

THE GIVE AND TAKE IN THE HUMAN-ANIMAL BOND: THREE TALES OF SPIRIT HEALING

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In this narrative, the author describes the healing that occurs in the human-animal bond through three stories. Each story is connected to the author's life, both personal and professional. These are stories of friendship and healing brought about by unconditional love and companionship between people and animals. Above all, these are stories of hope, courage, and the promise of a better tomorrow. Note: Names have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

Introduction

Recent years have seen an increase in attention to the human-animal bond and recognition of its importance in human development. However, this was not the case a few years ago. I remember how, as a doctoral student in special education, I had a hard time convincing the professor of a graduate course that the topic for my final paper—"Human-animal bond and animal-assisted therapy for young children with special needs"—was an important one. That was in 2001. Not too long ago! I remember leaving the professor's office in tears because my topic was perceived as unimportant in terms of its contribution to the field. It was also not considered a scholarly topic. Fortunately, with the support of my advisor, I was able to conduct research in this area as part of my doctoral program. My study addressed the quality of life (socio-emotional and spiritual) of university students with disabilities and their service dogs and examined the students' relationships with their dogs. My advisor requested Dr. Allan Beck, a prolific scholar in the field of human-animal bond from Purdue University in Indiana, to chair my research committee. This was the beginning of my professional work in this field.

My aim in writing this narrative is to describe the healing power in the amazing bond between humans and animals through three short stories. The first story is about the special bond I shared with a companion animal, a rescue squirrel named Cheeni. I was a sixth grader in India then. The second story is about

the bond between Tomo, a third grade student, and my companion dog named Kush. I was an elementary school teacher in Singapore during this time. And I end with the story of the healing of Kush (my companion dog mentioned above) through his relationship with people, some who were strangers and others who in time became his friends.

These are stories of friendship and healing between people and animals. These are stories of hope, courage, and the promise of a better tomorrow.

Who Am I?

I am a Singaporean Indian. I was raised and educated in both India and Singapore. Animals had a large presence in my life when I was growing up in India. After the completion of my undergraduate degree, I returned to Singapore and lived with my husband and our two Golden Retrievers named Kush and Babe. Kush (meaning happy in Sanskrit) was a fun-loving dog and loved being around people. Babe (a British White) was affectionate and warm and preferred to be with just my husband and me. I worked as an English language teacher and taught young monolingual Japanese children with and without disabilities. I came to the U.S. in 1998 with my husband and our two dogs to pursue my graduate studies.



Tale One: Cheeni and I, Chennai, India

Mango trees lined the high walls of my grandmother's home in Chennai, India. Squirrels were in abundance and chased each other all day long—a common sight in India. My grandmother often told me the story of why squirrels in India had three stripes down their back and why they were considered sacred. It was Indian mythology and I carried this story close to my heart. She would say:

“Squirrels may be small but they are courageous and faithful. They helped build the Rameshwaram Bridge to save Queen Sita who was kidnapped by the demon king Ravanna and taken to his secret island. They could not carry big rocks to build the bridge but they wanted to help Lord Rama to get his Queen back and so they did what they could given their size. They carried pebbles back and forth. So Lord Rama blessed them by drawing three lines on their back. That is how they got their stripes. They should never be harmed.”

My maternal grandparents were born in Rameshwaram, which is at the southernmost tip of India. So my grandmother would tell me this story with great elaboration and pride each time I rescued a baby squirrel and nurtured him/her to good health. I remember disliking the crows because they would peck at the squirrels' nests and the young ones would often fall to the ground. If they were lucky they would survive the fall. Pinkish brown with only wrinkled skin instead of fur on their bodies, they would lie on the lawn helpless and gasping: a heartbreaking sight. My grandmother and I would prepare a home for them made of a shoe box, using layers of newspaper and cotton to make the soft bedding, with tiny twigs and dry leaves spread around to create a surrounding similar to that of a nest. My grandmother taught me how to feed them: “Roll

this cotton ball to be long. Now dip one end of it into this lukewarm milk and let it touch their lips. They will suck on it like they would suck on their mother's nipples.”

