

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

Rethinking One Health, Part 2

Author's Note: As I wrote at the beginning of this series,¹ my commitment to One Health stretched back a decade or more before Beau and I went to Alaska. In fact, the theme of One Medicine-One Biology was the subject of a paper I presented to the Cornell President's Council in 2000. However, like most people, my understanding was primarily restricted to comparative medicine and zoonotic diseases, with passing interest in the relationship animals and humans have with the environment. During my trip with Beau at the end of my deanship in 2007, I recognized something else, a concept so fundamental to the human-animal bond that it changed my whole outlook on One Health. It would later be defined by Dr. Kate Hodgson, a veterinarian at the University of Toronto, using a new term, *zoeyia*.²

Donald F. Smith

By Dr. Donald F. Smith, with contributions from Dr. Kate Hodgson

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Beau served not only as the conduit for my reconnection with the natural world. What became even more important as the trip went on, he supplied the social lubricant that allowed me to contact and in some cases fundamentally connect with the people we met on the trip. I was better able to understand the people and their core values through their connections with Beau. And that is one of the most beautiful and substantive gifts that companion animals give us: the reason and method to connect to our world.

Whether stopping at the small town of Weyburn, Saskatchewan, hiking to a glacier south of Tok, Alaska, or relaxing in the lobby of the Anchorage Hilton, fellow travellers asked one question over all others, "You're making this trip alone?" My standard, and at first almost knee-jerk answer was, "No, Beau and I are traveling together." During the first few days, the response was more-or-less in jest, with a wink and a smile.

But as the trip continued, and as I began to realize how Beau was making my journey of self-discovery more profound, I occasionally took time to share these sentiments with fellow travellers. And they shared their experiences with me. It was then that I began to actually believe what I was espousing, that sharing the trip with my dog increased my self-awareness.

Beau also assuaged my impatience and increased my sensitivity, and even my kindness to strangers. I became less intense and was more authentic.



*Each time I stopped and got out, Beau would slide over and occupy the driver's seat
(Photo by the author, 2007)*



*Beau and a 17-year-old named Hunter in Minnesota
(Photo by the author, 2007)*

On our third day during one of our many stops, Beau led me to the edge of a vacated ballpark in a rundown part of a western Michigan town where some preteen boys appeared to be looking for mischief. After an awkward introduction—what middle school boy wants to talk to a 50-something man!—they realized that Beau was nonjudgmental, seeing them as boys, not as troublemakers. After playing for a while, and with Beau's tongue hanging almost to the ground from the vigorous exercise on a warm August afternoon, the boys left their desire for troublemaking behind and started home. I took note of the experience and later realized it was a part of a larger issue of how pets can benefit those out of the mainstream of society.

One of the few caustic people I met on the journey was the gatekeeper to the Kluane Museum of Natural History in tiny hamlet of Burwash Landing.³ His demeanor was ugly when I asked to

use the bathroom before paying the modest admission fee. The bushes across the road worked just fine as an alternative and temporarily lowered the temperature between us. It was not until Mr. “Long-ago-transplant-from-Toronto” met Beau that his attitude softened and he shared the personal challenges of a man whose life story had some unpleasant twists and turns. Pets foster engagement, spawning social interactions more authentic than Facebook.

They can also allay fear, anger and bitterness. On the frustrating evening in Valleyview, Alberta, when I walked out of the unkempt overpriced hotel and forfeited a night’s stay, I left my anger at the door and found the experience of sleeping under the stars in a field of clover fulfilling and joyful.⁴ The spontaneity of traveling with a dog sometimes affords opportunities to live with equanimity during periods of upheaval.

Not surprisingly, Beau created opportunities for social interactions with people of all ages and backgrounds, and I was able to investigate perceptions of veterinarians under different circumstances. Because I rarely identified myself as a veterinarian on this trip, I was able to ask naïve-sounding questions about our profession and get unfettered responses, many of which were surprising especially in the more remote areas of the country.

