the woods and came across a squirrel, I would enjoy its presence, but I would experience it as a member of a class, 'squirrel'. Now, I experience every squirrel I encounter as a small, fuzzy-tailed, person-like creature. Even though I usually don't know this squirrel from another, I know that if I tried, I would, and that once I did, this squirrel would reveal itself as an utterly unique being, different in temperament and behaviour from every other squirrel in the world. In addition, I am aware that if this squirrel had a chance to get to know me, he or she might relate to me differently than to any other person in the world. My awareness of the individuality of all beings, and of the capacity of at least some beings to respond to the individuality in me, transforms the world into a universe replete with opportunities to develop personal relationships of all kinds. Such relationships can be ephemeral, like those developed with the birds in whose territories we might picnic, or life-long, like those established with cats, dogs, and human friends.

Developing relationships with birds or other animals when we enter their space is surprisingly easy, if we approach the experience with sensitivity and humility. Like the baboons, most birds, mammals, and at least some of the reptiles I've met are highly attuned to human body language and tenor of voice. By moving slowly and without jerky motions, by sitting still and quietly observing one's surroundings, by announcing benign intentions in a gentle voice and through facial expressions, gestures, and posture, it is usually possible within minutes to reassure most animals that it is safe to go about their business close by.

One of my favourite examples of the unexpected rewards of such an approach involves a notoriously shy creature. I was standing in a forest, gazing around at the trees when I noticed a movement in the vegetation on the ground in front of me. As I turned my head to look, out popped a tiny mouse. She reared up on her haunches, twitched her nose, and stared at me intently. She knew I was there because instead of freezing like a statue I gently cocked my head, gazed back at her, and whispered a greeting. I was certain she would dart away at any moment and was surprised when she instead resumed her busy foraging, about three feet away. I watched her quick, efficient movements. Then, to my utter astonishment, she curled up at my feet and closed her eyes. I held vigil over her napping body, mesmerized by the rapid rise and

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fall of her tiny chest. After a minute or so, she awoke, glanced at me briefly, and went about her business, soon disappearing into the undergrowth.

In this case, I was the huge and potentially dangerous animal, but in other instances, the tables turn. During a visit with Diane Fossey and the mountain gorillas she studied, I found myself alone one day with a peaceful cohort of females and young. After a while, I noticed an adolescent female staring at me. I sensed a friendly attitude and tried to convey the same back to her. Suddenly she was standing right in front of me, pressing her flat nose against mine and fogging up my glasses. I was entranced. An instant later she wrapped her arms around me and for a moment held me close. Then she moved away nonchalantly, while I sat there, stunned, feeling like I did indeed belong on this planet. Who could argue with a blessing like that?

For those of us lucky enough to know wild animals on their own turf, on their own terms, such experiences are not exceptional. Ample evidence exists that when people have extended opportunities to co-exist with wild animals, profound relationships based on mutual trust (as with the baboons), or at least mutual understanding (as with the chimpanzee Goblin) can develop. With such prolonged exposure, members of two different species can co-create shared conventions that help to regulate interspecies encounters. Elizabeth Marshall Thomas (1994) gives a fascinating example. As a young woman, she lived with Ju/wa hunter-gatherers in the Kalahari desert of southern Africa with her family, who were studying and filming the people. The Ju/wa, she writes, had a truce with the local lions, such that neither harmed the other. Her brother John filmed an illustrative encounter. Four Ju/wa hunters were tracking a wildebeest that one of them had hit with a poison arrow. When they caught up with the dying wildebeest, a pride of about thirty lions surrounded it. The men, who were unarmed and of small stature, moved slowly toward the lions and announced that the meat belonged to the people. Several lions retreated. Others held their ground for a little while, but as the men descended on the wildebeest, still speaking quietly but firmly, the rest of the lions faded into the bush. The Ju/wa, apparently unworried, killed the wildebeest and processed the carcass. Years later, when Thomas returned to the area, the situation was very different. The Ju/wa were gone, forced to move into settlements, and the new people in the area did not understand lions. An ancient interspecies tradition was broken, replaced by mutual fear and mistrust.

I suspect that reciprocal understandings of this kind between people and at least some of our nonhuman neighbors were common during our time as hunter-gatherers, which constituted 99% of our history as a species. Numerous examples of researchers and photographers who have learned to relate, directly, on foot, to potentially dangerous wild animals (such as tapirs, elephants, hyenas, lions, wolves, bears, chimpanzees and gorillas) without harming or being harmed, attests to the potential for the widespread development of such relationships. If we valued other species enough, how far might we be able to go in re-establishing peaceful understandings with them, at least in places in which the animals are fully protected from human hunting and harassment?

