

Clarion Review ★★★★★

SELF-HELP

The Nature of Joyful Relationships: Inspiring Tails from the Animal Kingdom to Transform Your Life

Denise Donato-McConnell

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With her sage observations of the animal kingdom, Donato-McConnell teaches lessons about human relationships.

Animal lovers have long known that their relationships with other species can offer rare and beautiful rewards. In her inspirational book, *The Nature of Joyful Relationships*, animal lover Denise Donato-McConnell demonstrates how her own human relationships have become stronger by observing animals.

Telling stories about animal friendships has become something of a popular book concept; in this regard, Donato-McConnell treads familiar ground. The key difference, however, is in her ability to translate animal tales into life lessons for humans. When she is describing her rescue mutt Benny, the author recounts her own childhood, which was filled with clumsiness and low self-esteem—feelings that she carried into adulthood. Benny, despite having suffered abuse, offered Donato-McConnell unconditional love that was transformational: “Unexpectedly,” she writes, “it was through his example that I learned one of the greatest lessons for eliminating ego: how to stop judging myself.”

Throughout the book, Donato-McConnell makes similar perceptive observations. For example, she tells the story of how Tarra, an elephant living in an elephant sanctuary, befriends Bella, a stray dog. When Bella suffers a spinal cord injury and is left unable to walk or stand, Tarra watches over her. In fact, her attentiveness helps the dog recover. “Bella knew that Tarra loved her no matter what and asked nothing of her but her friendship,” writes the author. “Tarra and Bella’s relationship illustrates how, when people love without dependency, they can best support each other’s healing and growth.” Each of the author’s stories encapsulates the bond formed between two animals and relates it to an emotional lesson for readers.

Donato-McConnell does an excellent job of weaving meaningful stories into her own life philosophy. Prior to each chapter, she includes a short statement that acts as a bridge between the animal tales she tells. In one statement, she writes, “When you find yourself about to put off pleasure, remember the lessons of our domestic friends and family. They know how to enjoy the moment—this one, right now.” These statements further reinforce the deep connection the author sees between animal and human behavior. The book ends with a summarizing list entitled “Ten Symptoms of Healthy, Joyful Relationships.”

Donato-McConnell’s writing is crisp, insightful, and heartfelt. The text is enhanced by superb color photographs of startling animal friendships, including a gorilla and a kitten, a greyhound and a fox, and a chimp and a tiger cub. The cover is beautifully designed—a lovely, elegant type treatment is coupled with an evocative photograph.

Donato-McConnell’s engaging stories are so good she may leave the reader craving more, as *The Nature of Joyful Relationships* is only about a hundred pages of text. It is a book every animal lover will savor.

BARRY SILVERSTEIN (March 17, 2014)

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