Dogs: Teachers of what matters, in social work and in life

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ABSTRACT

This article articulates personal, professional, and spiritual reflections on reverence for life, experienced through connection with animals. It links values and beliefs learned from associating with animals with social work principles as outlined in Aotearoa New Zealand Code of Ethics, while exploring how they manifest in social work praxis and lifelong learning. The article is illustrated with vignettes from the author's life, offering suggestions on how social work praxis can be enriched by the engagement of animals. Dogs, dolphins, butterflies, and pigeons feature in this unusual contribution that explores human-animal communication and its relevance for social work.

Keywords: Dogs, social values, human-animal communication, reverence for life, ako.

Introduction

This short contribution is focused on social work values based on Indigenous Māori wisdom, as adopted in Aotearoa New Zealand *Ngā Tikanga Matatika*, Code of Ethics (ANZASW, 2019), and explores how I learned the same principles from, and with, dogs who accompanied me through various periods of my life. Coincidentally, when each period finished, a dog would leave my life. I will describe how dogs contributed to my lived experience of the pou (pillars) as depicted in the *Ngā Tikanga Matatika*, which is based on Māori principles for wellbeing.

Rangatiratanga: I know who I am and what I stand for

"Social workers value diversity and cultural identity. We use our practice to advocate for and support self-determination and empowerment of others." (ANZASW, 2019, p.10)

I was always connected to animals. All animals: snails, horses, mice, birds, dolphins … but dogs …. dogs have been special to me, my kith and kin since I was born. I did not grow up with animals, as my family tried to squash my love by trying to instil fear ("a horse will kick you, a dog will bite you, a cat will scratch you, mice are disgusting, pigeons spread diseases…") and the more they tried, the more convinced I became that they were wrong. My mistrust of human words grew, and my love for animals expanded. This was probably an expression of my critical thinking and curious scepticism.

The term *rangatiratanga*—essential in our Code of Ethics and everything we do with people we work with—loosely translates as self-determination, autonomy, and a right to stand our ground and be who we truly are. It is inherited from our ancestors, and it is to be gifted to those who come after us.

Knowing who I am and where I am coming from, where my roots are and what they are connected to, what moves my heart, and where my branches spread as a metaphor for the social justice actions I undertake, is essential for my social work. Without it, I would be an extended arm of the state and an agent of social control.

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As I was born into a family without much understanding of my love of animals, and as I was born a hopeless optimist, every Christmas and every birthday, I was hoping for a dog. Any kind of dog: old, young, wounded, jumpy, friendly or aloof, and every time I would be disappointed. I 'harassed' people in the local park to walk, pet or talk with their dogs. I could tell if the dog was male or female from their facial expression, read their mood and understand what they were trying to tell me. Some were happy, some sad, some worried, some stinky; I loved them all unconditionally. I kept bringing stray dogs home, and when my mum would come home from work, they would be kicked out or taken to the animal shelter. This kept happening until I met Astor: a German shepherd I found roaming the streets on my way back from school. I called him, and he responded by following me home. I emptied the fridge and gave him water in a most precious crystal bowl (yes, I was ten years old and home alone with a 'dangerous' animal!). When my mum rang a doorbell announcing her arrival from work, he ran to the door and started barking. My mum opened the door, and he jumped at her, gluing her to the wall with his huge paws, baring his teeth. I yelled "Astor, sit!" and he immediately obeyed. Still in shock, Mum said "Take this dog back to the police station, and tomorrow we will buy a poodle." I was not too keen on a poodle, but Mum was unwilling to negotiate, and I asked "Promise?" She shakily nodded, and I returned Astor to the police station, where it was revealed that he was indeed a police dog who had strayed.

I was ten years old, and a condition of getting a dog was that I would have to take full responsibility for walking, grooming, and feeding him. Lonny taught me responsibility and discipline. He taught me the importance of being reliable and persistent, knowing what I wanted, standing my ground and following the rules, as well as discovering the joy of caring for another sentient being. I learned about diversity and cultural identities by talking to dog-walkers whom I would normally never meet otherwise. I learned about self-determination and that sometimes it requires hard work to maintain it. All my friends loved animals and nature, and my yearning for a sustainable planet where all beings live peacefully was natural to me.

