

Companion animals as assistant therapists: embodying our animal selves

Veronica Lac and Robin Walton

Received 17 September 2011

Abstract: This article introduces the concept of Gestalt Animal Assisted Psychotherapy (GAAP). Clinical vignettes are used to demonstrate how companion animals enhance the therapeutic encounter within a Gestalt framework. The authors highlight the here and now, embodied, experimental and relational aspects of Gestalt therapy theory through their work.

Key words: Gestalt, Animal Assisted Psychotherapy, GAAP, embodied, experiment, relational, companion animal, non-verbal, inter-species, co-created.

Introduction

In this article we demonstrate how companion animals¹ have become our assistant therapists within a Gestalt framework. We offer a creative synthesis of Animal Assisted Therapy and Gestalt Psychotherapy, illustrated with examples of our work. Bringing companion animals into the therapeutic field enables our clients to explore and engage with their process in an embodied way that is consistent with the creative, experimental, and relational foundations of Gestalt therapy theory. This is our concept of Gestalt Animal Assisted Psychotherapy (GAAP).

Robin's background

Animals have provided me with companionship throughout my life. Growing up on a remote Welsh farm, I had more animal companions than children to play with. I particularly bonded with ponies, sheepdogs, and terriers in those formative years and have always been aware of being an animal myself.

When I was four-years-old we had a student living with us. Peter was blind. I remember his presence in our home and watching my father teaching him to ride my pony. Peter lived to be seventy-five-years-old, and although he never wanted a guide dog, he almost always had a horse to guide him. Being aware of the powerful, transformative therapeutic power of animals, I later volunteered with the Riding for the Disabled Association, working with children suffering from cerebral palsy.

As a Gestalt therapist I enjoyed incorporating animal metaphor and story into my client work. My Old English Sheepdog, Drover, made his therapeutic pre-

sence known to me from the outset. His keen sheepdog eye engages the attention of other animals and humans on sight. He is companionable and loyal, responsive and demonstrative. Bede the Border Terrier is a very different character. He is little, lively, and playful. He was just six-months-old when he met his first client. You may observe these animal characteristics at work in our clinical vignettes.

Veronica's background

In contrast to Robin's experiences, I grew up in the concrete jungle of Hong Kong, in a pet-free high-rise and I longed to have companion animals as a child. Four years ago, I was finally able to welcome a puppy into my life for the very first time. I have also recently fulfilled my childhood dream of learning to ride and have been astonished at the heightened awareness of my body process through horse riding.

Alfie, my four-year-old Golden Cocker Spaniel, came into my life at just nine-weeks-old. Having never had a pet before, it was a steep learning curve for me to attune to this dependant puppy in order to anticipate his needs whilst also maintaining my boundaries. I felt both daunted and excited by the responsibility of nurturing this tiny, sentient being. I paid close attention to his bodily rhythms so that I could respond accordingly. I began to recognise his ways of communicating with me and, in turn, Alfie learnt to read my body language. He was given clear boundaries, and over time we have established a routine for day-to-day living. In short, we came to know each other. Within this embodied relationship, we live and breathe a connection of love and devoted companionship unlike any I have ever known. The sound of his tail thumping against the floor when-

ever I walk into the room never fails to lift my spirits, and the simple rise and fall of his breathing next to me on the sofa never fails to calm.

Alfie is openly welcoming of other dogs and human beings whom he meets, being unusually submissive and non-territorial. He is highly sensitive to the availability of the other for contact, loves to play and lives to be loved.

Thus our companion animals displayed their therapeutic potential. From a Gestalt perspective, we began to explore the field of Animal Assisted Therapy, and to experiment with and learn from our animal assistant therapists.

The Field

Every human function is an interacting in an organism/environment field, socio-cultural, animal and physical. No matter how we theorize about impulses, drives, etc., it is always to such an interacting field that we are referring, and not to an isolated animal. (Perls et al., 1951, p. 228)

Whilst the Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) movement is still relatively new in the UK, this therapeutic approach has become firmly established as an effective way of working in a wide range of settings in the USA. From addictions, autism, and eating disorders through to family therapy and organisational development, working with animals in a therapy environment has enabled practitioners to reach many vulnerable individuals who have been deemed unreachable by traditional medical methods (Hallberg, 2008).

