



The Animal Connection

Lion Man of Africa, Gareth Patterson, explores what makes animals indispensable totem symbols in our lives...

The spiritual, cultural and emotional impact of animals on humans is as old as humanity itself. Down through the ages, this is interwoven into our psyche. Only in relatively recent times did this change, specifically in western society. The 'separation' from nature came with the subjugation of what can be described broadly as pantheistic, nature based, outlooks and beliefs. These old ways were forced underground for some 1,200 years by an authoritarian new order headed by a patriarchal God, made in man's image.

Pantheism did not die though, and today the spiritual, cultural, and emotional influences of animals remain rooted within us. How could it be otherwise? As a comparatively young species, we have been moulded and shaped by that impact and influence. As Henry Beston wrote in "The Outermost House": "In a world older and more complete than ours, they (the animals) move finished and complete, gifted with extensions of the senses we have lost or never attained, living by voices we shall never hear... they are not underlings; they are other nations..."

Spiritually shaken by his experiences during the First World War, Beston, self-described as a 'writer/naturalist' and today regarded as one of the fathers of the modern environmental movement, retreated to a house he built on the Eastham dunes at Cape Cod in the USA. There he wrote "The Outermost House", and the following sentence that encapsulates a truism about humanity, 'Nature is a part of our humanity, and without some awareness of that divine mystery, man ceases to be man.'

Today, often seemingly unconsciously, or intuitively perhaps, we surround ourselves with animal symbolism. Be it our Gods, arts, corporate branding, even sports teams, the animals are there in names or symbols – Puma, Eagle, Cobra, Jaguar, Fox, Penguin, even with Lacoste's crocodile – the animals are everywhere.

Another pioneer of the modern environmental movement, Joy Adamson of "Born Free" fame, wrote of the undividable (though often denied) human/animal inter-

relationship, stating 'Why did early man, when he expressed himself in rock engravings, choose animals as emblems of his aspirations? Why have highly cultured races like the Egyptians and Assyrians used animals as symbols of their Gods? Why are we so deeply moved by tragedies involving our pets? Why are the first toys given to our children representations of animals? Do we need more proof that we need animals more than they need us – that they can give us something which we cannot give ourselves?'

With Joy's words in mind, it is not mere coincidence that today the most watched (and most loved) Internet video clip on the planet is that of the reunion of Christian the Lion with his human 'parents', an amazing example of real love across the so-called 'species barrier'. This YouTube phenomenon has stirred the hearts of millions of people worldwide. Bought as a cub from a London store by two young Australian men, John Rendall and Ace Bourke, Christian was des-

igned to be taken to Kenya, and to be rehabilitated back into the wilds by the grand old lion man himself, George Adamson. Christian loved his initial carers, John and Ace, and the men reciprocated this love abundantly.

Many months after Christian was taken to Kenya, John and Ace visited George with the hope of seeing Christian. Christian by this time had grown immensely, and roamed the wilds in the company of two young lionesses.

Gareth Patterson with Batian, the lion




PHOTO: LOUISE GUBB

The film footage of the reunion between Christian and the two men is incredibly stirring. Christian strides slowly and watchful, down a granite outcrop. Suddenly his facial features transforms from caution to complete openness, and he runs towards Ace and John. Then an astonishing greeting ceremony takes place with Christian repeatedly leaping up, embracing the men with his paws, and rubbing his head against theirs.

In the past few months this

35-year old film footage has spread like wild fire across the globe, with some sixteen million people viewing it on YouTube. In every continent, TV news stations and talk shows have featured the Christian the lion video clip. Sony Pictures, reportedly, are set to make a feature film on Christian's story. Young and old, rich and poor, people of all races and religions, have all overwhelmingly reacted with emotion and positivity to the reunion of a lion and his human friends. Tears of

joy have been shed by millions of eyes. Why was this? Part of the answer I believe, is that we are responding to our age-old and deeply embedded connection with nature. In many ways, we had become lonely for that connection. Another part of the answer is simply love. What is love? This has been described as one of the most difficult questions for humanity and cannot be answered by the dictionary definition of 'a great liking or affection.' No, true love is the unconditional

kind. The wanting of only the very best for another. That was the love of the lion and the men. And that, in part, is why we wept. 

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The recently established Gareth Patterson Wildlife Foundation (GPWF) marks Gareth's 25th year of involvement in the protection of African wildlife. The Foundation's main objectives are to undertake and support wildlife research, promote indigenous African environmentalism, as also the concept of wildlife corridors to link protected areas. Visit www.garethpatterson.com or e-mail at gpwf@uninet.co.za



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