

THE SPACE IN BETWEEN: UNDERSTANDING LIFE WITH ANIMALS

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN G.A.
BRADSHAW AND ALICE BENESSIA

A.B. In 2020, you published “Talking with Bears: Conversations with Charlie Russell”¹. The book is the result of a long-term collaboration with Charlie Russell, a renowned, writer and photographer who passed away in 2018 after a lifetime devoted to understanding and protecting Bears². As a beginning, could you talk a little bit about Charlie and how you two met?

G.B. Charlie was brilliant – a true genius of heart and mind. He lived in Nature's skin. He grew up in Canada, in a family that was fairly hostile to Bears. They wouldn't hunt them but if a Grizzly showed up, they would shoot him down. That was the atmosphere and the beliefs he lived in. For whatever reason, Charlie saw things differently than

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1 G.A Bradshaw 2020. “Talking with Bears: Conversations with Charlie Russell”, Rocky Mountain Books.

2 Reflective of usage prevalent among many tribal peoples, as well as neuroscience's findings that treat species' differences like those of cultures, in this conversation Animal names are capitalized (e.g., Brown Bear) in keeping with capitalization of the names of human nations (e.g., Tewa). “Animal” and “Plant” are also capitalized to underscore this understanding. Although such categories retain a dualistic perspective that splits phenomena into pieces and therefore reflects a particular human cultural view—one contrary to the framing of this work and the sciences covered—this convention is used for clarity of communication.

most people. He was in many ways like a traditional Indigenous scholar, in the sense of being extremely observant and trusting his own experience. He did not have an agenda other than figuring things out. He had his own natural curiosity and an unconscious drive for uncovering truth, as he saw the disparity between his own experiences and what he was told. And he was moved by his love for Bears. One day in Kamchatka, he was out walking around with someone else's video camera, and he didn't realize that the voice recorder was on. He was enthralled with the world and came across a beautiful Brown Bear whom he did not know but felt such awe that he spontaneously exclaimed: “I love you!” That is how Charlie lived in the world. He simply lived on a foundation of truth and love. You can think of truth and love as a frame of reference, the vertical and the horizontal. I shared that frame of reference with him. It is how we clicked. Charlie appreciated that I don't use science selectively, as it is most often the case when it comes to Bears and other Animals. We respected each other because we both valued truth and were willing to follow it no matter the consequences, which if not “a revolutionary act, is at the very least, a thankless job”³. And we shared a deep love for Animals. That is why we started talking back and forth a couple times a week and never stopped, until he died.

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3 From: Charlie Russell 2018, “Giving Voice to Animals: A Naturalist's Note”, Foreword to G.A. Bradshaw 2018. “Carnivore Minds: Who These Fearsome Animals Really Are”, Yale University Press, p. 10.

We met when a mutual friend suggested that we would enjoy talking with each other. We had both just published books – mine on Elephants⁴ and his on Grizzlies⁵. Much to our surprise, we really got along and discovered how much we had in common. I think Charlie was drawn to me initially as I could be useful for the Bears. I had two PhDs, was a published scientist, and these credentials were useful because they gave collective validation to his experience. Although he was deeply respected and no one questioned his expertise, Charlie was, at the same time, unaccepted and dismissed for the reason that most people did not want to hear his message. His truth was too bitter a pill to swallow.

Let's say his message is subversive, in a way.

Yes, it undoes everything. It questions the Western grounding for objectification, exploitation and colonization by dissolving, through a deeply relational life experience, the illusion of our separation from Nature and the belief that we humans are better than Animals. This premise has no grounding, it is not even scientific by the definition of what scientists call scientific. Unlike the majority of researchers and

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4 G. A. Bradshaw 2009. "Elephants on the Edge: What Animals Teach Us About Humanity", Yale University Press.