In general, AAT

utilizes the human-animal bond in goal-directed interventions as an integral part of the treatment process . . . A credentialed therapist, working within the scope of a professional practice, sets therapeutic goals, guides the interaction between patient and animal, measures progress toward meeting therapy goals, and evaluates the process. (Chandler, 2005, p. 5)

This is the field from which our concept of Gestalt Animal Assisted Psychotherapy (GAAP) has emerged. Whereas AAT is goal-orientated and directive in its approach, we offer a more relational, co-created version based on Gestalt principles. GAAP maintains an existential, embodied, and experiential stance to the therapeutic relationship, and holds true to Gestalt roots in being a relational therapy that allows for creativity, experimentation, and improvisation (Spagnuolo Lobb, 2003).

Gestalt Animal Assisted Psychotherapy (GAAP)

Gestalt therapy focuses on the experiential present moment within relationships as 'it is only possible to truly know ourselves as we exist in relation to other things' (Latner, 2000, p. 13). Most commonly, this would be in the context of human to human relationships, whether in group or individual settings. Gestalt Animal Assisted Psychotherapy (GAAP) provides an opportunity for clients to engage in human client to non-human animal to human therapist relationships, where the companion animal offers an insight into the quality and nature of contact in that present moment within the relationship. The process of relating to a companion animal brings about the 'natural integration of mind and body, thought and feeling, spontaneity and deliberateness' (Yontef, 1988, p. 13) of organismic self-regulation, thus deepening the client's awareness of their contact styles, choices, and responsibilities within the context of a relationship. In our experience, it is through the process of non-verbal, embodied relating with these animals that authentic, intimate moments of contact emerge. We believe that it is this embodied communication (Smuts, 2008) within the client-animal-therapist relationship where GAAP can bring about profound change and healing.

Our clinical vignettes demonstrate how key Gestalt concepts of here and now, experiment, embodiment, and relationship are brought to life as we work with companion animals in a therapeutic setting, whilst staying true to Gestalt principles of awareness, phenomenology, and field theory.

Phenomenological enquiry: inter-species communication

The Gestalt method of phenomenological enquiry uses open-mindedness, active curiosity, and detailed description of what is observed through all the therapist's senses. Since it is not for us as therapists to interpret our clients' phenomenological experience, it is also not our job to interpret our animal assistants' authentic responses. GAAP maintains this non-interpretative stance to allow for clients to make their own meaning from their interactions with the animals. Our companion animals are excellent role models in phenomenological enquiry as they are particularly attuned to our constantly shifting energy, movement, and breath.

We can't disguise our feelings from animals because we give off telling cues, including movement and smell, that convey our true state . . . Animals smell our fear, anger, contentment . . . we have to base our interactions on

honesty, mutual respect and compassion. If we don't, they'll know it and respond accordingly. (McCormick and McCormick, 1997, p. 23)

Robin works with Bede and Zoe

Zoe was attracted to the idea of working in therapy with animals. She was used to dogs, and wanted to meet Bede from the outset. When I called him in to the therapy room, he rushed in and jumped straight into her lap. The excited puppy greeted her with youthful enthusiasm equal to her own. Zoe was experienced with animals and was quite capable of calming Bede. When she had finished playing with him, Bede draped his outstretched body in her lap, and fell asleep there. Seeing them together, both very relaxed, gave me a warm, contented feeling, and I found myself smiling.

Zoe then began to explain her problem to me. Internet dating had resulted in a series of disappointing encounters with young men. She did not understand why these men who seemed so eager to be in relationship with her at the outset would abruptly leave her. In telling me this, she became wide-eyed, agitated, and shrill. Zoe had now lost all awareness of her little animal companion. I watched Bede wake up, gather himself together and fleetingly glance up at Zoe's face. Then he carefully extricated himself from his position and crept away slowly, keeping a very low profile. He seemed to have shrunk to about half his former size, as he crossed the room towards me with his tail tucked underneath him and his ears pinned flat against his head. Bede stood at my feet, gazed directly into my eyes and waited. A deep surge of compassion welled up within me.

