

Animal communicator Terri O'Hara.

Photo: Jon Christopher Meyers

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by Michael M. Phillips, Wall Street Journal

What Do Dogs Really Think? Pet Psychics Are Standing By

In humans' long quest to talk to the animals, some are casting doubts aside and turning to people who say they can commune with cats, horses and even guinea pigs

Once or twice a year, Terri O'Hara visits a ranch in Littleton, Colo., to talk with the animals.

Ms. O'Hara strolls through the barn, mingles with the herd and sits down with the poultry. She says she drinks in telepathic images that reveal animals' inner thoughts, be they profound or mundane.



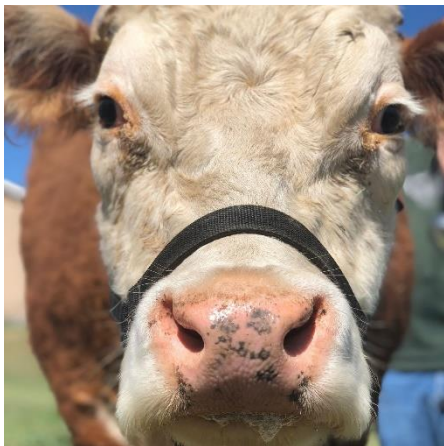
Read my mind

On a typical visit, Ms. O'Hara will report that a gelding is concerned that human staff members get dangerously underfoot around the feeding stations. The miniature steer is miffed that the male pig has a female companion and he doesn't. The alpacas divulge that cliques are forming among the volunteer ranch hands. The hens complain that the rooster is abusive.

Ranch owner Bernadette Spillane takes these reports into account when managing the 53-acre property. The ranch is a sanctuary for rescued horses, and Ms. Spillane says they line up to unburden themselves on Ms. O'Hara's visits. "There were horses we didn't realize were having an issue," says Ms. Spillane, 65 years old. "Or they knew other horses were having an issue, and they wanted to talk about it."

In humans' long quest to communicate with their beloved pets, some are casting doubts aside and turning to animal communicators—sometimes called pet psychics—to try to learn what's on Fido's mind.

"Just because I don't understand it doesn't mean it's not real," says former Manhattan restaurateur Alex von Bidder, whose daughter brought an animal communicator to her horse farm in Aiken, S.C.





On the Spillanes's ranch, Ms. O'Hara said that Moonshine, a miniature steer, wondered why he couldn't have a friend when Wilbur the pig had Charlotte. Mick the horse worried about the safety of staff members. Shelby and other alpacas expressed concerns about cliques among volunteers. Photos: Happy Dog Ranch(4)

Ms. O'Hara, who lives in Eugene, Ore., has a three-week waiting list for appointments and counts more than 10,000 animals among her clients. Last month, she gave a woman the hard news that the family dog preferred to live with her soon-to-be-ex-husband.

She has even held telepathic sessions with guinea pigs. "On average, they have less to say," she acknowledges.

Ms. O'Hara, 61, says she began hearing animals as a child. She stopped admitting it in her teens. Her parents died when she was in her late 20s, and, overwhelmed by the prospect of three deaths in short succession, she turned to an animal communicator to talk to her terminally ill dog. She immediately recognized that same ability in herself.

"I've heard them in a way that doesn't involve the ears," she says. "I've heard them in the heart."

She started conducting sessions with friends' pets, but took several years to make a career out of it. "I got into it kicking and screaming," she says. "I was still shy. I was still embarrassed. The more I did it, the more I realized it was a bit of a calling."



Animal communicator Anna Twinney with Excalibur, a Spanish Mustang.

Photo: Tess Helmandollar

Like Ms. O'Hara, animal communicator Anna Twinney usually holds sessions over the phone, while looking at a photograph of the animal. Ms. Twinney says she has talked to horses in Dubai from her home in North Carolina. She has done in-person work with sloths in Costa Rica. Sloths, she says, talk faster than they move.

The British-born Ms. Twinney, 50, specialized in rape and child-abuse victims while she was a police officer in the U.K. She says she earned her U.S. residency for her expertise in horse whispering, which she describes as a behavior-modification technique that involves touching the animal. She says she also uses telepathy with animals, their thoughts flickering past her like a colorful silent movie.

“With telepathy you can go to the horse’s mouth to find out what they need to feel safe,” says Ms. Twinney.

Ms. Twinney recently conducted a session with Walks With Indelible Courage, a Spanish mustang boarding on the Spillanes’ Colorado ranch. The horse grew up untamed on a 7,000-acre ranch in Wyoming and was so wild that ranch hands struggled to get a halter on him, much less persuade him to get into a trailer.