Months later we would set them free on the mango trees. Then healthy and chubby, they were free to go. Some would come back for a few weeks looking confused. And then they would disappear. I would miss their little feet running on my shoulder, arms, and neck. I would miss caressing them. “You have saved one more of Lord Rama's helpers,” my grandmother would say. “Be happy for them.”

Then I was a sixth grader at Church Park, a school in Chennai. I had a particularly hard time during that year. I had a classmate named Nellie who used to rally other classmates against me for no reason, and I often wondered what I did wrong for her to dislike me. I knew that she was a weak student and did not study hard. Nellie often copied my homework against my will. She used to tear pages from my notebook and splash ink on my assignments. She enjoyed watching me get into trouble and would snigger when the nuns kept me back in class during breaks to write compositions. That year, on my birthday, I brought a bag of candies to distribute to my classmates, a customary practice in most schools in India. I walked row by row and placed a couple of candies on each classmate's desk. I placed the candies on Nellie's desk and she swiped them off her desk onto the floor with a ruler. She had a mean and sullen look on her face. I said nothing and walked on to the next classmate. I was embarrassed. I was shocked. I was sad. I did not dare tell anyone at home about my troubles at school.

Other things were also happening at the same time that I was being teased and bullied in school. I was under a lot of pressure to do well in my exams since another classmate and I were competing to be ranked first in class. And if this were not enough of a hardship, I had to prepare for my piano exams. I had a strict 76-year-old piano master named Mr. Menezies who came to my home every Wednesday to help prepare me for the Trinity College of London music exams. Passing the exams with flying colors was important to my mother, so I could not escape my music

lessons. Mr. Menezies was harsh. If I did not get the scales right, he would snap his little ruler on my knuckles. I prayed each Tuesday night, "Please God. Please make Mr. Menezies sick or miss the bus tomorrow."

Cheeni was one of my recovering cheeky baby squirrels. I loved each one of them, but Cheeni was my favorite rescue. He was very expressive and had a unique way of communicating with me. He also enjoyed being held and caressed. I used to cup my palm and Cheeni would snuggle in it and fall asleep. I always felt light and calm when I held him and watched him fall asleep, making gurgling sounds in the comfort of my palm. My greatest feelings of elation were when I fed Cheeni. With his bony paws, he would hold the cotton dipped in the lukewarm, sweet milk and suck on it. He liked his milk a little sweet so I used to add some sugar to it. That was how he got the name Cheeni (meaning sugar in Tamil).

Cheeni became my closest friend and my confidant. On cool summer evenings I would sit on the floor under the Neem tree and hold him in my hands. I would tell him about Nellie and the horrible things she did to me. I talked with him about my stresses of exams and facing Mr. Menezies when I had not mastered a particular scale. Talking to him made me feel better. Thoughts of Nellie, Mr. Menezies, and my little childhood troubles would eventually fade away. I was always excited to come home from school to spend time with Cheeni. He was getting stronger by the day and I knew that it would soon be time to let him go.

Mid-summer that year my mother's sister was visiting from Kajang, Malaysia. One day, the day my grandmother and my mother were out of town and could not feed Cheeni, she promised to feed him while I was at school. I reminded my aunt of how to feed him before running off to the waiting rickshaw that had come to take me to school.

I could not find Cheeni when I returned home from school. My aunt was sitting in the courtyard with my uncle and a cousin. "Where is Cheeni?" I asked anxiously. My aunt replied with a laugh, "Come and say hello first. Where are your manners? "Cheeni?" I asked again.

Cheeni was dead. My aunt said that she probably did not feed him the right way and too much milk went into his mouth and he choked to death. "Did you not make the cotton into a thin string like thing?" I asked. "It was a ball of cotton and when he opened his mouth, I squeezed the milk into his mouth," she replied.