5 Charlie Russell and Maureen Enns 2002. "Grizzly Heart: Living without fear among the brown Bears of Kamchatka", Random House of Canada.

scientists, Charlie's motivation did not come from any intellectual appetite and it wasn't extractive. It was really about understanding Bears by living with them, side by side, and showing that it was possible to coexist peacefully. In a sense, it is kind of the reverse of Western science, where through separation and objectification – the dissection of Nature - we pile up information, accumulate knowledge in bits and pieces and then say we understand.

In relation to this, in the book, you quote Charlie saying: "I never wanted to know Bears, I only wanted to understand them". If we look at the etymology of understanding, we find out that it means "standing among"⁶. Knowing something seems to imply some form of distancing and control, while understanding entails a shared experience, with no hierarchies, on common grounds.

Yes, exactly. And Charlie's motivation for understanding came from a deep emotional connection. His observations and experiences were embodied and informed his practice. His process was very organic. He paid attention. Bears weren't objects. Paying attention is "listening with your eyes", as he used to say, being present and caring deeply about whomever is around. He learned about Bears on their own time. Nothing was assumed until facts

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6 Understand as "stand among", from Old English under "between, among" (source also of Sanskrit *antar*, Latin *inter* and Greek *entera*).

were verified, mentally, emotionally and physically. His method was actually more rigorous than most conventional science. Yet, if we look at the scientific literature, it is not only rare, it is dismissed.

In what way?

People who are labeled authorities and experts on Animal Wildlife generally base their expertise on theories and ideas coming from a culture removed from Nature, “knowledge at a distance” created in an anthropocentric vacuum. For the most part, modern scientific knowledge does not come from experience, but rather from unfounded assumptions and myths⁷. In this way, Western science has an intrinsic bias because it is created in an artificial frame. For Charlie, similar to Indigenous’ perspectives, you can’t afford to have myths. It just doesn’t work. You are immediately confronted with the reality of experience. Gordon Haber is a rare example of scientist who approached learning about Nature similarly to Charlie. Haber studied Wolves in Denali, Alaska, and I talk about him and his deep respect and understanding of Gray Wolf society in my forthcoming book, “The Evolved Nest”⁸. Gordon was very uncommon because, even though he had a PhD and he came from that tradition of remove – the cultural

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7 As it is extensively shown in both “Talking with Bears” and “Carnivore Minds”.

8 Darcia Narvaez and G.A. Bradshaw, 2023. “The Evolved Nest: Nature’s way of raising children and creating connected community”, North Atlantic Books.

agenda of objectification and distancing from Nature – he, like Charlie, relied on his own observations and experience. He was informed by what he studied in school but he was open to learn from his own observations. He stands out in Western science, as he was willing to question the foundations from which he came..

How do you think that this kind of deep questioning is triggered?

I think the specifics depend on the individual, however, one can find common patterns. Anthony Storr, a well-known psychiatrist, wrote a whole book on how and why certain individuals make discoveries or create new worlds in their field by breaking the conventional paradigm from which they are born. What all of those individuals have in common is that they were somehow pulled out or derailed from the collective conveyor belts of the conditioned education that severs our common biological roots and replaces it with an agenda of separation from the rest of Nature. Charles Darwin, for example, had a relational rupture when his mother died.

What about Charlie?

Charlie was dyslexic and had a traumatic experience from a very sadistic schoolteacher. He quit in the second year of high school. I remember him telling me that if he hadn’t done that, he would have died. He knew that if he had continued his soul would have died.

And what about you? Was there an experience that shook you at the core?

No, I don't think so. I just didn't know anything different. The way I was raised was a very accepting, expansive setting, with a lot of inner freedom. If there was something significant, it was more of a reverse trauma. In the sense that I was born and felt whole, and then in my twenties I got into the conveyor belt of academia. Like Charlie, I was seeking truth and social justice. But then, I gradually realized that this was not the agenda of science and academia. The experiences in school and as a scientist caused a rupture. What saved me, in a way, is that I always functioned as an outsider. I was never invested into a particular discipline like most scholars are. My subject matter was truth and to me Western science was just a heuristic, a tool among others, not reality. It is how I am wired. I would say that through my writing and sanctuary, living immersed with Animals, I have come back to that sense of wholeness. That is embodied in the work of my nonprofit, which offers teachings and practices that seek to dissolve this traumatogenic, culturally-conditioned mindset and realign us through mindfulness and meditation - with Nature's ethics and principles. I called that return, Nature Consciousness⁹. That reintegration, that restoration, is me

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⁹ The Kerulos Center for Nonviolence was founded by G.A. Bradshaw in 2008. More about it later. See also <https://kerulos.org/>

coming home. If my mother were alive, she would say: "Sweetie, you are like your old self again".