Since the little fellow had escaped Zoe's wrath thus far unnoticed, it did not seem fair to expose him to her as he stood unprotected, trembling at my feet. Perhaps my own experience of being a pre-verbal infant in the presence of angry adults evoked my empathy for this small being now. Instinctively, I responded to him silently: I gave him a faint smile and a nod of acceptance and he hopped up beside me. Bede squeezed his whole body tightly into the space alongside my thigh, and pushed his head right out of sight, under my arm. His tension was palpable; I felt his body shudder slightly. In this position Bede's sensitive nose, eyes, and ears were as far out of contact with Zoe as he could possibly achieve, without him actually leaving the room.

As Bede began to relax I was able to re-focus my peripheral awareness, and turn my attention more fully towards Zoe. When she next drew breath, I intervened: 'Where's Bede?' I asked airily, as if I didn't know either. Zoe looked about her. Smiling now, I indicated towards the brown rump she could just see beside me, with its tail pointing in her direction. It did look comical, and when Zoe saw Bede was there she just burst out laugh-

ing. I sat quietly with Bede, waiting for her laughter to subside, and for her to reconnect with us herself. In order to elicit her understanding of what had happened between us, I then asked Zoe, 'Well, what is he saying to you?'

Inter-species communication is enacted, not spoken, so images are formed which are hard to explain in words. When Zoe fully reconnected with Bede, she recognised what she had done that caused him to leave her. This allowed her to explore the connection between this interaction with Bede and her experiences in relationships with men. She was able to see how she lost connection with Bede completely when she began to feel frustrated and angry, so that there was no room left for him in their relationship. It dawned on Zoe that Bede's departure from her was his way of escaping confusion, as he was unable to understand her shift from exuberance to anger within their relationship. From this, Zoe was able to see how she co-created the unsatisfactory relationships in her life, heightening her awareness and allowing her an opportunity to make new choices.

We believe that our ability to communicate across species is co-created. Non-human animals can provide us with a deeper understanding of our emotional processes through a field-dependent, embodied encounter. When we place humans and animals in separate categories, we project out our animality and lose a sense of our embodied animal being (Totton, 2011). GAAP enables us to reclaim our animal ways of relating through an embodied, experiential process.

Of course, we humans *are* animals . . . The mutual relating we engage in with other animals transforms us, yes, but that transformation rests squarely in the common evolutionary trajectory that we share with other creatures . . . To explore being with animals is to explore our own past. (King, 2010, p. 6)

Here and now – Veronica works with Sarah and Alfie

In a fundamentally Gestalt way of being, animals live in the here and now. They are willing to stay present and connected in relationship with us if we are able to stay in the present moment with them ourselves.

It is as if we enter a special place when we relate with animals: not a physical location, but a state of being. Or it may be more accurate to say we *create* a special place. To pay attention to all the little idiosyncrasies of interacting with this animal versus that one (King, 2010, p. 183).

Sarah came into therapy wanting to explore her inability to leave her relationship of five years with a married man. She was wracked with guilt each time she

saw him through not wanting to be ‘the other woman’ and vowed that it would never happen again. She would end the relationship, only to give in to his seductions again after a few weeks. Sarah spoke with a timid voice and held herself in a small, compact way with her shoulders lifted upwards, and chest collapsed. She moved in a quick, staccato manner that took up little space.

Sarah arrived for a session a day after the latest reunion. As always, my dog, Alfie, greeted her at the door, but unusually followed her into the therapy room without being invited, whereupon Sarah began to give him lots of fuss and attention. I asked her if she had invited Alfie into the room, to which she answered ‘No’, and continued to pet the dog. After a few moments, Alfie lost interest and wandered across to the other side of the room. Sarah sighed and her body slumped forward as her arms rested on her thighs. I asked her if she wanted Alfie to stay or not. She said she wanted him to leave and called out to him, with no response. We sat for a while and watched Alfie investigating his surroundings. After making his way around the therapy room, he went back to Sarah. Immediately, I noticed Sarah breathe in sharply, sit up and open her arms to welcome Alfie, and she resumed her petting and fussing of him, all the while telling him what a good boy he was. After a few minutes, Alfie lost interest and again wandered away from her. Again, I watched her body slump forward and I repeated my query as to whether she wanted him to stay or not. Again, she responded that she wanted him to leave, and called out to him, but was ignored. Again, we sat and watched Alfie.

Veronica: What do you want from Alfie right now?

Sarah: I want him to come over to me.

Veronica: So you don’t want him to leave now?

Sarah: I did. Now I’m not so sure.