I also actually believe that the accompaniment of Beau sharpened my senses. Before I left home, I had packed a box of CDs of Beethoven and Bach (old favorites) and a cluster of unfamiliar music to stretch my mind (from heavy Wagner to Schoenberg’s twelve-tone). After the first day, they remained unopened in an obscure corner of the jeep. I found they were too distracting to the world we were passing into and to the swirling thoughts and questions in my mind.

Traveling with Beau was like driving with a wide-eyed child. Every sight, sound and smell, every bend in the road, every animal sighted was a new experience including those we had witnessed many times before. His enthusiasm fed mine, and he fueled the embers of youth that lingered deep inside me.

In September 2012, I visited Tuskegee University to deliver a keynote address on One Health to veterinary and nursing students and their faculty. After talking about zoonotic diseases and comparative medicine, I plunged into the concept of zoeyia, the third leg of the One Health stool. As defined by Dr. Hodgson, zoeyia refers to the evidence-based positive benefits to human health from interacting with animals.⁵

I talked about the role of animals in promoting human health in areas such as encouraging exercise, decreasing risk factors of heart disease, addressing the barriers of social isolation, among others. To close, I talked about what it had been like to drive across the country with your hand on your dog’s fur for several thousand miles. “Could you imagine holding your spouse’s hand for 30% of your three-week trip,” I asked.

As the laughter dissipated, I continued, “Now suppose I was diagnosed with terminal cancer tomorrow and had just a few months to live. I love my wife and my family and would want to

feel their presence, but it would be Beau who would lie beside me during my final weeks and hours. Not only would I require less attention from family and less medical care from nurses, but I would be less financial burden to the state.” The room grew very still as I explained that I was referring to the pragmatic aspects of end-of-life care, the need for less pain or anxiety medication, as well as less attention from medical personnel.

Though veterinarians are familiar with the unspecified concept of zooeyia (often having experienced positive effects of animals in their own lives) they are not trained and prepared in veterinary college nor do they always—in a practical sense—include zooeyia in their approach to practice on a day-to-day basis.

In the meantime, the medical profession and the mainstream media are becoming aware of the potential of pets without being prepared to handle the complexity of the relationships. The positive attributes of pets and the environment are real, already reducing health care costs and increasing enjoyment of life in ways we recognize but don't yet enumerate. There is a growing need to establish a practical and collaborative One Health approach between veterinarians and human health professionals.

I believe it is time for veterinary medicine to assemble the third leg of the One Health stool. Or shall we be watching from the shadows as the medical profession awkwardly assumes responsibility for that component of human and animal health?

¹ Smith, Donald F. Traveling with Beau: My 34-day Trip to a Deeper Understanding of One Health. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*, September 9, 2014.

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Smith, Donald F. The Long Journey Home: Traveling with Beau. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*, November 12, 2014.

² Hodgson, Kate and Marcia Darling. Zooeyia: An essential component of “One Health”. *Can Vet J.* Feb 2100: 52(2): 189-191.

³ Smith, Donald F. The Long Journey Home: Traveling with Beau. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. November 12, 2014.

⁴ Smith, Donald F. The Texas of Canada: Traveling with Beau. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. October 29, 2014.

⁵ Hodgson, Kate and Marcia Darling. Zooeyia, *Ibid*.

KEYWORDS::

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Saskatchewan
Kluane Museum of Natural History
Valleyview, Canada
Tuskegee University
Zooeyia
Kate Hodgson
Marcia Darling

LEADING QUESTION:

What is the “third leg” for One Health in addition to comparative medicine and zoonotic diseases?

META-SUMMARY:

The author’s travels with his dog, Beau, on the Alaska Highway, opens his eyes to zoeyia, the essential third component for One Health in addition to comparative medicine and zoonotic diseases.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS:

Dr. Donald F. Smith, Dean Emeritus of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, had a passion for the value of the history of veterinary medicine as a gateway for understanding the present and the future of the profession.

Throughout his many professional roles from professor of surgery, to Department Chair of Clinical Sciences, Associate Dean of Education and of Academic Programs and Dean, he spearheaded changes in curriculum, clinical services, diagnostic services and more. He was a diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons and a member of the National Academy of Practices. Most recently he played a major role in increasing the role of women in veterinary leadership.

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine is one of his projects where he was able to share his vast knowledge of the profession.

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