Safi

Because it is important not to interfere in the lives of wild animals, the personal examples I've described so far involve an important but limited degree of interspecies interaction. I turn now to an enduring relationship predicated on an ever-deepening

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meeting of a human and nonhuman mind. Safi is an 80-lb German shepherd-Belgian sheepdog mix who resembles a black timber wolf with oversized ears (Smuts, 1999b). I acquired her from an animal shelter when she was about eight months old, a stray of unknown background. We have lived together for ten years.

Before Safi, I shared my life with other dogs, but because Safi was post-baboon, I related to her differently. I assumed from the start that she was a sentient being with the kind of wisdom I had discovered in the wild animals I had known. As much as possible, I tried to surrender expectations about who she was or what she could or could not do based on her species identify. I communicated with her in the richest way possible, using words, nonverbal vocalizations, body language, gestures, and facial expressions. I spoke to her constantly, especially about things of mutual interest or concern. I soon discovered that I did not need to train her with commands because, from the beginning, she responded appropriately when I politely asked her to do something the way I would ask another person, using full sentences, like, 'Excuse me, would you please move out of my way?' or 'Go downstairs, get the ball, and bring it back up here so we can play.'

Safi has an inherent sense of appropriate behaviour in different circumstances, making it possible for me to take her almost anywhere off leash. When we are in the human world of the city, I make most of the decisions about where to go and what's off limits, and I protect her from cars and other human dangers. But the further we go from human habitation, the more our roles shift. When in the wilderness, Safi mostly takes the initiative because I am now in her world, and she usually knows much more than I do about what's up. She decides where to hike (usually off-trail, which is safe, because she can always find her way back to our campsite or car), and she chooses the best camping spots. These locales are always in the open, and, just like the locations of wolf dens, they usually include a small rise that she can lie on to watch over the landscape (Mech, 1970). Safi becomes exceedingly alert to any potential danger and lets me know with a single deep 'woof' when she spots a person or animal in the distance (another example of wolf-like behaviour). When travelling after sunset, she always walks ahead of me (dogs have better night vision than humans), and during the day she will not close her eyes to rest unless I sit up tall, look intently all around, and announce in a spirited voice that I'm taking over the watch for a while. Even then, she takes only brief naps and insists on resuming her vigil before long. Yet, until she spots something, there is no tension in her body, and it's clear that being lookout is a welcome job. So is collecting wood for our fire, and periodic forays to scent-mark the periphery of our campsite and sniff the air in all directions. Most fun are the daily explorations, when Safi leads me to one marvel after another. As I approach the hidden stream or beaver dam or fox den that she's found, I express my delight, and her tail never wags harder than at this moment of shared discovery. She is also exhilarated by my request, 'Safi, please find the way home,' a signal to sprint in a beeline toward what proves to be camp, running back to urge me on, and then sprinting off again, until this routine has been repeated dozens of times and we finally reach our destination.

The more freedom Safi has to express her wild self, the more I delight, and the more I delight, the more she expresses herself. As with the baboons, I get to relinquish my separate, analytic self, turning myself over to the deeper wisdom of an animal whose ancestors adapted to this North American landscape long before mine did.

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Back home, our shared rituals are less dramatic but equally satisfying. When I wake up in the morning, Safi presses her forehead against mine and holds it there, another characteristically lupine behaviour (Fox, 1980). When I get out of bed and say, 'let's stretch', Safi places her front feet close together facing my hands and we synchronize yoga's 'downward dog' position (at which she naturally excels), touching our heads together briefly as we stretch forward. Then we both shift to 'upward dog', and our eyes lock as we lift our heads to face one another. Thus begins our day, synchronous movements expressing our emotional alignment, in the way of wild animals.

Safi and I have created many such rituals involving synchronous or complementary movements, but I can't explain how any of them came into being. Certainly, I did not invent them, and I don't think she did either. Rather, they developed spontaneously in the intersubjective space we inhabit together. They are part of our shared culture, a way of being-together unique to the two of us. This shared culture emerges from our deep bond, and its expression continuously deepens our relationship still further. Every vocalization by her or me that the other understands, every subtle movement that the other tunes into, every ritual we enact together, simultaneously reveals a mutual past and an ongoing commitment to a common future in which the circle of shared experience and fellow feeling grows ever larger. This is the way of female baboons living their lives together in the same troop. This is the way of wolves whose survival depends on enduring commitments to other pack members. This is also the way of humans, a way we forget all too often in this day and age. It is a language of bodies and sounds and movements that preceded the spoken word and that tends to speak the truth, where words might lie.