Veronica: And you want him to come over to you now?

Sarah: Yes. I liked him giving me attention.

Veronica: How does it feel to be given attention in this way?

Sarah: I like it, but it doesn’t seem fair . . . it’s all on his terms. He comes and goes when he feels like it. He ignores me when I call him. Even if I want him to leave he’ll ignore me anyway, so I might as well just let him give me attention when he feels like it . . . [Sarah begins to cry softly] . . . It feels just like my relationship with Tim!

Through this process with Alfie, Sarah was able to see how her lack of clear boundaries, and her inability to state what she wanted allowed others to treat her as they wished without her needs being met. This opened up the path for us to explore and experiment together what it might be like for her to state her needs clearly, and

bring herself into relationship in a way that she could be seen.

As many dog owners will know, however well trained a dog is, if instructions are given without a clear intent the dog will do as he pleases. Staying in the present moment, Sarah was able to identify feelings of helplessness when Alfie did not respond to her when she gave half-hearted instructions. With support, she was able to work with Alfie through experimenting with her tone of voice and body movements to command his attention, and ask for what she wanted. This led to the discovery of her being able to say, ‘I want you to respect me’, as she asked Alfie to sit and stay at the threshold of the therapy room. This exploration allowed Sarah to experience in the here and now a new way of co-creating a relationship.

Experimental – Robin works with June and Drover

Introducing a companion animal to assist in the therapeutic process is itself an experiment. A live animal can provide additional avenues of exploration for the therapist and client which may not otherwise be apparent. Creativity and experimentation are foundational elements of Gestalt therapy, where the Gestalt experiment ‘is a way of thinking out loud, a concretization of one’s imagination, a creative adventure’ (Zinker, 1977, p. 127). GAAP upholds the spirit of this and views each moment of contact between the client and animal within the therapy session as an experiment for the client in how they co-create relationships; how they co-create moments of intimacy or distance; how they project, deflect, retrofect their feelings on a moment-by-moment basis. The companion animals provide immediate feedback to the client and therapist in their authentic here and now responses within the relationship.

This brings clarity for the client which may not otherwise be as accessible. The creativity that companion animals can bring into the therapeutic encounter allows the therapy session to ‘become a series of small experiential situations which are organically intertwined with each other, each event serving a particular function for the client and holding in it a potential surprise, a discovery totally unexpected by both client and therapist’ (Zinker, 1977, p. 127).

June came into therapy following the death of her identical twin. Initially, her loss felt overwhelming to her, and she reacted by isolating herself from social contact. Following a childhood incident involving a dog, the twins had become dog-phobic. June also habitually avoided every person and every situation that she found frightening. Now she wanted to join a

support network for bereaved twins. Panic attacks prevented her from doing so.

When Drover was a puppy, he was small and very appealing. He watched through the glass door as my clients came and went. Seeing him, June was unafraid. She found him enchanting, and as he grew she remained fearless. June decided to use this opportunity to explore her phobia. A trusted friend had recently acquired a puppy, and she wanted to be able to tolerate this animal from the outset. We made a plan to allow Drover to meet and greet June at each therapy session, and we monitored her responses. She was amazed that her heart rate remained steady, she could breathe freely and she felt warm and energised rather than rigid and frozen as she was with other dogs. One day Drover made an unsolicited intervention: he nudged his way into the therapy room and lay down. June suggested that we might let him stay awhile and he remained at her feet, to her great delight, throughout the session. On subsequent visits we experimented with making decisions: did June wish to invite Drover in on this occasion, or not? Decision-making has always been difficult for June: being confluent with her twin she could hardly distinguish her own needs. Without her, she still attempted to make others decide for her, yet often felt dissatisfied, finding herself either overwhelmed or abandoned. June was anxious to know what I would prefer, and feared that Drover would be upset if she rejected him. When Drover was not available she began to feel heart-sinking disappointment. His presence or absence gave us ample opportunity to investigate her bodily responses to being with him, passively. We were interested to discover how she felt when she actively chose the level of contact she wished to have in their relationship. I encouraged June to take time with each decision and to check her bodily responses. Being a scientist, June commented in detail concerning her breathing, heart rate, sweating, nausea, and other sensations. She often interpreted such data as being symptomatic of physical disease, and so she exacerbated her own anxiety. When I also elicited her scientific knowledge of physiological responses to stress however, she was equally able to decrease her anxiety levels. With each mini-experiment she was better able to allow her uncomfortable, panicky feelings to subside. In this way June heightened her awareness of her emotional states and began to manage them better.