When I was 16, I went skiing and left Lonny with my family. I was told that he disappeared. His disappearance is still a mystery; he either tried to find me and got lost, or my family intervened, hoping that I would find more human friends and stop talking with animals. From Lonny, I learned to, appreciate reverence for life, and found an awareness that all beings are sentient. I learned that intelligence is universal and that biology determines how it is expressed. In other words, if I were born as a slug, I would do what a slug does. We are who we are, and the more we fight it, the more likely it is that we will lose ourselves. I learned that self-determination is essential for reciprocal, respectful relationships. Lonny left, and with him, my childhood. At the age of sixteen, my life became more complicated, conflicts with family members and teachers became more common, and my interest in art, music, and alternative theatre became more important than mainstream society's narrow and boring path.

Figure 1: Lonny, who disappeared together with my childhood

Manaakitanga: Who we are determines how we host life

"Social workers recognise and support the mana of others. We act towards others with respect, kindness and compassion. We practice empathic solidarity, ensure safe space, acknowledge boundaries and meet obligations." (ANZASW, 2019, p.11)

I was just over 16 when Pacha was returned to her mum and her mum's owner because she was allegedly unmanageable. Her previous human described her as so destructive and untrainable that she had to tie her up to a kitchen table. I brought her home knowing that my family would not show any manaakitanga, but I had to try. My grandma chased her with a broom, and my mum immediately exclaimed "Out with her!" Pacha put her head on my mum's foot and looked up with puppy dog eyes, and Mum said "OK, till tomorrow morning". She stayed for 13 years until she died when I was 29. She captured my mum's heart as she knew how to do it with grace and integrity. She accompanied me in my weird, wonderful and wild years. She never needed a leash and followed me everywhere; I would smuggle her on trams, busses, and to my classes when I started studying social work. She was a regular at all parties, would sit on my lap when I played cards, enjoyed being surrounded by all the joys of wild living in the '70s and '80s, and hitchhiked with me around Europe. When a car stopped, she would inspect it first, sniff the air, and then give me a signal if it was safe to enter. She never failed, and I never had any bad experiences hitchhiking, assuming that only kind people would stop for a hitchhiking dog. She taught me about friendships, relationships, hospitality, and how to walk on a tightrope, have unforgettable adventures, stay safe, hold space for others, and be a mother. This learning was reciprocal; I had to take care of her fully, and she took care of me. She was also a most devoted mother to a litter of five puppies, and demonstrated more feminine qualities than I ever had.

As she was my companion while I was becoming a social worker, learning about expressing kindness in professional settings, ensuring safety and respecting boundaries was a perfectly natural thing for her to do, and I had to learn that while hitchhiking. Drivers would open their souls as they knew that they would never see me again. I also had to learn English fast. When I was not travelling, I studied and worked with young people. Pacha's presence bridged many rivers and reconciled many differences between me and some of my clients. She was also the first dog to "graduate" from the University of Zagreb and receive a certificate of completion; however, she was not allowed to attend the graduation ceremony. When I started working, I had never met someone who could not connect with her, and her presence was a great icebreaker for new clients. She was the wisest dog I ever had.

When she took her last breath, I looked into her eyes and said, "We will meet again; I will recognise your eyes", and she responded telepathically "NO – it is time for you to have children!" and then closed her eyes. That finished the wildest and the riskiest period in my life.

Figure 2: Pacha in a car we hitched in, somewhere in Germany.

Whanaungatanga: Making and growing babies in love

"Social workers work to strengthen reciprocal mana-enhancing relationships, connectedness and to foster a sense of belonging and inclusion." (ANZASW, 2019. p.11)