Working with Charlie was also a form of reintegration, right?

Yes. We worked on various issues over the years and our perspectives – the things we had to say – were like good wine. They aged well with time. Charlie's death was a huge, visceral shock, even though I knew it was happening. I spoke to him the day before he died. He was going in for a procedure and we both knew that the outcome was likely his death. My first response after he died was that I had failed because I had not been able to get the book we were working on published in time. But I promised him and so I had to start all over and write it myself.

As Charlie and I began our conversations, which lasted for over nine years, we focused on using neuropsychology as a heuristic to shine a flashlight on the life and culture of Bears, through Charlie's experience. I used neuropsychology to test and evaluate if what science predicted matched with what he observed - and it did. Bears are not the unpredictable maniacs that most scientists and Wildlife biologists say, but emotionally, highly intelligent and deeply ethical beings. We found that there was scientific evidence but it wasn't enough. Neuroscience – talking about the brains, minds and all that – was insufficient. We really needed something deeper, more holistic and

more encompassing. We needed a way to talk about Charlie and the Bears' world. That required stepping out of the box and opening to a different epistemic and even ontological framing.

It seems to me, and you have talked about this, that the book was becoming not as much about the Bears *per se*, their culture and psyche, or about Charlie's life and work, but it was about the space *in between* them. So it needed a different approach.

Yes. And this was reflected in our process. At one point, we kind of stalled out. I would write stuff and we would go over and Charlie would write and we would go over, but we were not advancing. It was as if we hit a wall. To adequately communicate what Charlie and the Bears saw, did, and experienced, we needed a framework other than a conventional biological model, to make the invisible – the interactive field that Charlie and the Bears occupied – visible. Then, one day, I came across an interview that David Bohm gave at the Bohr Institute in Copenhagen and it changed everything.

As one of the founding fathers of quantum mechanics, David Bohm was another amazing character. I encountered his writings when I was working on the philosophical foundations of physics, many years ago, and I have been appreciating him since then.

Yes, I love him too. My background is in physics and math and I listen to lectures on quantum mechanics as a sort of comfort intellectual food. David Bohm was a wonderful human. Chiefly, I think, because even though he was a dedicated scientist and researcher he didn't stop there - he didn't cookie-cut his thinking to fit the conventional. He took it to the streets, literally. He cared about the world and wanted to share with people the profound implications of quantum physics. I decided to send Bohm's interview to Charlie, and asked him to just take a look. He watched it and called me, totally excited. He said that David Bohm felt like a long lost brother. It was amazing.

Indeed. In the book you quote Charlie talking about David Bohm: "There's a way of being with someone you really trust, and with that trust there is love. Then words aren't really important. You get that feeling with certain people even if you don't know them well. Watching David Bohm's interview was like being with the Bears. I get the same feeling. Questions and answers just flow [...]. Like the Bears, he asks with his eyes and the question is clear."¹⁰ Why do you think that Charlie connected so strongly with him?