As Evan Thompson describes in this issue, deep intersubjectivity requires empathy. I've worked hard to empathize with Safi, so that I can meet her needs and desires as fully as possible. Safi's communication is subtle and refined, and I employ everything I learned from baboons in feeling my way into her being. When Safi wants something, she never makes a peep or nudges me but instead sits very erect and stares intently into my eyes, as if willing me to enter her mind. When this occurs, I say, 'Show me what you want!' and she will, most often by moving toward a desired goal, stopping a few feet away, and directing her long and very pointy nose right at it, like a laser beam. I think she is often better at understanding me than I am at understanding her. Once, after sharing a few cookies, I removed the bag and placed it on the other side of the room, high on a shelf. A little while later I looked up from my book to find Safi gazing at me intently, a thin thread of saliva hanging from her lips. I said to her, 'No more, the cookies are gone' (a phrase I routinely emit after I put treats away). She immediately turned her head to point directly at the treats on the shelf, and then turned back to me as if to say, 'No they're not!' I felt humbled, caught in a lie by my dog!

Safi's social skills seem to transcend species' boundaries. In addition to her many dog and human friends, she has also befriended cats, ferrets, and at least one squirrel. But her most remarkable 'interpersonal' connection involved Wister the donkey — a species her ancestors preyed upon. Wister belonged to a neighbour in a remote part of Wyoming where Safi and I lived for five months. He wandered freely through our yard and beyond. Wister's reaction to dogs suggests that he recognized them as potential predators. Whenever he saw one, he charged, braying loudly, and if he got close, he kicked at them with his sharp hooves. When he first encountered Safi, he charged

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her and kicked. Safi danced away and replied with a delectable play bow. Momentarily nonplussed, Wister stared at her, and then resumed his charge. Safi danced some more and again invited him to play. Wister kicked at her again. Worried for her safety, I led Safi away, but every time she met Wister, she invited him to play. Eventually he succumbed, and after about a month, they become inseparable. Each dawn, after being released from his corral, Wister would stand outside our door and bray until I let Safi out, and then they would play and wander together for hours.

Donkeys and dogs have very different ways of communicating and very different styles of play, but somehow Safi and Wister co-created a system of communication that worked for them. Safi taught Wister to jaw wrestle, like a dog, and she even convinced him to carry a stick around in his mouth, although he never seemed to have a clue what to do with it. Wister enticed Safi into high-speed chases, and they'd disappear over the horizon together, looking for all the world like a wolf hunting her prey. Occasionally, apparently accidentally, he knocked her with a hoof, and she would cry out in pain. Whenever this occurred, Wister would become completely immobile, allowing Safi to leap up and whack him several times on the snout with her head. This seemed to be Safi's way of saying 'You hurt me!' and Wister's way of saying, 'I didn't mean it.' Then they would resume playing. After they tired of racing, Safi often rolled over on her back under Wister, exposing her vulnerable belly to his lethal hooves in an astonishing display of trust. He nuzzled her tummy and used his enormous incisors to nibble her favourite scratching spot, just above the base of her tail, which made Safi close her eyes in bliss. They shared a water bowl and lay down side by side for naps. When we moved away, Wister became despondent, losing his appetite and refusing to play. Clearly he missed her, and when they met again four years later, they recognized each other instantly.

Sometimes I feel as if Safi's being and mine merge, although our bodies remain separate. Our moods often synchronize, although I cannot tell whether I'm mirroring her or she me; perhaps we're both responding to something else in our environment. After I return from several days away, I often catch Safi contemplating me from across the room, as if soaking up my presence. When I'm away from her, my hands feel restless and bereft, deprived of the feel of her thick fur.

When I'm sad, Safi always senses it and usually lies next to me with her head on my heart. She does this not just for me, but for friends when they begin to talk about something sad. She seems as calm and dignified as ever at these moments, so I do not think she offers comfort to make herself feel better but rather for the other's sake.