I was 29, accomplished and independent, but not keen to be in a committed relationship. At my friend's birthday party, I overheard a guy talking about his "little democrat". I thought he was talking about his son, but I soon realised that he was talking about a dog. I flippantly said "You have a dog? My dear dog Pacha recently died. Please call me when you walk your dog; I am so missing dog walks!" as much as this sounded like a come-on, I was genuinely interested only in his dog Teddy, but it seems that life force had other plans. The man called the next day, and I played with his dog like a child, running on the field and completely ignoring the man. Two hours later, I felt somewhat guilty as I had not paid any attention to his human who provided me with the joy of playing with Teddy, and I invited them for a cup of tea at my place. Teddy (a well-toilet-trained dog) peed at my little flat's entrance and exit, marking his territory. He moved in (together with his human) soon after. Teddy taught me about the importance of following my intuition, being light-hearted, letting go of my barriers and being present. He was a Norwegian spitz cross, incredibly charming and strong-willed. I was married to his human for 25 years and had two sons with him. His human was also charming, strong-willed, and sometimes kind and loving, just like Teddy. Teddy initiated the creation of our family and was incredibly gentle and mindful with our first son, who learned how to walk by holding on to his fur. Teddy got killed in a horrific event just a month before we left a war-torn Yugoslavia and moved to Aotearoa New Zealand. His death was a metaphor for what potentially could happen to us if we stayed. Leaving my whanau and friends was surprisingly easy, as the pull to Aotearoa New Zealand was so strong. I soon realised that whanau connections go much deeper than mere physical presence. With some, I became more connected when I left, and my mum was a regular visitor. Teddy taught me about the importance of whanau, its biological and chosen features, commitment, energy utilisation, and the ability to choose a path that gives more light, life, and laughter. His death marked the end of my life in Croatia, and the start of my life as a working mother and wife.

Figure 3: Teddy – a matchmaker, connector, babysitter and protector

Kotahitanga and Wairuatanga: Being at the right time, in the right place, doing the right thing

"Social workers work to build a sense of community, solidarity and collective action for social change. We challenge injustice and oppression in all its forms, including exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence." (ANZASW, 2019. p. 12)

"Social workers attend to the wellbeing – spiritual, emotional, psychological and physical – of self and others. We acknowledge the

significance of whakapapa, self-awareness and self-care." (ANZASW, 2019. p.14.)

These two pillars have merged, as my sense of spirituality is inseparable from social justice, a sense of oneness with the universe, community social action, and social transformation; as well as the importance of challenging oppression, discrimination and any form of misuse of power. Community development and community action seem to be the only true social work, while everything else appears to be mere firefighting. Principles of kotahitanga and wairuatanga integrate love, justice and wisdom, including human and more than human endeavours, enabling us to perceive beyond our five senses and challenging expressions of discriminatory and dogmatic behaviours hidden behind authoritarian expressions of spirituality. Mechanistic, outcomes- and outputs-oriented social work misses the importance of idiosyncracies, context, historical injustices, the creation of meaningful connections and the co-creation of transformation in the communities we serve.

When we, as a small family of three, landed at Mangere airport in 1995, the moment I touched the ground, I felt the wairua of Aotearoa New Zealand without even knowing what wairua meant. Ponga trees, kauri, rimu and totara, birds, long white clouds, people smiling on the streets, the calm Pacific Ocean and the rough Tasman Sea enveloped me. I felt truly at home for the first time in my life, which was weird as I was in a 'foreign' land. I wondered why I felt like a stranger in my own land and at home in a foreign one. I arrived in Aotearoa New Zealand believing that in this beautiful green and blue country, not only Māori and settlers (colonisers) live in peace, but they even welcome newcomers like me. I read everything I could find about Te Tiriti o Waitangi, and it seemed to me that Aotearoa New Zealand was an amazingly appreciative country; I had not seen anything like that in my travels. This illusionary bubble was quickly busted, and I realised that being a social worker and a fighter for social justice, I still had a job to do in challenging injustice and oppression, and confronting cultural hegemony and discrimination existent even here, in 'paradise'. Deep resonance with Māori culture enabled me to tickle my roots and explore how my culture shaped who I am and how it impacts my social work practice. Life looked optimistic, but we were renting, and dogs were not welcome.