I cried. Tears ran down my cheeks and into my mouth. I was not sure if I should sit or stand. There was a lump in my throat and I could feel it rising. I remember my aunt saying with little care, amused by this emotional outburst for a squirrel, "Don't cry silly girl. It's only a squirrel and there are many out there. Now stop crying and I'll buy you a goat. They are more fun."

I buried Cheeni under the Neem tree, holding him in my palms and saying goodbye, goodbye to a little friend who healed my spirit when I was down. I lit several incense sticks and placed them on top of the mound of earth. "Please forgive me. Goodbye my sweet little friend."

My grandmother used to hold me close to her heavy bosom and console me each time I thought of Cheeni and cried. "It's okay, don't cry," she used to say. "He is in heaven. Not too far away. Maybe he will come back to you again in his next life."

Tale Two: Tomo and Kush, Singapore, 1997

It was a hot and humid morning. The children in my third-grade English language class had just returned from a field walk. There was a knock on my classroom door. A Japanese homeroom teacher and a chubby boy with soft, gentle eyes stood outside my door. "*Jega sensei* (Teacher Jega)," said Mr. Kinoshita. "*Kare wa Tomo desu. 'A' class kara. Kore kara 'C' class ne.* (This is Tomo from the 'A' class. From now he will be in the 'C' class.)" Then he turned to the little boy and said in an encouraging voice, "Mo, Jega sensei was anato no atarashii sensei desu. Gambatte ne! (Teacher Jega is your new teacher. Good luck okay.)" I looked at Tomo and smiled. I was puzzled. What a lovely child, I thought to myself.

Tomo was a nine-year-old biracial student. His mother was local Chinese and his father

was Japanese. Tomo was first placed in the upper level English language class. Students at this level (in classes A1-A3) were mostly bilingual and proficient in English. Tomo was trilingual. He was proficient in Mandarin, Japanese, and English. But Tomo did not perform well in the "A" class. His teacher reported that he seldom spoke, cried a lot, and preferred to be alone. He was unhappy when asked to be a part of a group for class activities. Tomo also did poorly in his class assignments. As his grades worsened, his teacher suspected that he might have learning difficulties and, without conducting an extensive investigation of his poor performance in class or of his behavior, she decided to demote Tomo to a lower level English language class ("C" class). Tomo was sent to me because I was one of the two teachers in the lower level class who included children with disabilities.

Tomo remained quiet and said little for the next few weeks in my class. He sat by himself during the short break and read his *mangas* (comics). When I noticed that other children did not include him in their groups, I learned that biracial Japanese children were generally considered impure by their peers. It seemed to me that Tomo's biracial status had made him an instant outcast among his Japanese peers. When I noticed that Tomo was frequently bullied, I corrected students who called him *hambun* (half-half) to his face. I often overheard boys talk to one another saying, "*Nihonjin janai yo, Hambun ne* (He is not Japanese. He is half-half)." The boys in the class isolated him and each time I placed him in small groups, the children looked at each other in shock and dismay. They grumbled beneath their breath, "*Yada! Nande?* (Oh no, why us?)"

I remember thinking about my sixth-grade days, particularly the teasing and the bullying and how my class teacher did nothing during these times. I remembered those embarrassing and painful moments. Memories of Cheeni, my conversations with him, and how he comforted my spirit flashed through my mind. Somehow that was the only fond memory I had of being a sixth grader. It was not surprising to me that for years I refused to revisit those Church Park school days for fear that it would

take me back to those unpleasant events. In 1997, as a third-grade teacher watching Tomo and witnessing his troubles, I came face to face with those bottled-up memories.

I decided to make some changes in my class. I moved Tomo's table to the front of the class and near my desk so that I could look out for him. I also frequently asked Tomo to help me during instruction in hope of raising his spirit and making him feel important. He would comply happily but said little. He continued to show little interest in his work or being in school. He remained shy and nervous. He would smile at times, but there was always a tinge of sadness in his smile. And it pained me to see him that way.