Safi's most extraordinary expression of empathy occurred one day when she was just over a year old, barely out of puppyhood. I was feeling very low. Unable to shake my despairing mood, I took Safi to the woods, hoping this would cheer me up. For a while, we played fetch with sticks in the river, her favourite game. Yet soon she refused to go after the stick, which was unheard of. I kept trying to entice her to play, but she just stood in the water looking at me. Finally, she moved to an island in the stream, about thirty feet from the bank where I stood, and lay down facing me. Her penetrating gaze caught my attention, and I sat down to face her. She held her body completely still and continued to hold my gaze. Looking into her eyes, my body relaxed. Her face became the world, and I seemed to fall into her being. I was vaguely aware of people in canoes passing behind her on the other side of the island, and I noticed her ears rotate to track them, but her eyes and her body remained motionless.

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She held her position and my gaze for about twenty minutes and then quietly approached and lay down next to me. My dark mood had vanished.

This was my first lesson in meditation. I took it to heart and began to practise regularly, usually outside. Whenever I sat in meditation posture, Safi would move about ten feet away, lie down facing me, and gaze into my eyes. After gazing back for a brief time, I would close my eyes and surrender to the rhythm of my breath. When I opened them again, she was always in the same place and always looking at me. After about two weeks, something new occurred. Our meditation began the same way, but when I opened my eyes, Safi was sitting right next to me, facing the direction I was facing. Ever since that moment, whenever I meditate outside, I open my eyes to find her next to me. Although during meditation my senses are finely attuned, I have never once heard her approach. I don't know how she does it.

Such experiences, and many others like them, reveal Safi to be a highly aware being, more so than many dogs I know; in fact, more than some people I know! Her attunement to others probably has something to do with her genetic endowment, but I think at least as important, if not more so, is the fact that she has shared her life with another being who sees who she is. Similarly, Safi seems to sense the spirit within me, perhaps more completely than anyone else has ever done. When two beings delight in one another this much, their relationship becomes a haven for free and creative expression of being. Trust deepens, mutual attunement grows, and that elusive quality we call consciousness seems to extend beyond the boundaries of a single mind.

The Meeting and Merging of Minds

In my interactions with baboons and other animals, including Safi, I have experienced the relationship between self and other in different ways that seem to form a natural hierarchy. At the most basic level, an animal responds to me (or to any other animal)[7] in an impersonal and reflexive way, based on 'instinct' or habitual responses to similar stimuli in its past environment. An example is the baboons' flight reaction when I first appeared on the scene.

At the next level, an animal attempts to learn or detect something about me, for example, whether or not I am a threat. The baboons' reactions to me during the initial phases of 'habituation' typify this level. No longer terrified by my novelty, they remained wary but interested in me — from a safe distance.

At the third level, an animal recognizes me as an individual and begins to respond to me in ways that might differ from its response to another member of my species. After several weeks, the baboons were less nervous around me than they were around visiting friends who looked like me. Clearly, they had both identified me as a particular human and developed expectations about how I would behave.

At the fourth level, an animal recognizes that I am a social being like them, and that communication back and forth is possible. As I described above, reaching this stage represented a turning point in my relations with the baboons because it created the opportunity to 'negotiate' the terms of our relationship. When members of two different species reach this level, they face the additional challenge of learning to interpret each other's signals. The baboons and I achieved a degree of success in this regard, in

[7] For the sake of convenience, I describe these relationships in terms of dyads, but the same conceptual framework can apply to multi-party relationships.

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part through my attempts to 'speak' baboon and their ability to understand me despite an outrageous human accent.

A fifth level, which requires the communicative abilities of the fourth level, occurs when both parties are motivated to maintain a mutually beneficial relationship, for example, a voluntary sexual partnership, an alliance, or reciprocity of any kind.

A sixth level occurs when individuals maintain a mutually beneficial relationship for its own sake. Such relationships often begin because they allow an animal to engage in activities such as play, sex, grooming, or effective joint action (e.g., hunting) that contribute to survival, reproduction, or other utilitarian outcomes. But in humans and, I believe, many other animals, affection often develops between individuals who share such activities over time, and the bond may take on a life of its own even when the rewarding activities are no longer important (former human–dog working partners who end up 'just friends') or possible (baboon mates who remain friendly during the two-year hiatus between female estrous cycles [Smuts, 1999a]). I refer to this level of relationship as 'mutuality' (Bonder, 1998). Whether mutuality occurs within or between species, the participants typically move beyond merely understanding each other's standard signals to the development of a new language and culture that transcends the particulars of either animals' individual or species-specific repertoire. Many people experience this kind of relationship with a mate, a child, a close friend, or a companion animal.