The moment we paid a deposit for a house, I reserved a Rhodesian ridgeback mastiff cross puppy, Mia, who was coincidentally ready for a pickup on our settlement day. The dog's presence turned a house into a home and confirmed Aotearoa New Zealand as my forever home. Mia was a true family dog. She loved playing a game of Ludo with us, taking the dice in her mouth and spitting it, patiently waiting for her turn. She was a balm for the family and a companion in my life from when I was 33 to 45, during which time I raised my two children. I learnt about adjustment to a new country; family life; the meaning of home and belonging; how to be calm in a storm; how to accommodate and still be true to core values of rangatiratanga, manaakitanga, whanaungatanga, aroha, kotahitanga, mātātoa and wairuatanga. When things would get tough, we would go for a walk, and Mia would transport me to another dimension, where values and principles were more important than everyday 'rarurarū'. In the year 2000, I developed a strong longing to give birth to another child. It was irrational, spiritual and visceral. Mia delivered two puppies on my partner's birthday; our second son was born nine months later. Mia showed me that delivering new life to this world can be peaceful, gentle and easy. This is exactly how my second son's welcome to this world was. When Mia's time to leave this world arrived, we asked her if it was the time, and she confirmed. An old dog who hated vet visits and could not walk staggered to the car, walked into the vet's surgery and gave him her paw for her final injection. We were all

Figure 4: Mia, keeping a family together, smoothing rough edges, inspiring kotahitanga.

with her, and her spirit and the appreciation of the unity of all life she represented stayed with me forever.

During this period, I realised the importance of collective action for social change. We attended protests together; I learned about specific ways colonisation happened in Aotearoa and how to listen to the spirit of this land of a long white cloud that was speaking to me through its waves, winds and ponga trees.

Mātātoa – the courage to challenge

"Social workers act with moral courage in situations that are uncomfortable, challenging and uncertain. We use critical reflection and questioning to work through contradictions and complexity." (ANZASW, 2019. p.13)

I could not even think of getting another dog for six months, but then I started missing the dog's presence in the house. I wanted a dog completely different from Mia, and I envisaged a little Hairy Maclary type of dog, preferably female. I called a dog shelter, and they had just what I wanted: a little, hairy, black female. When I saw her, we did not connect, but then I felt guilty for not picking her up. Shelter workers reassured me that small dogs find homes fast, but bigger dogs are more of a challenge. I went around to see other dogs, and there he was—big, white with orange blotches, male—and everything opposite to what I wanted. I fell in love instantly. Bili was abused and neglected, found roaming the streets, and nobody claimed him. He was sick, and we could pick him up only after he recovered and got snipped. He was about six months old, and his story of abuse slowly unfolded. He showed me that he was abused by little children and loved by teenagers. He was fun and loving but would have unpredictable, angry outbursts. Walking with him was stressful, and I had to be on alert, but at the same time, he was the most grateful, loving and communicative dog. He even had a large orange heart that would sprout on his body when he would lie down and relax. He accompanied me from when I was 46 to 58, during the most challenging part of my life. He helped me to work through all the personal, ancestral and political trauma that I experienced. He exemplified everything that was wrong in our family; he was perfectly imperfect, vulnerable and resilient, the same as my family in that period. He escorted me to come to the other end and stayed with me until my heart was healed. He also affirmed and confirmed my belief that death is just a transition. He returned as a white butterfly just to let me know he was OK.

One morning in May, I was walking him at Mairangi Bay before going to work, and we noticed a pod of bottlenose dolphins frolicking around a woman on a paddle board. I tied him up to the bench, stripped into my tights and bra and dived in. It was one of the most transformative experiences in my life. I swam with a pod of at least 25 wild dolphins, and confirmed that life should be lived without unnecessary inhibitions and that uncomfortable, challenging and uncertain situations provide an opportunity