Several months later during a PTA meeting, I talked with Tomo's mother, expressing my concern about him and wondering why she did not place him in a local multicultural Singaporean school. She informed me that his father wanted him to learn Japanese in the event the family had to return to Japan. I told her that I was concerned about Tomo's emotional state. She informed me that he spoke at home although not too much and added that he code-switched in three languages and that she was not sure what bothered him in school. She knew that her son was quiet in school and had no friends. He was not invited to birthday parties and other play groups. Mrs. Kawauchi was at a loss about what to do to help her son, but stressed that she was quite concerned about his academic performance. She hoped that I could help him with his reading and writing skills after school hours. Unable to remain at school after regular teaching hours to provide Tomo with extra help, I volunteered my time for two afternoons a week at my home. This child needed help and I wanted to try to understand him. It was arranged that Tomo would come to my home after his soccer training.

Afternoons with Jega Sensei (Teacher Jega)

The first month Tomo and I spent quiet afternoons at my home. I would teach him in English and Japanese. Tomo completed whatever tasks I gave him with minimal communication. He uttered approximately five

phrases such as no, yes, *o mizu* (water), *inu* (dog), *okasan kita* (mom's come), and *ima nanji* (what time is it now). His eyes would light up when I placed his favorite Malay cookies, *Kueh Belandah* (Love Letters), in front of him. I noticed that he was wary of Kush, our two year-old Golden Retriever, and appeared nervous whenever Kush came near him. Each time Tomo would arrive, he would wait for me to hold Kush and then scurry inside to sit on the dining chair with his legs off the floor. Kush would sense his discomfort and would eventually settle on his favorite sofa after the initial excitement of seeing Tomo.

One day, Tomo's mom dropped him off at my home, forgetting that we had cancelled lessons for that afternoon. I had a dental appointment and was away from home. It was a day off for my husband and he was alone at home when Tomo rang the gate bell. Having met Tomo and his mother, my husband knew that the child was having some problems, that he barely spoke, and that he was nervous around Kush. My husband later told me that he was at a loss regarding how to keep the child occupied until either his mother or I returned.

Coming home from my dental appointment, I was surprised to find Tomo. I was even more surprised to see him sitting on a mat in the patio and reaching out to Kush with a treat in his hand. I heard him telling Kush to "sit." I pretended not to be surprised, said "hello" to Tomo, and spent the next 15 minutes hanging around in the living room in a casual manner. I watched Tomo touch Kush and giggle "*momo chan* (common name for pets in Japanese; reference to cuteness in Chinese)." "Do you like him, Tomo?" I asked, to which he nodded. "Do you want more cookies to give Kush?" I pressed on. "I have many here," he replied, showing me his palm. I was surprised to hear the confidence in Tomo's reply and his ability to communicate his thoughts without hesitation. I looked toward my husband and asked in Malay, "*Apa ini?* (What is this?)" He winked at me and nodded toward Kush saying, "*Suda kawan* (Become friends)." Indeed a friendship had been formed. And a period of healing had begun.

When his mom picked him up later that afternoon, Tomo was reluctant to leave. "*Momo chan,*" he said, pointing to Kush. "*Kawaii ne* (cute, isn't he)," his mother replied. Tomo finally left to go home. A happier than usual child! Later that evening my husband recalled what happened that afternoon:

Ren: *I did not know what to do with Tomo. He was distressed that you were not here. I tried my best to get him to tell me his mom's hand phone number so that I could call her to pick him up...I ran out of ideas on how to entertain him so I gave him something to munch on. He was very quiet and sat drinking the soya milk and munching Love Letters. Kush sniffed and sniffed and went straight to Tomo and sat in front of him. Tomo quickly drew his legs towards his chest and pushed himself further into the sofa. He held his drink high and looked at me. I told him not to be afraid, that Kush was very gentle and would not hurt him. Kush became impatient and wanted the cookies so he placed his paw on Tomo's thigh and looked with imploring eyes. I coaxed Tomo to hand Kush a piece of the Love Letter and not to be afraid. One piece led to another and another and soon Tomo was petting Kush with the tips of his fingers, making sure to keep a clear distance...I decided to watch the news and let the two of them work it out. I was surprised that Tomo could speak because when he ran out of the Love Letters, he asked me calmly, "Can I have some more?"*

Brinda: *Just like that?*

Ren: *Just like that. Without faltering!*

In the months that passed, Kush and Tomo became good friends. Tomo enjoyed his afternoon lessons with me and clearly Kush was the reason behind his enthusiasm. In class he would come earlier than usual and make small conversations with me about Kush. I found that Tomo was quite talkative and he spoke Japanese and English fluently.