A seventh (and final?) level develops when individuals experience such a profound degree of intimacy that their subjective identities seem to merge into a single being or a single awareness (at least some of the time). A personal example is the experience that Safi and I shared when we gazed for so long into each other's eyes. Of course, I cannot know for certain the nature of Safi's experience, but both repeated encounters of this kind with her and similarities between Safi's behaviour and that of people with whom I have shared level-seven experiences make me believe that she and I experience similar subjective states when we connect in this way.

The first three levels do not imply 'positive' motives for relating to another. For example, prey animals may very well recognize individual predators that they encounter often and learn some of their idiosyncratic habits, and a predator might do the same (level three). There is presumably no friendly motive in such relationships. Also, at any of the first three levels, there is no necessary correlation between the level achieved by one member of the relationship and the level achieved by the other. I might contemplate a beetle long enough to discern its individuality, but the beetle might never respond to me as anything other than a looming threat.

The fourth level and beyond, however, depend, at least to a degree, on both parties mutually recognizing the other as a communicative being, and they therefore also require at least a degree of cooperation. Consider, for example, Thomas's description of the relationship between the Ju/wa hunters and the lions with whom they share their habitat. Although their interests are often in conflict, both parties agreed not to fight over carcasses, and when Ju/wa and lions encountered one another in the bush, they left each other alone — a truce presumably worked out long ago and passed on as cultural traditions within and *between* members of each species. Cooperation, at levels four and five, does not imply mutual affection or altruistic motives, but simply the capacity in both individuals to recognize and communicate about what's in their best interests.

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Level six is distinguished from ‘lower’ levels by ‘pureness’ of motives. I do not mean to imply that individuals receive no practical benefits from intimate friendships, but rather that the nature and persistence of these relationships transcends those benefits. They involve a kind of commitment to the relationship ‘no matter what’ (Nesse, 2001). Those of us who have experienced such relationships know that they are deeply rewarding. Indeed, for many people, they are the most fulfilling part of life.

Level seven relationships are paradoxical because ‘relationship’ implies interaction between two separate beings, and at this level, such separation dissolves (at least temporarily). How common such experiences are is hard to say, because, in our culture at least, we do not tend to talk about them, and most of us do not grow up expecting to merge with others in this way. However, many people seem to have experienced such moments with others, perhaps especially with companion animals. Published accounts of human-animal bonds support this claim (Corrigan and Hoppe, 1989; Fox, 1980; Hogan *et al.*, 1998; Rosen, 1993).

Conclusion

How does this conceptual framework relate to intersubjectivity or consciousness? ‘Intersubjectivity’ could be a label for interactions or relationships occurring at levels six and seven. There is an inherent paradox in intersubjectivity so defined because at both of these levels, participation in the relationship cannot be coerced but must, by definition, reflect independent agency by each animal. Yet at the same time, the relationship creates for each individual a new subjective reality — a shared language, culture, or experience — that transcends (without negating) the individuality of the participants (Wilber, 1995).

In my view, such intersubjectivity implies the presence in another of something resembling a human ‘self’. This ‘presence’ is not exactly the same thing that scientists refer to when they speculate about ‘self-awareness’ or ‘consciousness’ in nonhuman animals. Scientists define these concepts in terms of the mechanisms that allow an animal to achieve an instrumental act, such as solving a problem ‘in its head’ without trial and error, or being able to attribute beliefs and knowledge to another (‘theory of mind’) in ways that allow an individual to find a resource or obtain some other practical objective (Heyes, 1998; Povinelli and Preuss, 1995). Even when scientists investigate ‘social cognition’ in other species, they are interested in how an animal might use its understanding of someone else to further its own utilitarian goals (Byrne & Whiten, 1990; Cheney & Seyfarth, 1990). In contrast, the ‘presence’ we recognize in another when we meet in mutuality is something we feel more than something we know, someone we taste rather than someone we use. In mutuality, we sense that inside this other body, there is ‘someone home’, someone so like ourselves in their essence that we can co-create a shared reality as equals.

I do not care what we call this presence. What matters is recognizing its importance and honouring it in ourselves and in others, including nonhuman animals. This presence is encountered directly through creative and caring intersubjectivity. The capacity for such intersubjectivity exists at birth in many kinds of animals. It flourishes or languishes depending on the social worlds we encounter — and deliberately create. Experience suggests that by opening more fully to the presence of ‘self’ in others, including animals, we further develop that presence in ourselves and thus become more fully alive and awake participants in life.

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