Ashley and Thorpuppy

I had been seeing Ashley since the summer of 2009. The only reason she comes to therapy is because she is court-ordered to do so as part of her probation that she attained from an assault she committed while she was “under the influence” and absent without leave from her parental home one weekend. Ashley states that she will not engage in therapy. She makes comments like: “All therapists are stupid. I hate people.” Despite her negative attitude toward therapy, Ashley has shown up for most of her appointments, stays the full hour and talks about important issues in her life. I have very little therapeutic agenda in sessions because I have learned that if I begin to act like “a therapist”, she will pull away; maybe drop out. Ashley has been around the therapeutic block and I am her 10th therapist.

I do animal-assisted therapy (AAT). The reason I choose to work with animals in my practice is because they are often times effective for helping to bridge the gap with children and youth who are “hard to reach” or resistant to engaging in the therapeutic process. According to Minatrea and Wesley (2008), AAT positively influences the counselor and client relationship with participants who are addicted to drugs. There are many other scientifically based studies which provide evidence that animals help to alleviate anxiety for children and youth in stressful situations like therapy settings, that they can increase social contact and increase feelings of attachment to not just animals but humans as well (often the counselor who is facilitating the AAT sessions). So far though, my attempt at including animals into our session had not gone well as Ashley claimed to be allergic to cats, didn’t like my black lab dogs and was “too cold” to work with the horses. I was at a loss.

I truly believe that everyone wants help. I refuse to believe that people are happy getting in trouble at home, at school and with the law. I hoped that somewhere deep down inside, Ashley was coming for reasons other than a court order. I continued to try by allowing her to direct our sessions and allowing her to carry out her court-ordered obligations with me, even though she was sometimes impolite and our hourly sessions lasted a lifetime for both of us.

Then one day Ashley did something profoundly brilliant. She brought HER dog to our session. At first she insisted on many rules that had to be in place if HER dog was to stay. For example, my cats had to go, my dogs were not allowed in and I was not allowed to touch her dog. I agreed. Through her interactions with her dog, I got to see a loving, flexible, understanding teenage girl. She did not get angry when her dog didn’t listen to her, she set firm and assertive healthy boundaries and she showed appropriate affection to him when he sought it from her. Ashley appeared to have wonderful social skills with her dog but when interacting with people helpers and her mother she was rude, hurtful, aggressive and volatile.

Without encouragement or suggestion, Ashley continued to bring her dog to therapy sessions. As time progressed, Ashley allowed her dog to sit with me for the duration of the sessions. At first she would try to get him back but when he wanted to stay, she allowed it.

In our session last week, we could see my two black labs begging to come in with their big brown eyes. It was minus 15 degrees. I said nothing. Ashley said “I think they want to come in.” I said: “Only if you want them to.” I had been querying whether Ashley had empathy outside of her own dog for some time now. “Yes, please let them in. But I don’t like big black dogs, especially labs because they are not fluffy.” I let the dogs in and my 7 year old Thorpuppy went right over and laid down next to the couch Ashley was laying on. I told her I would move him. Surprisingly, she said: “No, that’s ok.” Thorpuppy lifted his head and peered into her eyes, their heads were almost touching. Ashley reached out and began to stroke his head. Thorpuppy let out a big sigh and so did I. Ashley looked at me and said: “Maybe I don’t hate all big black labs.” I silently thanked God. Ashley’s biggest obstacle is her “box-like, all-or-
nothing” thinking. Thorpuppy may have just helped change one angle of one wall of one box. I wasn’t sure it was possible, but the wisdom of a little girl and a big black dog are helping me understand.