I think there are many layers. First,

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¹⁰ G.A Bradshaw 2020. "Talking with Bears: Conversations with Charlie Russell", Rocky Mountain Books, p.261

David Bohm interpreted the theory of quantum mechanics as describing a radically different reality, relational at its core. That was so resonant with how Charlie experienced the world. Both of them were concerned with the space *in between*, as you mentioned, where the subject and object, the observer and the observed are inextricably one. That's how they lived their life. Another aspect is that both Charlie and David based their research on experience. They saw it as part of a whole understanding. For example, Bohm recounted an experience as a child when he was crossing a stream, relating it to an insight about the nature of reality. He described his memory of looking at the stepping-stones surfacing the water. Instead of walking on one stone and assessing the next move before making another step, he walked across in one single unbroken gesture, and it worked. He realized that movement in itself was a state of being. Charlie had practically the same experience. He recalled a specific state of mind when crossing a stream in which being and acting were one, and in complete connection with what was around him. That is how he kept his boots dry and that is how he was with Bears. It is what David Bohm ended up calling "holomovement", an unending process of unfoldment that is never static or complete,

constituting the very essence of reality¹¹. Their descriptions are incredibly similar, even though they are very different people. So, their connection ranges from a broader ontological perspective – the inherently relational essence of reality – to an epistemic perspective – not wanting to know the world but to understand it, through experience.

I relate these parallel experiences at the stream with my practice, my life with creatures in Pianpicollo, where, at times, movement becomes one with the inside and outside world. Being and acting, intention and chance, begin to resonate and blur into each other. That experience can be found and described in a variety of ways. One I recall now is in the book by Robert Pirsig "Zen and the art of motorcycle maintenance". I read it years ago and it keeps reemerging over time. In that book, Pirsig suggests that *quality* can be thought of as a relational event, in which the inner and outer space meet, they are revealed as one, and form is dissolved. It seems to me that what Charlie and David Bohm describe can be seen as occurrences of quality. They cannot be planned. One can only be prepared to greet them.

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11 In Bohm's terms: "Not only everything is changing, but all is flux. That is to say, what is, is the process of becoming itself, while all objects, events, entities, conditions, structures etc, are forms which can be abstracted from this process " David Bohm 1980, "Wholeness and the implicate order", Routledge, p.48.

Yes, they are moments of dissolution – of all the layers of thought, knowledge and perception of separation that have been accumulated and passed down, generation after generation for thousand years, conditioning the human mind. I sense that for David Bohm, and I can probably say with more authority about Charlie and certainly for myself, that the experience is really a re-entry. It is the experience of coming into a reality that has always been there, where we are part of everything and everything is part of us. To talk about these moments is very difficult because by definition they are ineffable and cannot be described with words – the whole cannot be described by the parts. Or as Buddhists say: the finger pointing at the Moon is not the Moon. As we go along this path, we have to be very mindful that there are at least two challenges that we are dealing with. One is that we are using language, which is dualistic, to describe non-dual phenomena. The other is that, as humans, we have to get used to the understanding that every moment is in fact the meeting of the non-dual and the dual, essence and form. Mindfulness or other kinds of spiritual practices can help with that. Animals – and Plants – have the same issue, but I think they are much better at it, they are at peace and live with the intrinsic contradiction. I think that humanity's path is learning how to be aware and comfortable with it. At this point, in my own ontological and epistemic journey, my feeling is that we are having to confront the constructed reality that we live in – based

on certainty, determinism and form – with a “broader” reality which is uncertain, non-deterministic, non-dual. When we dissolve all of the binary categorizations of dualism – mind / body, human / Nature, Animal, Plant, science/spirituality – we find ourselves in a no man's land. We don't have a reference. But that is the point. That is the core, the intersection of David Bohm's work with Charlie's work, with mine, but also with spiritual paths – I refer to Buddhism because that's something I'm more familiar with. All are non-dual. And the fact that things are not necessarily determined, certain, that doesn't even figure in. There is no reference point other than being right there, being present. So I would say that the commonality in these experiences and views is being present, which, in its deepest sense, breaks through all binary categorizations. We could think of a tent pole, the center pole of this tent, which we might refer to as reality. When you raise that tent, the terrain is very different and at first disorienting. When the reference frame changes to the experience of being present – which is a timeless domain – we lose our familiar scaffolding and the meaning of life takes on a very different color.

So that space in between Charlie and the Bears could be thought of as being in that terrain, around that tent pole, which we could refer to as 'Nature', with all the limitations of our dualistic language.