Figure 5: Bili sprouting a heart while sleeping

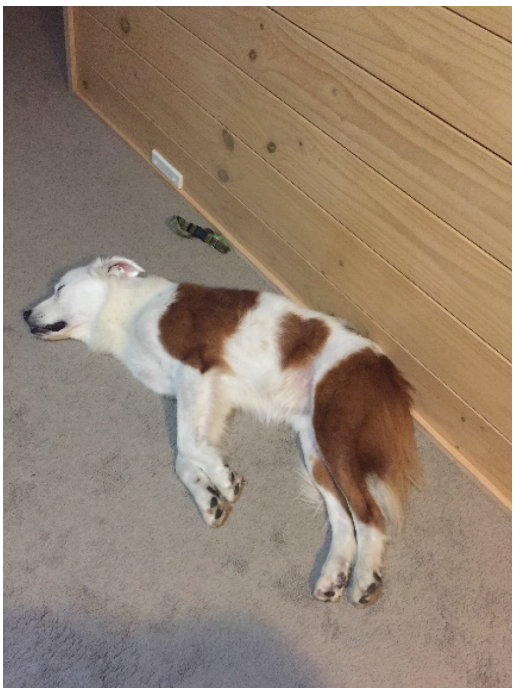


Figure 6: Touched to tears, a moment of recognition

for learning while courageous actions and conversations are part of bringing forth the world. Love and courage are part of the same life principle. Bili taught me how to use my power for empowerment. He also taught me how trauma blocks the expression of our true nature, as fear blocks and distorts our perceptions and our behaviour. I also learnt to stop making excuses for irresponsible and unacceptable behaviours, personally and professionally.

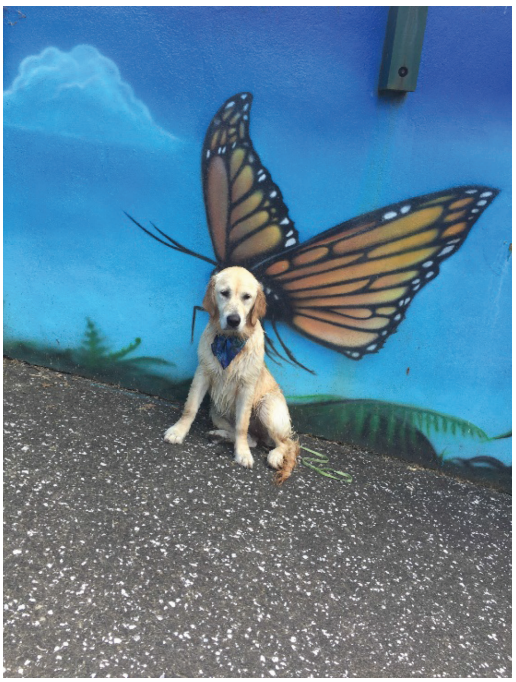
Aroha: Life is love manifested

"Social workers acknowledge our mutual responsibility for wellbeing. We recognise our common humanity with people who use our services and hold people to account, using professional judgment without being judgemental. We focus on people's strengths and finding solutions." (ANZASW, 2019. p.12)

Māia means courage in Te Reo Māori; in Greek mythology, she is one of the Pleiades connected to motherhood, and in Hindu mythology, Maya represents an illusion or a dream. In Slavic mythology, Maja (Maya) is the force that gives life, a goddess of nature and spring. Māia is the first dog who came into my life without trauma, and coincidentally, my life is very peaceful now. When I went to see her (as I could not possibly get a dog without meeting her first), she was a week-old blind puppy, and her mum's human put a little purple collar on her when I expressed my interest over the phone. Eleven seven-day-old puppies were sleeping on the heap. When I knelt beside the whelping box, Māia, a little blind puppy, crawled to me. How did she know that I was her person?

She's taught me about gratefulness, loving life and being in the flow. She accompanies me during professional supervision, and I take her to my classes whenever possible, especially for field trips. Life is about love in the widest possible sense, and our theories and models help us as practitioners to organise our thoughts and build competence, which is then followed by confidence. Still, our theories and models are of little use for tangata whai ora (people who seek well-being). What makes our interactions

Figure 7: Māia, helping humans to grow their wings.



transformative is our ability to connect, be fully present, show aroha and be a wealth of useful, practical information. To be able to do that, we need our theories and models to organise our thoughts coherently and helpfully, but if our hearts are frozen, blocked, or we are turned into bureaucratic calculators, we will not be able to provide a safe space for transformation. This transformational process is reciprocal and mutual. We learn from relationships with all beings: human, not human, and more than human.

My dog companions taught me about reverence for life, enabled me to deeply experience social work values and principles in every encounter, and encouraged me to take life spiritedly.

The link between the pou of the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers' Code of Ethics and my life with dogs may seem unusual; however, this article aimed to demonstrate that the Code of Ethics is not something to be obeyed or learned, it needs to be lived and experienced. These pillars are a foundation of my personal, professional, political, and spiritual life and are reflected in my interactions with humans and with all manifestations of life.

References

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