Afternoons with a Puppy Named Kush

Tomo and Kush became “*tanoshii tomodachi* (happy friends)” as Tomo called them. A typical scene the afternoons he visited me was one of excitement and urgency. I would hear the sounds of running feet and the gate bell would soon ring several times (in the past Tomo would ring the gate bell once and wait politely). Once I opened the gate, he would run past me, throw his bag on the patio, and look for Kush. Kush would be excited to see him and the two would play in the garden. Tomo would talk to Kush without a care: “*osuwari* (sit),” “*sensei, mite, Nihongo wakar!* (Teacher, look, he understands Japanese!)” The scene would be one of a child running in circles with a golden dog jumping at him.

I soon had to make a deal with Tomo—a bit of work and a bit of play. But first it was time to study. Tomo was willing and eager to do more tasks if he could get additional time with Kush. In fact, he was eager to do complex tasks. One day, as Tomo and Kush were playing, I asked Tomo if he liked being in school. I was not expecting a reply so I was surprised when Tomo shook his head in negation. He did not say anything the first time.

I found that Tomo was relaxed when he played with Kush. I noticed that he talked cheerfully and a lot during their playtime. In the weeks that followed, I probed Tomo for some answers regarding his sadness in school. In bits and pieces he told me about his experiences with his classmates. Tiny problems, or so they may seem for grownups, but they were big troubles for this little child. A list of not-so-nice happenings in school.

Tomo’s classmates teased him because his mother was not Japanese. He was also teased for speaking in Mandarin to his mother. Tomo, as a result, did not like his mother visiting the school. He did not like his mother speaking to him in English. He was teased because his mother had a Singaporean accent. He was embarrassed that his mother code-switched and used Mandarin instead of conversing in English or Japanese. His classmates did not want to play with him. He was looked at strangely when he was the only one without an *obento* (Japanese meal) on some days and had Chinese food instead. His classmates teased him about his chopsticks that looked different from theirs. Of such nature were Tomo’s troubles.

The child was going through a lot. On his own! He had kept all of these problems to himself, and they gnawed at his heart, but I was glad that he was finally able to talk. Kush seemed to have had that calming effect on him and helped him talk about his troubles without it being too hard on him emotionally. Tomo was smiling a lot more as time went by and the tinge of sadness in his smile had begun to fade. Sometimes I heard hearty laughs. I knew that he was “healing” with the help of a friend, a friend none other than Kush.

Kush Comes to Class

One morning I decided to bring Kush to my class. He looked handsome wearing his bright yellow and orange scarf with purple paw prints. A few children in my class shrieked in delight when they saw him with me. “*Kawaii, kawaii* (cute, cute),” they screamed and clapped their hands. Others stood a little distance away looking in awe. They were a little unsure because Kush was big. “*Kowaii ne! Oki ne!* (Scary, isn’t he! Big, isn’t he!),” they would say. Students continued to trickle into class and found themselves amidst some excitement. Tiny voices called out, “Kush chan, Kush chan. Kite! (Kush darling, Kush darling. Come!)” Kush was very excited and responded to his name by wagging his tail. When the bell rang and it was time for class to begin, I saw Tomo walking hurriedly ahead of some boys. He looked shocked to see Kush in class.

Tomo came up to Kush and to the surprise of his classmates, he went down on his knees and hugged Kush saying, "*Kush chan. Genki?* (Kush darling. How are you?)" Kush burrowed his head into Tomo's belly and stayed still, his tail wagging while Tomo caressed him. The children looked on in disbelief at the way the two were together. Kush the oki na inu (big dog) responded in the most spectacular and special way by snuggling into the softness of Tomo's belly. The two made the class news.