On her return from a visit to her friend with the puppy, June was triumphant. She brought me a picture of herself, happily hand-feeding the dog. This was no puppy, but a very boisterous and lively adolescent German Shepherd bitch. To her friend's amazement, June was able to calm and manage both herself and the dog.

Next we made comparisons between various dogs and explored phenomena such as trustworthiness in

order to develop her ability to discriminate. In the presence of Drover, her loyal companion in therapy, June always felt accepted, whatever her mood. This encouraged her to accept herself, and she learnt to feel her anxiety and respond to it more appropriately in relation to both animals and people. Realising that her phobia made her vulnerable and isolated, June chose to interrupt this vicious cycle. Her new ability to moderate contact in relationship allowed June to join the UK bereaved twins support network. She then attended an international conference, and decided to become a group facilitator herself. June wished to share her experiences and to encourage others to survive twin bereavement.

Embodied – Veronica works with Nick and Jayne

To be embodied is to be living with one's whole being and not as a talking head. (Parlett, 2003, p. 59)

Gestalt therapy 'seeks to bring the body back to life, back into a constantly shifting and growing capacity' (Totton, 2003, p. 107) so that our clients can begin to engage with themselves and the world around them with more aliveness.

Physical touch is essential to life; it is a pre-verbal method of communication, and 'is such a direct and definitive way of communicating "body to body"' (Kepner, 1987, p. 72) that the quality of touch that occurs between the primary carer and the infant directly affects the neurological development of the child (Gerhardt, 2004; Stern, 1998). With this in mind, it seems essential that physical touch plays a role in the therapeutic setting, and it is in this respect that GAAP provides our clients the chance to experiment and for powerful healing to occur. Animals live in relationship; dogs and horses in particular seek physical touch, both to touch and be touched. Whether this is through petting or grooming, these soothing touches create a lasting impact on the client's experience. Working with horses allows for an even deeper embodied experience, particularly for clients who need to feel a physical sense of support.

Nick, a young widower, attending a GAAP session working with horses described his situation as 'overwhelming'. He was struggling as a single parent to a seven-year-old son, and saw himself as altogether 'too much' of a burden to those around him. Nick was of medium build, around 5 feet 10 inches tall and weighing approximately 150lbs, with slender hands and scrunched up shoulders. When standing, he rocked gently back and forth on his feet and curled up his toes. His breathing was shallow and his chest tight, as he drew air into his lungs and held his breath, without

exhaling fully before taking the next breath. Standing with him, I experienced myself as pulling in and up, as though I could hover above the ground. He described himself as feeling ‘unanchored’ and ‘perpetually anxious’. This particular session had begun with some breathing exercises to help Nick to focus on his body sensations, exploring where he felt tension and increasing his awareness of the way he breathes. He had chosen to work with a chestnut mare named Jayne, a sturdy horse of medium height (15.2 hands), with whom we had spent some time grooming and preparing for a bareback mounted session in the indoor arena. Once Jayne was bridled and had her bareback pad in place, I asked Nick if he felt ready to mount.

In order to mount bareback, riders may need a ‘leg up’ even with a mounting block in place. I explained that I could put my foot on to the top of the mounting block, creating an additional ‘step’ for him to put his foot on to give him enough height to swing his right leg over in order to mount. This created a dilemma for Nick. Despite his slim frame, he feared that he would be too heavy for me to support him; and said he felt ashamed that he could not get up by himself, saying ‘I should be able to just get on and do it on my own’. I suggested that we could experiment with how much weight he would be prepared to allow me to support, by gradually testing the strength of my ‘step’ before actually mounting the horse. He agreed and we spent several minutes ‘testing’ my support of him, with Nick increasing the weight that he lent on my leg each time. We paid attention to how this felt for him to be able to test it out first and he reported that he was surprised that I could take his weight and that he felt safer and calmer with each attempt. We continued this until Nick felt ready to mount, at which point he noticed how Jayne had remained patiently in place by the mounting block the entire time and expressed his gratitude and surprise that she was there, and that this level of support was available to him. Nick became tearful as he recognised how often he continues to struggle on his own for fear of being too much of a heavy burden for anyone else, even when help is available and offered to him.