Ms. Twinney reported that Walks With wanted to change pens, a step that Ms. Spillane says helped calm him.



Ms. Twinney recently held a session with Walks With Indelible Courage, center.

Photo: Adam Edwards

Predictably, animal communicators run into their share of skeptics.

Kyle Huwaldt's father has engaged Ms. O'Hara on and off for nearly two decades, spanning three generations of family dogs. But Mr. Huwaldt, a 21-year-old finance student at the University of Denver, just doesn't find it plausible that someone three states away can have a two-way conversation with a dog by looking at its photo.

That said, he finds it harmless enough. His father, retired structural engineer Michael Huwaldt, 72, is very attached to his dogs, and heartbroken when they die. A session with Ms. O'Hara makes the passage of time and dogs less painful, "even if it's not scientific whatsoever," the younger Mr. Huwaldt says. "Why question a good thing?"

Then there was an incident years ago with Muddy, an aged chocolate Lab who, Ms. O'Hara conveyed, wanted his ashes spread in the mountains he saw from the yard. The elder Mr. Huwaldt didn't think the mountains were visible from Muddy's favorite spot, so he squatted down to get a dog's-eye-view. Sure enough, he could see the mountains through the trees.

"So I became a believer," he says. "There's no way she could have made that up or known that."



Muddy in Wheat Ridge, Colo., in the 1990s.

Photo: Michael Huwaldt

Siblings Julie and Jeremy Vogel hired animal communicator Brenda Cunliffe earlier this year for a session with their parents' Lab-pit bull mix, Charlie. Charlie struck Ms. Vogel as unusually needy and wondered if he was happy.

Mr. Vogel, 24, was hesitant, but his sister egged him on. "We should just try it," she recalls saying.

They wanted to keep the session secret from their parents. "We didn't really want to freak them out," says Ms. Vogel.



Julie Vogel with the family Lab-pit bull mix, Charlie. Photo: Jeremy Vogel

So they closeted themselves in a bedroom in the family home in Valhalla, N.Y., gave Charlie a bone with some peanut butter and put Ms. Cunliffe on speaker phone.

Ms. Cunliffe reported that Charlie said he's a "happy boy" and everyone thinks he's human, according to the Vogels. She asked him if people talk to him and Ms. Cunliffe said he responded, "Yep, all the time." As he chewed his bone loudly, Ms. Cunliffe noted he said his teeth weren't giving him any problems.

Ms. Cunliffe also conveyed that Charlie gets bored when everyone stares at their phones. "Really? You're going to look at that again?" she relayed him saying. "Come on, let's go back outside, Dad."

Ms. Vogel, 27, found the session entertaining and comforting. "I don't understand how it works," she said afterward. "But I also understand that there are many things that we can never understand."

Ms. Cunliffe, based in Vero Beach, Fla., didn't return calls or emails requesting comment. Her website advertises 30-minute sessions for \$65.



John and Bernadette Spillane with one of their Irish Wolfhounds, Kerry.

Photo: John Spillane

Jacqui Feinstix of New Paltz, N.Y., was impressed when Ms. Cunliffe passed along the news that her deceased dog Woody was upset that his ashes were under the sink. Jacqui had scattered his remains in his favorite park, but the urn itself was—unknown to Ms. Feinstix—indeed under the sink.

“You can’t Google that,” says Ms. Feinstix, a 37-year-old yoga teacher and birth doula.

In addition to animal communication, Ms. Cunliffe advertises herself as an “angel therapy practitioner,” certified to “work with the angels, elementals, archangels, and ascended masters to provide spiritual healing and harmony to themselves and others in all areas of life,” according to her website.



Doreen Virtue with her Pomeranian, Feather.

Photo: Doreen Virtue

She writes she learned to communicate with angels from Doreen Virtue, then a top-selling New Age author. In 2017, Ms. Virtue became a born-again Christian and disavowed the practice of calling upon angels. She had, she said, regrettably been deceived by “New Age teachings and by demons who were posing as angels.”

Ms. Virtue also turned against pet psychics. Partly it was for theological reasons. But partly it was because one of them reported that her elderly dog, Gigi, was asking for a friend. Ms. Virtue and her husband took her advice and adopted Feather, who turned out to suffer from extreme separation anxiety.

Gigi died in 2017, leaving the couple alone with a very high-maintenance Pomeranian. “I wish we hadn’t listened to that pet psychic,” Ms. Virtue says.

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