

6.5 Minutes With...Transcript
Barbara J. King
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Nicole Welk-Joerger, C21 Deputy Director: You're listening to 6.5 Minutes with C21 – an audio introduction to the topics, experts, and leaders who take part in the conversations hosted by the Center for 21st Century Studies.

I'm Nicole Welk-Joerger, Deputy Director of the Center and the interviewer in this episode.

Earlier this semester I spoke with Barbara J. King, emerita professor of anthropology at William and Mary, whose most recent publication *Animals' Best Friends: Putting Compassion to Work for Animals in Captivity and in the Wild* focuses on the everyday emotional lives of animals.

How might we approach the topics of loneliness isolation and connection with consideration for the experience of nonhuman animals?

Barbara J. King: When I talk with students, I make the distinction between human uniqueness and human exceptionalism. Clearly, we humans are unique [00:02:30] species, we have some capacities that other animals don't. But equally unique are bison and trout and cats and chimpanzees its evolutionary theory that compels us to understand that all species are unique. And that's great, but what goes wrong, is when people go further than that recognition and suggest that, because we have language, because we live in complicated societies we are somehow not only unique but special, more intelligent, more emotional, more intricately organized.

On the perspective of human exceptionalism then, we're considered to be the animals who love and grieve and we're different than everyone else and that's what I reject so. My work over the last 10 or 12 years has been very much focused on identifying love and grief in the animal kingdom. And we know, and I really mean know we're not just proposing that grief is a widespread phenomenon. Animals who lose a mate or another family member or a close friend may go through a period of mourning. We know this in orcas chimpanzees, monkeys, ducks, geese, house cats, giraffe dogs, I could go on. I haven't directly tackled the question of loneliness. But I think it's almost embedded in a sense, because as I think about it loneliness can involve two separate types of situations in one we or the animal and question may feel very physically and emotionally cut off from others kind of globally. Perhaps you live alone, although, of course, not everyone who lives alone is lonely perhaps you live with others, but you don't feel emotionally connected with them. The other sense may be loneliness and yearning for a particular individual. So you are separated from someone through death or some other mechanism and you have other friends, other family members, but you're lonely for that individual.

In thinking about these two situations, I can really readily map them on to other than human animals. So let's take the first one. We might think of the elephant Happy, who is very much in the news she is held at Bronx Zoo and has been for numerous years and an enclosure alone. We might think of a monkey about whom I write and speak frequently his name is Cornelius and he's held in a primate research center in Wisconsin, who's all alone in a cage and he sees other monkeys but he is a very, very social being is [NOTE: has been mostly] alone in this cage 24/7 year after year since 2010. We might think of an animal shelter where there's an older dog who's passed over repeatedly as the younger animals are adopted, and it would seem to me a perfectly legitimate use of the term loneliness in these various cases.

Nicole: Nonhumans or other-than-human animals are often cited as potential aides, who can help humans combat conditions like loneliness. What are some things that we might want to keep in mind about the relationships we build with other-than-human animals?

Barbara: So, what I look for is a type of relationship that has reciprocity. Now, of course, when we're talking about our animal companions at home, this isn't going to be comprehensive reciprocity. I mean, the cat is not going to get up and bring me food as I would with her, and the dog is not going to walk me down the street, but I mean emotional reciprocity. So, if we ask an animal to be an emotional support animal either very formally with certification or informally at home, I think it's incumbent upon us to make sure that we are offering a lot to that animal. And this bounds so conversation about animals and emotional support, I think, to domestic animals because we don't want to bring wild animals into our homes or our lives and ask that of them.

We should even think about things like taking selfies with wild animals. That often puts them in danger if they act in some way that's interpreted as aggressive. They're, the ones who pay the price for that, so I think that sometimes, when people talk about the potential to help animals combat loneliness. there's too much focus on us... and I say that with empathy. I think it's very important to find ways to ameliorate human loneliness. So maybe I will end with a positive example. Let us think about an older person who is no able not able to go out as much anymore, perhaps a younger person who faces disability. There is a wonderful opportunity if the person is able to adopt that older animal in the shelter, who is lonely who wants companionship and both animals, the human and the nonhuman animal both win from that. So, we just want to make sure that we're thinking about all the ethics with empathy for lonely people empathy for lonely animals, and making sure we are trying our hardest to do the right thing.

Nicole: To further engage with this interview, other conversations, and the participatory research and reading activities for Lonely No More, please visit our website at uwm.edu/c21. If not there, we hope to catch you when you have another 6.5 Minutes to spare.