This is the type of embodied, non-verbal experience that GAAP enables; via his relationship with myself and Jayne, Nick was able to access feelings within himself that were hard to reach and often deflected through the cognitive process of language formation (Smuts, 2008). Freeman and Rieger (2011)² believe that the focus of the work is to facilitate the relationship between the client and the horse, much like in couple’s therapy. Within this environment, the core of the work was the encounter between Nick and Jayne meeting authentically and co-creating a supportive and healing relationship within which Nick could explore his sense of self, and styles of contacting.

Relational – Nick and Jayne continue together, assisted by Veronica

It is our belief that companion animals intuitively operate from an authentic, relational position, approaching the therapeutic encounter with an attitude that incorporates inclusion, presence, commitment to relationship, and confirmation of the client’s experience (Hycner and Jacobs, 1995), which enables full contact to occur. Full contact in this context can be seen as a co-created, non-verbal process of

[N]ot just togetherness or joining. It can only happen between separate beings, always requiring independence and always risking the capture of union . . . I am no longer only me, but me and thee make we. (Polster and Polster, 1974, p. 99)

For us, it is no surprise that Buber’s (1958) philosophy of I-Thou relating originated from his relationship with a horse:

As a child visiting his grandfather’s estate, Martin bonded with a mare. In a barn alone with the horse, he discovered the joys of total immersion with a non-human creature. In such a moment the world is shut out, and one’s own mind is quieted. Life and love are poured into the space that person and animal create together. (King, 2010, p. 101)

In the moment that Nick noticed Jayne’s unwavering support and presence, his embodied response allowed him to open up to her. He reached out and stroked her neck and thanked her for staying with him. Jayne responded by turning her head towards him and nudging his shoulder. ‘I think she wants me to get on her’, he said. So we prepared to mount once more. Nick reached up and placed some of his weight on Jayne’s withers, put one foot on my ‘step’ and swung on to her back. Almost immediately, I saw him tense his lower back, hips and knees. Feeling his tension, Jayne arched her back, shifted her weight slightly and braced herself to support his rigid body.

Those familiar with horses will know that they respond to the most subtle movements from the rider. When a rider is disconnected from their own body ‘the horse will express it behaviorally or actually even become locked up in his body’ (Rector, quoted in Kohanov, 2001, p. 202).

Nick reported that although he knew that Jayne was willing to support him, he was worried that he was still too much for her and that he felt disconnected again. So I encouraged Nick to breathe deeply and follow his breath into his lower back and down into his pelvis, and watched as he relaxed his hips and knees. Jayne responded by rounding her back and lowering her head, indicating a more relaxed state, in response to Nick’s own process.

Encouraging Nick to continue to deepen his experi-

ence of having his full body weight supported, I offered an experiment of allowing Jayne to move him as they walked together, as 'our sensations of body weight in relation to gravity, earth and space are made and discovered through movement' (Frank, 2001, p. 77). So I led them around the arena for several minutes, paying attention to their movements and breathing. I watched as Nick drew a deep breath, and as he exhaled and released his tension, Jayne let out a deep sigh in response. Nick was now fully in contact with Jayne.

The similarity between the movement of horses and humans can be seen in the way that a horse walks; the swaying of the hips in particular is reminiscent of a woman's hips in motion (Freeman, 2011). So as Nick relaxes into the movement of Jayne's walk, his hips and pelvis can begin to relax and move with her and allow him to feel in contact both with himself and with Jayne.

We took a break from walking and I offered another experiment: to lie spine to spine with Jayne so that he could experience her fully supporting his weight throughout his body in a different configuration. I supported Nick as he lent backwards and rested his head on Jayne's rump. In this position, Nick began to weep, saying that he felt less tense and anxious and better able to rest. He began to notice how tired he felt from holding himself up unaided. As he breathed in the support that Jayne represented, Nick became aware of the people around him who are willing to help him with his grief and with his son.

Our experience of our body weight determines how we experience ourselves in relationship with others, and 'yielding is about experiencing the weight of the body in relation to the supporting earth' (Frank, 2001, p. 83). Nick's experience of yielding to the full body support from Jayne allowed him to recognise how he was isolating himself from those around him.