At the start of class, I asked Tomo if he would like to introduce Kush to his classmates. He agreed and did so shyly but with pride. I encouraged the rest of the students to ask Tomo questions about Kush. I told them that Kush loved being with Tomo and that the two were *tanoshi tomodachis* (happy friends). Tomo, who by then knew Kush fairly well, answered most of his classmates' questions. Kush hung around near him and responded to Tomo's gentle strokes by licking his face and doing his happy dance, a dance that he always did when he was happy and excited. My husband and I called it the "Stevie Wonder" dance.

*A nod to the left and a nod to
the right.*

*Right paw - step and off. Left
paw - step and off.*

*Turn around and two mighty
WOOF WOOF!*

(And repeat)

The children burst into a loud laugh and clapped in delight. "*Sugoi ne Kush! Sugoi Tomo!* (Fantastic Kush! Fantastic Tomo!)"

Tale Three: The Healing of Kush, Seattle, Washington, 2008

Kush is now 13 and lives in Seattle with us. He is in good health and continues to enjoy his daily walks. On some days he is slower than others since he has developed arthritis. His vision has also gotten poorer. He still does his Stevie Wonder dance whenever he gets excited. He still trots when he is happy.

In November 2007, we lost Babe, our other beloved Golden Retriever. She passed away a couple of days after a major surgery to remove a large tumor in her spine. Babe was Kush's companion of 11 years and he was saddened by her passing. In the weeks that followed Babe's death, Kush became anxious and lethargic. He would continually sniff at Babe's favorite spots at home where she used to lie and chew her bones or fall asleep. Kush would stand still near these spots and look lost. He was also restless at night and paced often, looking around. I suspected that he was searching for Babe. I also noticed that Kush was not excited about going on his daily walks and often seemed eager to return home. The extra love and attention at home helped. On some days he seemed better. Still, he was not completely his usual happy-go-lucky self.

A month later a casual interaction between an elderly woman and Kush seemed to rejuvenate his spirit more than usual. On our daily walks, morning and evening, we used to pass the neighborhood pharmacy, a medium-sized and a rather unattractive looking store. The elderly lady who was walking toward the entrance with the help of a stroller saw Kush. She came toward him and petted him. Her aged, crooked fingers scratched the back of Kush's ear gently. Kush wagged his tail and licked the back of her hands a couple of times. As the lady walked through the doors of the pharmacy, Kush continued to look on with his ears pricked up. He seemed eager to follow her, so I let him lead the way and fell into step beside him. Together we walked through the aisles of the pharmacy. Several shoppers petted him while others paused and complimented him. The staff gave him a treat or two. That day Kush trotted cheerfully back home, taking long rhythmic strides.

From that day onwards for the next three months, Kush would stop at the pharmacy on our way back from his daily walks. He would turn toward the entrance, enter the store, and look around gleefully before beginning his walk through the aisles. He would sniff around since he could not see very well, walk up to shoppers, and catch them by surprise. He seemed to be particularly fond of the elderly shoppers. "Oh, hello there, puppy" were

frequent comments. A caress or two, a lot of kind words, a couple of treats, and out of the store to finish our walk and head back home again. It became a ritual. I observed how the voices of people talking to Kush and their gentle caresses soothed his spirit and healed him. He became visibly cheerful. Sometimes he did his Stevie Wonder dance in the store. "My, my, you are quite the tap dancer!" one shopper remarked.

Then the heavy Seattle rains came. There were fewer shoppers during this time and I became worried. I feared that Kush would regress in terms of his mental health. I began to think of an alternate plan to continue his healing process. I began to wonder if there might be a special place for my very special senior dog to make friends with seniors like him.

