



Reconnect with Life's greatest teachers

...the animals have much to teach us.

There are a number of us who love and adore our pets. From loyal felines, protective canines', right down to furry gerbils and lazy lizards, we stand fully committed to our role as caregiver to these wonderful companions. No matter what animal you have chosen to accompany you on this earth walk, we can agree that the benefits of being a pet owner far outweigh the work and responsibility we are entrusted with.

I am often gifted by the silent wisdom of my golden retriever Gideon. I marvel how his forgiving heart welcomes me at the door when I arrive home later than usual, never holding a grudge, instead wagging his tail in celebration of our union. I watch as he rushes for his favourite ball, dancing at my feet, never ceasing to amaze and remind me that happiness can be instant and simple. I marvel at his deep, intuitive sense where he detects and warns me of an approaching storm, allowing me the chance to close my windows before the rains come down.

How many of us have witnessed a curious kitten lunging for a dangling piece of yarn, reminding us how innocence and play help to ease our stress, or the robin who breaks the lonely silence of a morning with her promising song. Nothing beats witnessing a child's fascination with a pet hamster who innocently teaches responsibility and patience through unconditional love.

You don't have to own a pet to experience the wisdom and inspiration that animals can bring. As a matter of fact before domestication of our four-leggeds, winged ones, creepy-crawlers and finned ones, we shared the land and built a strong bond with them. According to The Medicine Wheel teachings of the Ojibwe culture there is an order in which all was originally created. Through the wisdom of this wheel we learn that the planet, plants and animals came first before humans which were added last in order to complete the cycle of interconnectedness. It was through observation and emulation of the land animals that our clan systems were created. Through them, we were taught how to survive and thrive on the land. Basic survival such as seeking shelter, storing food, enduring harsh weather conditions and protecting our families resulted in our survival, and our gratitude for this is immense. So great is our love and respect that our clan names are animal. The guidance and knowledge gained from these animals are highly revered and are referred to as "totems." The word totem is derived from the Ojibwe (Chippewa) word '*odoodem*' meaning "his kinship group." You may also be familiar with the west coast totem poles. Today, animal totems are studied and celebrated throughout many cultures spanning the globe.

Discovering animal totems in a modern context is a process of personal observation and experiences with animals that aid us towards clarity, confidence and connection. By focusing on the attributes of an animal, we internalize their traits and thus begin to externalize the very character we absorb from them. The best way for me to explain this is to share a personal story.

While walking in the woods one day, which I often do, I found myself distracted and disillusioned with a life challenge. Indecision through lack of self confidence caused me to question myself at a time where making a decision was imperative. As I wandered, a large grasshopper appeared in front of me causing me to stop for fear of stepping on him. As I approached, the grasshopper leaped forward and remained with me for several steps, inviting me perhaps to consider taking a leap forward myself. As I continued on the path the sounds of a woodpecker drew my attention upward. As I watched and listened, I learned how woodpeckers have a profound sense of hearing and can directly target what is unseen beneath the bark of a tree, therefore accurately pecking into the bark and finding her food. In that moment I realized I needed to practise patience with myself, tap into my own intuition and confidently take a leap forward.

Most of us come into contact with animals each day; however, we aren't always aware of their presence or their message. Contrary to what most would say, a raccoon on the back deck looking for the remnants of your BBQ dinner or the unexpected snake under the front porch can be lovely gifts. Consider that a raccoon's face mask could be an invitation for you to remove the disguise you may wear and reveal who you truly are. Perhaps snake, who shows us that transformation is at hand offers the invitation to shed the old and start anew.

Is it a coincidence that we have these experiences with animals? No matter what your thoughts and beliefs are, – animals will continue to enter your life and it is up to you if you want to engage their wisdom. In the wise words of Chief Dan George I leave you with this:

If you talk to the animals
They will talk with you
And you will know each other.
If you do not talk to them,
You will not know them
And what you do not know
You will fear;
What one fears one destroys.

-Chief Dan George



As a dynamic speaker, educator, storyteller and author, Raven wholeheartedly shares her experiences and the wisdom of her Ancestors through a wide variety of presentations, workshops, retreat days and guest appearances. Held in Udora (15 min North of Uxbridge) each event incorporates a traditional experiential learning style that offers an inspiring and fulfilling experience for all. For more information please go to www.ravenspeaks.ca