Ethics and safety

Ethical practice requires that the therapist is clear about the therapeutic value of any intervention (Bond, 1993). Since GAAP is primarily an embodied approach to therapy, it is vital that when working with body process and somatisation we lead by example in recognising our own embodied being (Kepner, 1987). The need for grading in experiments, the importance of the therapeutic alliance and the recognition of the availability of support (self and environmental) are crucial. It is also important to recognise the developmental level of the client at the time of the original somatisation, particularly if regression occurs during the raising of body awareness (Gerhardt, 2004).

Additional ethical considerations that GAAP must take into account include the safety and welfare of the animals. We believe that the physical and emotional

welfare of our companion animals is an essential element of the therapeutic process. We recognise the impact that therapeutic work may have on them, and are mindful of the responsibility of providing due care and consideration when asking them to assist us in this way. In particular, regarding the potential of vicarious trauma, animals must be given time to rest between sessions. In the vignette above with Bede and Zoe, it was important that Robin monitored Zoe's effect on Bede and took care of him by taking him for a long walk after the session in order to allow him to shake off any residual effects (Levine, 1997) from the therapy work.

In order to ensure our clients' safety, GAAP is only conducted with companion animals that the therapist and/or client is familiar with. It is important to assess the risks involved in introducing dogs to clients who have very different needs and expectations. When working with horses, the therapist must have sufficient horsemanship training to be able to 'understand the horses' place in the herd, their temperament, level of training, ground manners, physical strengths and weaknesses, and their ability to tolerate people who are inexperienced around horses' (GEIR, 2011).

Conclusion

We have introduced GAAP as a synthesis of Animal Assisted Therapy and Gestalt Psychotherapy whilst staying true to our experimental, embodied, and relational roots. Our clinical vignettes demonstrate the powerful connections that can be made between our companion animals, our clients, and us, bringing about increased awareness of the here and now process, resulting in profound changes in our clients' ability to form relationships. What we offer in this article is merely a glimpse of GAAP's vast potential. We have outlined cases where clients worked with one animal. Yet we have also witnessed the healing available when we have worked with clients' own companion animals; with a herd of horses; multiple dogs and cats; in group settings, as well as with couples and families, bringing issues of drug/alcohol addiction, eating disorders, bereavement and adoption. GAAP is a new and ongoing experiment for us, and we find encouragement from Malcolm Parlett, who says,

The attitude of experimenting calls for being open to the unknown and finding what is offered in the present moment and in the field as it exists at the time of the experiment. Improvising, as in jazz or improv theatre, is pure experimenting. In other fields of activity it is to 'fly by the seat of one's pants', or to 'make it up as you go along'. No experiment can ever be planned fully in advance, and readiness to improvise, with the artist working live and the situation 'taking over' brings living in the NOW to a high point. (Parlett, 2003, p. 60)

We believe that it is only when we reconnect with the natural environment and our fellow creatures on this planet that we can regain some hope and expectation that we, the human animals, can survive. We are forever amazed by the healing power of animals, and thankful for the lessons that our companion animals provide us with.

Notes

1. By companion animals we refer generally to dogs, cats, and horses, although other smaller domestic animals such as rabbits and guinea pigs may also become suitable assistant therapists (Chandler, 2005).
2. Duey Freeman and Joan Rieger are the founders of the Gestalt Equine Institute of the Rockies (GEIR). Distinct from other forms of equine assisted psychotherapy, they have developed a method of working therapeutically with horses and humans which involves both ground and mounted work on horses from a Gestalt perspective. Much of the authors' approach to GAAP work with horses stems from their training.

