

Reading #2
A Spirit Apart: Elizabeth Atwood Lawrence

The biography of this course's founder was published by Kathryn Levy Feldman in 2005 under the title *A Spirit Apart: Elizabeth Atwood Lawrence* (Phoenix: Heritage Publishers). It begins with reference to the lines from Keats that suggested the title for this book:

And other spirits there are standing apart
Upon the forehead of the age to come;
These, these will give the world another heart,
And other pulses. Hear ye not the hum
Of might workings—?
Listen awhile, ye nations, and be dumb.

Dr. Lawrence was, as this biography shows so well, a wide-ranging, remarkable pioneer of the human mind and spirit. This is described further in the Preface to *A Spirit Apart*:

Whenever we attempt to think about our relationships with the living beings around us, we stand on the shoulders of pioneers like Dr. Elizabeth “Betty” Lawrence. This important fact isn't always well known, as the following story reminds us.

An Anglican bishop was asked by his son, “If philosophers are so smart, why don't they rule the world?” The father replied, “They do ... five hundred years later.”

Many people won't yet know the name of this distinguished but shy scholar, or her remarkable range of thought and subtle but lasting influence on people in different walks of life. But in years to come they will likely be affected by this woman of surpassing though subtle achievement. Indeed, many of today's “cutting edge” thinkers about “animals” (that is, our nonhuman fellow beings on this earth) know that this wonderful woman's work was a tapestry of active compassion, meaningful insights, personal relationships, and rich, wide-ranging scholarship.

As a pioneer in veterinary medicine and as an educator at Tufts University School of Veterinary Medicine, Dr. Lawrence gently modeled for students and colleagues how to think more clearly and open-mindedly about both familiar and unfamiliar animals. As importantly, her compassion and conscience-bound thinking also extended to *other cultures* where our fellow humans often exemplify well how fully human it is to care about the nonhuman lives around us. Today ethicists, ecologists, behaviorists, cognitive ethologists, theologians, lawyers and many

others are among those who gratefully acknowledge that “Betty’s” work was formative for their own attempts to engage fully the nonhuman lives in and around our human communities.

What is perhaps most beautiful of all, however, is something altogether personal about this very full life. In fascinating ways Dr. Lawrence’s most remarkable achievements, outdistancing her influential books and essays, may have been her personal relationships—a loving marriage and children, and both human and nonhuman friends who knew her arts of healing and education.

This singular life of commitment and exploration was suffused with compassion and intellectual curiosity, and if you explore it in detail, you will savor its most salient and astonishing feature—it is possible for a human being, supported by a loving spouse and family, to explore an extraordinary range of our human interactions with nonhumans. When considering such a life, one cannot help but wish that, as the Anglican bishop suggested to his son, our society will in five hundred years reflect the values and commitments of Betty Lawrence and her rich understanding of our world—informed, fine-grained, and at the same time deeply connected to the life around each of us.¹

In so many ways, all of Dr. Lawrence’s work—whether in veterinary medicine, anthropology, or the new field of human-animals studies—emphasized the importance of noticing and taking seriously our interactions with nonhumans *themselves*. She saw this as an integral feature of any true understanding of nonhumans—she also understood seeing nonhumans in their actual context and social lives as part of humans’ special connection to the natural world. For example, at page 18 of *A Spirit Apart*, Dr. Lawrence’s personal and scholarly work on the therapeutic features of knowing nonhumans (including her article “Wild Birds: Therapeutic Encounters and Human Meanings”) is described in detail.

Dr. Lawrence went beyond merely observing other animals, of course. She was a healer of remarkable abilities, and is even mentioned by Monty Roberts (known widely as “The Horse Whisperer”) as one of his models. She was also known as a scholar capable of wide-ranging interdisciplinary syntheses—her work is full of insights about our complex history and abilities with the Earth’s other animals. At page 66, the biographer includes

¹ The preface is by Paul Waldau.

Dr. Lawrence's insightful distinction of the important "human-animal bond" from the broader topic of this course, "human-animal relationships."

[quoting Dr. Lawrence] "Human-animal relationships is a much broader topic than the human-animal bond. The latter usually refers to health benefits for people: animals helping the handicapped in hospitals, the elderly in nursing homes, or lonely people institutions or at home." While legions of books, including, in 1993, Elizabeth Marshall Thomas' *The Secret Life of Dogs* (which Betty reviewed in *The Interactions Bibliography* in December of that same year), have been written as a testament to the health benefits that pets can provide, and there is even an American Association of Human-Animal Bond Veterinarians, Betty was much more interested in the cultural aspects of human-animal interaction, across societies and over time.

Dr. Lawrence was also a *woman* pioneer in a profession that, until this millennium, has been male-dominated (the demographics of the profession now or next year will reflect, for the first time ever, that there are more women in the veterinary profession than men). At pages 32 and 66-67, *A Spirit Apart* raises interesting issues about this complex phenomenon—could it be the case that understanding women's relationship to the nonhuman world will be a principal means of understanding the future of veterinary profession?

This brief description of Dr. Betty Atwood Lawrence's contributions to veterinary medicine, Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine, and the study of nonhuman animals is best concluded by her own words:

The rapidly expanding scope of contemporary veterinary medicine demands broader channels of professional concern as well as increasing recognition of the interrelatedness of human beings and animals. All veterinarians, as mediators between humankind and nature, have profound responsibilities and unique opportunities to make a difference on behalf of both animals and people in the coming century.²

In this course, we will suggest that veterinarians (and veterinary students, of course) must notice and take seriously two related phenomena—the realities of nonhuman animals *and* the nature and scope of humans' interactions with other living beings. Learning about

² These appear at page 67 of *A Spirit Apart*—they are taken from "A Woman Veterinary Student in the 50s: The view from the Millennium." *Anthrozoos*, volume 10, no. 4, 1997, 160-169, at 167.

both is required if one is to meet our TCSVM community's commitments to science and our commitments to ethics. These two important human endeavors are the cornerstones of the Ethics and Values Signature Program, the oldest of the signature programs here at Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine.

Thus, whatever form of veterinary practice you ultimately choose—whether laboratory animal work, food and resource animal practice, a concentration on wildlife, or companion animal-centered work—you will need to notice and take seriously the realities of the animals before you. Both science and ethics are remarkable in their special commitments to accomplish this task—Betty Lawrence's work reflects well that in both cases the realities of other animals *must be seen* in order to carry out the essence of the veterinary, scientific and ethical enterprises.