Kush began to visit Red Cedar House, a retirement residence, in March. He spends an informal hour of fun and laughter with the residents in the activity room. Hugs, caresses, and belly rubs galore. Kush gets ecstatic and often does his Stevie Wonder dance for them. I notice smiles on the faces of those who seem lonely and sad. Kush brings a lot of happiness to the residents in that one hour. And they continue to heal him and rejuvenate his spirit each week. The residents are thankful to me for volunteering my time to bring Kush to the residence. I am grateful to them for helping Kush get on his feet and be the happy dog he used to be. It is now nearly nine months since Babe passed away. Kush is visibly better. His healing process has had a ripple effect on the entire family.

Kush continues to be excited about going to Red Cedar House. He cannot contain himself from the moment he gets out of my car. He is so excited to enter the retirement home each week that I have to use the handicap knob to open the main door of the building. And then he merrily trots in. To meet his good old friends!

Final Reflections

The unconditional relationship, free from judgment, criticism, and negative feelings, was the basis of human-animal bonding in all three stories. In Tomo's and my case, such a bonding

gave rise to an honest and open relationship with the animals in our lives and enabled us to share our most intimate emotions with them. The animals were good listeners and made us feel better. The ability to be oneself without having to worry about pleasing someone, simply to do the things one likes or just cry and be sad, formed a completely wholesome foundation for our relationships with them. For example, I found that Tomo spoke the most about his negative experiences at school when he was hugging or caressing Kush. Many children form powerful attachments to animals and find that their relationships with them can help to release pent up feelings (Jegatheesan & Meadan, 2006; Meadan & Jegatheesan, in press). Cheeni and Kush each acted as a surrogate for a human friend. Kush was the "significant other" in times of Tomo's need, providing him with comfort and making him feel important and "worthy of dedication" in a world that seemed to isolate him.

The animals acknowledged our feelings through their own unique ways to help us feel loved and important. Whenever Tomo hugged Kush and gently caressed him, Kush would do his Stevie Wonder dance in excitement and then tuck his head into the softness of Tomo's belly. Tomo would almost immediately smile. It was as though Kush sensed that Tomo needed comforting at that time. Cheeni, my rescue squirrel, would flick his tail in a circular motion and rustle up his bed when he saw me. It was his way of showing his affection. Cheeni and Kush, through their use of verbal cues, body language, and physical contact, comforted our spirits and helped change our mindsets toward a more positive and rewarding end. Beck and Katcher (1996) explain how "touch" is part of communication and is used to "qualify the emotional meaning" (p. 79) of what was being said or intended.

Finally, I think about Kush and all that's happened to him in the past seven months and how people can impact the emotional lives of animals and heal them psychologically. I have seen such a healing—the emotional healing of Kush—by strangers and friends alike. I come from a culture that teaches us of the laws of Karma, the effects of all of one's actions that create and impact past, present, and future

experiences in this world and the after. Recently, I have been spending a lot of time in our garden enjoying the glorious Seattle summers. Kush enjoys lying in the sun with his head on my lap. On and off, he nudges me with his paw to continue massaging his ears. I look into the eyes of this amazing soul and think about his life and the people in it. I am glad that he is back to being his old self, once again doing the Stevie Wonder dance. He looks happy, relaxed, and content—he has received his *Karma-Phala* (fruit of all Karma).

Epilogue

Tomo returned to Japan after completing grade six. The last time I heard from him was in 2000. He sent me a postcard from Osaka and addressed it to Kush and *Jega Sensei*. At that time I was nearing completion of my master's degree in Hawaii. I sent him a photograph of Kush and Babe taken at the Kapiolani Park in Honolulu. I have not heard from him since.

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Acknowledgement: This article is dedicated to Kush, Babe, and Cheeni.

Brinda Jegatheesan is an Assistant Professor in Educational Psychology at the University of Washington. She is currently working on a funded research study on the relationship between children from three different religious backgrounds (Islam, Judaism, and Christianity) and their pets. Kush continues to visit the neighborhood pharmacy during his daily walks in Seattle. He now has a shaggy companion, a Wheaton Terrier mix rescue named Krithi, who keeps him feeling young with her playfulness. Comments concerning this article can be sent to brinda@u.washington.edu.



Kush. Photograph by Brinda Jegatheesan.

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