References

- Bond, T. (1993). *Standards and Ethics for Counselling in Action*. Sage Publications, London.
- Buber, M. (1958). *I and Thou*. Trans. R.G. Smith. Charles Scribner & Sons, New York.
- Chandler, C. K. (2005). *Animal Assisted Therapy in Counseling*. Routledge, Oxford, UK.
- Frank, R. (2001). *Body of Awareness: A somatic and developmental approach to psychotherapy*. Gestalt Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Freeman, D. (2011). Private correspondence and unpublished writing.
- Freeman, D. and Rieger, J. (2011). Private correspondence and unpublished writing.
- GEIR (2011). GEIR Code of Ethics. Gestalt Equine Institute of the Rockies, Colorado.
- Gerhardt, S. (2004). *Why love matters: how affection shapes a baby's brain*. Brunner-Routledge, Hove, E Sussex, UK; New York.
- Guo, G., Meints, K., Hall C., Hall, S. and Mills, D. (2009). *Left Gaze Bias in Humans, Rhesus Monkeys and Dogs*. University of Lincoln, UK.
- Hallberg, L. (2008). *Walking the Way of the Horse: Exploring the Power of the Horse-Human Relationship*. iUniverse, USA.
- Hycner, R. A. and Jacobs, L. (1995). *The Healing Relationship in Gestalt Therapy*. The Gestalt Journal Press, Gouldsboro, ME.
- Kepler, J. I. (1987). *Body Process: A Gestalt Approach to Working with the Body in Psychotherapy*. Gestalt Institute of Cleveland Press, Cleveland, OH.
- King, B. J. (2010). *Being with Animals: Why we are obsessed with the furry, scaly, feathered creatures who populate our world*. Doubleday, New York.
- Kohanov, L. (2001). *The Tao of Equus*. New World Library, USA.
- Latner, J. (1992). The Theory of Gestalt Therapy. In Nevis, E. (ed.), *Gestalt Therapy Perspectives and Applications*. Gestalt Institute of Cleveland (GIC) Press, Cleveland, OH.
- Levine, P. (1997). *Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma*. North Atlantic Books, USA.
- McCormick, A. and McCormick M. (1997). *Horse Sense and the Human Heart*. Health Communications, Deerfield Beach, Florida.
- Parlett, M. (2003). Creative Abilities and the Art of Living Well. In Amendt Lyon, N. and Spagnuolo Lobb, M. (eds.), *Creative license: the art of gestalt therapy*. Springer Wien, New York.
- Perls, F. S., Hefferline, R. and Goodman, P. (1951). *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality*. Bantam Books, New York.
- Polster E. and Polster M. (1974). *Gestalt Therapy Integrated: Contours of Theory and Practice*. Vintage Books, New York.
- Spagnuolo Lobb, M. (2003). Therapeutic Meeting as Improvisational Co-Creation. In Amendt Lyon, N. and Spagnuolo Lobb, M. (eds.), *Creative license: the art of gestalt therapy*. Springer Wien, New York.
- Smuts, B. (2008). Embodied communication in non-human animals. In Fogel, A., King, B. J. and Shanker, S. G. (eds.), *Human Development in the Twenty First Century*. Cambridge University Press, New York.
- Stern, D. N. (1998). *The Interpersonal World of the Infant*. Karnac Books, London.
- Totton, N. (2003). *Body Psychotherapy: an introduction*. Open University Press, UK.
- Totton, N. (2011). *Wild Therapy: undomesticating inner and outer worlds*. PCCS Books, Ross-on-Wye, UK.
- Yontef, G. (1993). *Awareness, Dialogue and Process: Essays on Gestalt Therapy*. Gestalt Journal Publications, Highland, NY.
- Zinker, J. (1978). *Creative Process in Gestalt Therapy*. First Vintage Books, New York.

Veronica Lac, BSocSc, MA, MSc, is a GPTI Accredited Member and UKCP registered Gestalt psychotherapist in private practice. She has recently relocated to the USA where she now works with Alfie as the Animal Assisted Therapist on site for a residential mental health and behavioural unit for at-risk adolescents. Veronica is in the process of completing the two-year intensive programme in Gestalt Equine Psychotherapy through the Gestalt Institute of the Rockies, Colorado. She currently offers Gestalt Equine Assisted Therapy at an eating disorders clinic in Northern Virginia.

Address for correspondence: 704 Chadfield Way NE, Leesburg, VA 20176, USA.
Email: veronicalac@gmail.com

Robin Walton, BSc, Diploma in Gestalt Psychotherapy, is a UKCP registered Gestalt psychotherapist working in private practice with Drover, Bede, and her clients' own companion animals. She has lifelong experience of inter-species communication and thus has developed a special interest in pre-verbal and non-verbal human interaction. For the past ten years, Robin has been a singer with York Opera which has heightened her awareness of the emotional language of music.

Address for correspondence: Falcon Cottage, The Nookin, Husthwaite, York, YO61 4PY, UK.
Email: robinaatgestalt@btinternet.com