

Bird Trains Human—Human Learning Is Slow

A Review of Learning and Education from the Bird's Point of View by Karla Boyd

With acknowledgment for the book: *The Parrot Who Thought She Was a Dog* by Nancy Ellis-Bell.

Writing of her love for her Macaw, Sarah, Nancy Ellis-Bell fills many pages describing her attempts at forging a relationship with the once wild, then held-captive Macaw. What is not obvious is the subtle story underlying the human-animal bonding going on.

Nancy recounts turning to music and movies for relief from stress and an overly demanding work life while living in too small a space. Besides her husband, she shared their home with seven other living beings. Nancy was frustrated and resigned in her attempt to find a solution to their cramped living quarters. She had always envisioned a large spacious home for her and her husband and critters. She now was thwarted in her attempts to create her dream.

Nancy had felt caged in as eager anticipation turned to helplessness while she waited for her husband, a contractor, to build their dream home. Her tether had become taut, and Nancy was experiencing the mounting grief and held-back tension. Nancy's habit of letting her frustration build and brew did not allow her to slow down and understand her inner experience effectively. One day she turned to loud rock music to drown out her woes. Sarah and her two other avian companions, sensitive to Nancy's moods and feelings, were not buying any of the wild dancing in their shared living space and told Nancy so in so many screeches and squawks. Nancy's reassurances, "It's okay, Sarah, it's okay, Mommy's just rocking out, Mommy's just having fun," did not work. Sarah did not believe what Nancy was saying.

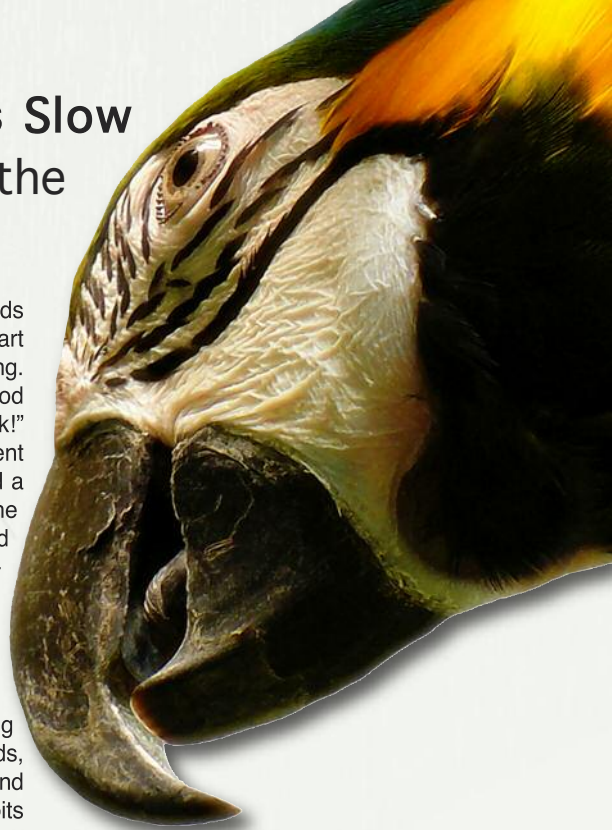
Nancy knew that if any of her avian friends thought that she was upset they would start worrying that they had done something wrong. She knew they would want her to feel good again and want to help. "Aaacck, aaacck!" Sarah's protests were prolonged and strident and registered as a need for Nancy to find a different outlet, so she turned away from the contentious metal rock offender and switched to a more melancholy singer, Dan Fogelberg. But when Dan came on, all three parrots lamented and protested the singing through their loud vocal squawking, "Why so sad? Why so sad?"

Nancy had spent a great deal of time learning to listen to her animal and feathered friends, domesticated and feral, parrots, dogs, cats and raccoons. She listened to their animal habits and communications and recognized the signs that her birds were worried. She could hear it now in their plaintive cries, "What could we have done? What can we do? We are worried now and we don't know what to do." Squawk. Aaacck. Pacing. Feathers flying.

The loud music, wild dancing and the sad and lamenting singing of Dan's songs showed the birds Nancy's genuine state of being. It was she who was not listening and not hearing the incongruence of her "lip service" butting up against her body language. The discrepancy was more than the birds could take. Her feathered teachers easily reflected back to Nancy her true emotional state.

Had Nancy cried or sat down and felt her frustration and admitted it, her feathered and canine family no doubt would have joined her in quiet consoling and attention. Nancy's not admitting to her feathered friends what was real, left them to feel the tumult and confusion that Nancy exhibited. They sounded their alarms. They communicated to Nancy, hoping that she would admit that she was upset and understand that her upset was something they wanted to know more about.

To Nancy's credit, as her three birds vetoed the music, she relented that her words soothed no one. Not without some reluctance, she turned to comedy. Many spiritual teachers as well as health care providers offering students and patients a way to find fresh ways to lift their spirits when troubled might have suggested the same thing. Nancy chose an I Love Lucy episode, one of Sarah's favorites. One episode had



Sarah laughing so much that Nancy could not help but laugh until she started breathing more fully again and lifted herself out of her funk.

There is an old saying that when "two or more are gathering in my name, I am there with them." Nancy allowed Sarah and her other companions to help her find a successful tool to shift her from a sad state to a new, more uplifting one. Through laughter, Nancy found a release for her pain. She also discovered a pathway for working out her distress that honored the safety of her companions.

The birds offered Nancy a different path. The birds directed a move away from aggressive discordant loud sounds and movie violence to light comedy. Might this path be more effective in working out Nancy's resignation and frustration? Might this path be more aligned with the ways her feathered "teachers" find peace in their natural world, seeking calm environments instead of chaotic ones?

What we can glean from this vivid portrayal is how animals and feathered beings contribute daily to helping humans learn more effective means of communication. They guide us towards more reliable changes in our world, leading us to more harmonious relationships. Through their voices, they help us find ours. And through their steadfast companionship, they help us to be more fulfilled human beings as we hope that we contribute to richer and fuller lives for them.

Visit: www.bestfriends.org/theanimals/pdfs/birds/featherplucking.pdf for more information about stressors for parrots. And see *Alex and Me: How a Scientist and a Parrot Discovered a Hidden World of Animal Intelligence and Formed a Deep Bond in the Process* by Irene M. Pepperberg.