Yes, and that is basically how I see 'Nature': it simply is. Charlie was Nature, with the Bears. It was his home. It was his work. It was everything. He lived fitting in Nature's coherence, which can be thought of as a life of nonviolence. This is a subtle point.

Could you say a little more about what you mean?

A short story that Charlie shared with me might help. Charlie lived in Alberta, and he often went out to walk around in the mountains where he was raised. As he said, he never walked from A to B, he just went out there and wander. One day, in one of his walks, he saw a group of Deer burst out from the woods radiating out. He slowed down, curious of what was going on and saw that the Deer had stopped running and began to graze. He went a little further and saw there was a Puma who had pulled down and killed one of the Deer family members. The Puma was sitting there, eating the dead Deer. With the remaining Deer only a hundred meters away. When he recounted that story to a biologist she said, "The Deer are grazing so close to the Puma because they don't care. They don't have feelings for their family." Most biologists would say something along these lines, that Animals don't have feelings for their family, so if someone dies it's no big deal. This is not the case – neither neuroscience nor experience agrees with this incredibly ridiculous assertion. I have witnessed something similar and I saw the Deer

family watching on as one of their children was killed and being dragged away by a Puma. They were clearly aggrieved. But, first, they couldn't do anything, meaning there was no way they could prevent the killing – and the Fawn was dead. Secondly, it was not what they wanted – far from it – but they understood that it was the Puma's job. There were no hard feelings, so to speak. To me that reflects the nonviolence of the whole system. It retains coherence. That does not mean that Deer don't feel grief. But, as Charlie said, they don't have the luxury to dissociate. They don't have the luxury to mourn. They may still retain the deep sadness and sense of loss. But it all fits in. It is very different when you have to deal with mass hunting and the kind of things that Animals and Plants are subjected to by humans, which have no meaning at all. Most Bears have been shot at, at least once. When they are killed, multiple bullets are found in them. Practically all Bears have witnessed their mothers being shot or being killed. There is no meaning. It breaks Nature's coherence, or in other words, Nature's ethics and principles. That is when you get PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder).

Maybe you can talk a little bit about that, in relation to your seminal work on Elephants and the foundation of The Kerulos Center for Nonviolence?

In 1996, I was with a team of scientists that went to South Africa to study Lions. The country was trying to boost ecotourism

and wanted to bring back the Animals that had been killed off, to populate parks and reserves to make money. While there, I heard about a phenomenon happening in the Wildlife parks – the murder of about one hundred Rhinoceroses. The first assumption was that poachers had killed them to obtain and sell their horns for traditional medicine. But the horns were intact. It turned out that young male Elephants were the ones attacking the Rhinoceroses. The question was, why? I started to wonder who these Elephants were, what was going on in their minds and what was happening to them. I wanted to understand them. I applied what I knew about the human mind to Elephants and came up readily with a diagnosis of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). This led me to establish the field known as trans-species psychology – which is the open statement, only tacitly acknowledged in science, that all Animals including humans have essentially the same mind, brains, and capacities for thinking, feelings etc. In fact, the use of nonhuman Animals for experiments is based on this model of a single brain, mind and behavior across species.

PTSD is the only diagnosis of a mental disorder with an external cause; it happens because something has happened to you. The Elephants who committed the murders had witnessed mass killings of their families, and multiple traumas. The Rhinoceroses' killings were a consequence of the breakdown of Elephant culture and minds. I tell this story in my book

“Elephants on the Edge”. What is happening to Elephants and ALL Wildlife is a radical breach in Nature. What humans do - killing, torture etc – is not in Nature’s rulebook. It violates Life. It does not fit in the Elephants' and other Animals' sense of meaning and coherence, their Umwelt, existential narrative. PTSD is a natural response to unnatural conditions. Most people are not taking that into account. When a Bear attacks someone, the majority of time it is because he is or she is traumatized. You can look at it in purely scientific terms, very conventional science: from an evolutionary perspective, or epigenetic perspective, they are merely adapting to the environment. Animals are being forced to live in conditions to which they were not prepared and that they did not evolve to live in. They had to make this huge evolutionary jump to conditions that break the coherence of their world. That differential is what you can call the propensity for trauma. So all this led to founding my nonprofit, The Kerulos Center for Nonviolence, a sanctuary, a home to rescued Animals and a center for what we call contemplative activism, for the purpose of ending violence against Animals and promoting a radical ontological transformation of humans to nonviolence.

Using your scientific work on PTSD as a heuristic, as you mentioned, we could say that Charlie went on to demonstrate that in absence of trauma – in a place where Bears' master narrative was

relatively intact - humans could in fact live peacefully with them, right?

Yes, exactly. He went to live with Bears in the Kamchatka Peninsula for a decade. He chose that place because, relative to Canada and North America's Grizzlies Bears there seemed to be historically free of the mass hunting and persecution. He learned later that there was, in fact, a history of hunting but nothing like here, and in Europe. Relatively speaking, it was still fairly intact. His long-term personal experiment is remarkable. He was able to do raise ten traumatized Brown Bear orphans – whose mothers had been killed – and enable them to live well in their natural society and homeland. He learned through profound personal change. He took the time to understand, to listen to Bears. As he said, not many people are willing to do that, they mostly just want to get things done, get the data, the money and privilege that goes with it.

And by taking that time to understand and be changed, the space between him and the Bears was filled with trust, which brought to unforeseeable and unexplainable events from the point of view of conventional science. Maybe you can talk a little bit about one of them, about Brandy?

Yes. In his second year in Kamchatka, Charlie adopted for the first time three orphan Brown Bear cubs from a local zoo, where they were going to be killed

because they were growing up and no longer seemed entertaining to humans. After extensive research on the few existing similar attempts, Charlie decided to take them in. He brought them to his cabin in the wilderness to help them grow, become functional wild Bears and return to their homes. As the cubs were growing up, a female Brown Bear with her own cubs began to show interest in Charlie. One day, one of her cubs ran around so that Charlie ended up in between the cub and his mother. All of science says that this is a sure way for triggering a Bear attack. But, Brandy, as Charlie named her, remained completely at ease. She began enjoying their company on walks, waiting for them when they lagged. She made sure that Charlie was not left behind. Eventually, he ended up inserting himself in the line of Bears, taking the position behind Brandy and ahead of her cubs. Then, one day, out of the blue, Brandy came with her cubs and left. That was it. She left her cubs with Charlie and went off doing Bear work. And there he was with his own cubs and her cubs together: an incredible event, a breakthrough of trust. Of course, as scientists have it, a mother Bear would never leave her cubs, unless she sequestered them for safety purposes. But that day she just left her children with a human. As Charlie said, Brandy offered no invitation or questions, asking: "Are you interested in the job?" She just appointed him nanny. It lasted for seven years, three sets of Brandy's children. She would go off leaving Charlie in charge and then

come back later in the day. In my view, it speaks of her extraordinary personality, like Charlie. She wanted to get to know this guy. It is an example of how non-humans live an appreciation of diversity, but without separation and difference. There is so much more porosity in Nature, so much more fluidity. Over time, her trust for Charlie grew to the point of allowing him to make mistakes. In other words, she began teaching him about Bear ethics and etiquette. One day, Charlie recalled laughing, Brandy came down the hill roaring at him and in no uncertain terms told him he was being disrespectful. She was working, trying to get Salmon, and there he was, getting caught up playing with the kids and disrupting her work. Year after year, she was actively mentoring Charlie. He learned from her nuances about how to raise orphan Bear cubs. That is how he was grafted into the rootstock of Brown Bear wisdom.

The story of Charlie and Brandy is not a romanticized Disney's picture. It speaks at a deep level. It dissolves the Western narrative that Nature runs on the survival of the fittest. It is not about survival: it's life. Yes, in order to live, you have to survive. But living is much vaster. It is an open-ended process of mutual transformation. It is inherently relational. It takes everyone into account. It unfolds in a world cohered by love.