

### 3 Can't we ditch the jackal and just be giraffes?

During my early acquaintance with the jackal and the giraffe, I thought the idea was to do my utmost to become a giraffe. I thought it would be wonderful if, from now on, I were to be understanding of everyone and everything. All I had to do was stick to observations and turn my attention to feelings and needs. And stop making demands, of course.

I found however that it wasn't that easy to act upon this resolution. I'm a brilliant 'interpreter' for instance: I tend to think I know what someone else is thinking or intends to say. This struck me as a good place to make a start and I took a decision. From now on, I was going to stick to the facts, not fill things in any more, which only leads to misunderstandings, as in the following example.

I do *qi gong*, a movement discipline from China, and a dear friend of mine once told me that *qi gong* is bad for the health. He thought it would be better if I stopped. Some time later, he asked how it was going with my *qi gong*. I immediately went on the defensive: he obviously wanted to know if I had stopped yet and if not, if I had already become ill. At least, that's what I thought he wanted to know. It didn't occur to me that he might be asking out of interest. My friend was astonished at my fierce reaction. He had long ago accepted that *qi gong* was apparently my 'thing' and had become curious.

When, as in this example, I still used to make the occasional interpretation, I used to take myself to task about it. I was

impatient at myself: I knew how nonviolent communication was done now, so I should just get on with it.

Fortunately, I arrived at the insight that by rigorously ceasing to make interpretations, I was betraying a part of myself. I was denying myself the pleasure I had experienced when I concocted entire stories about the people I observed. Like at a camp-site, when I saw two young couples talking to each other, while their children, both aged about two, played near by. I imagined that they had just met each other and were talking about their children. I was sure they all four had busy jobs and were now enjoying just relaxing and chatting.

When I allow myself to fantasize in this way, I am also training my powers of observation. As I watch and muse, I wonder where I get the idea that they all four work or that they're just enjoying relaxing. I don't want to know if it's true. It's a game. At such times, I'm enjoying my jackal, who thinks he knows exactly how things work.

I am gradually learning to call in my giraffe as well, as soon as I notice that I'm losing connection with myself or someone else or that an argument is threatening - as in the *qi gong* example. When I went on the defensive on that occasion, my friend became angry. I put on my giraffe ears and said: "Are you angry because you think I'm on the defensive?" This gave him the space to tell me that he felt hurt. He felt sad at the idea of me thinking all this time that he disapproved of me practicing *qi gong*. He wanted recognition for the fact that he respected my choices and was genuinely interested in what I did. Thanks to my giraffe, our connection was restored and the confrontation did not degenerate into a hail of poisoned arrows.

I didn't give my jackal the opportunity of growing into a full-blown adult jackal. While he was still a baby jackal, had

only just taken an interest and only just begun to splutter his protest, my giraffe had already bent his head down close to him. My giraffe gave him some attention, provided for his needs and he was able to go back to sleep again.



If we do this, the jackal is able to fulfill the function I think he is supposed to fulfill. He sends out alarm-signals when needs are unfulfilled and the giraffe picks them up and takes appropriate action.

It sounds so simple. The jackal announces himself, the giraffe talks to him and harmony is restored. Before the giraffe is able to do this reliably however, he needs some practice.

The giraffe too, starts out as a baby. At birth, he radiates only Love. Ever seen a baby wake up in the middle of the night and send out signals to its parents in the vein of: "Oi, lazybones, get up! Can't you hear I'm hungry? Your duty is to take care of me whether you like it or not"? No, babies just make requests. By crying, they let us know they are hungry. A baby will still be happy to see his parents even if they come to him only after an hour. No accusations, just love.

As, later in life and now consciously, we get in touch with our giraffes, we may be pretty clumsy with them to begin with. Giraffes will want to respond to their surroundings with understanding but are as yet unable to always find the appropriate words. They start out falteringly and to a raging jackal, may only manage: "Er, are you feeling irritated and do you, er, need understanding?"

But giraffes grow up and at a certain point, reach puberty. They understand that it's okay to stand up for themselves and do so with vitality. I meet some 'teenage' giraffes like this in the course of my work. Imagine fifteen people sitting in a circle. One person interrupts the conversation with the words: "I'm not feeling connected. I need connection." And then looks around with an expectant air as if to say: "Make the connection happen, now." Or he responds to a remark someone makes with: "What need makes you say that?"

And this 'teenager' doesn't want to listen to anything else until a satisfactory answer has been given.

What he fails to realize is that while he has gone into his own inner process by making contact with his own feelings and needs, he has as yet made no contact with the feelings and needs of others. He doesn't realize that he can restore his connection with the group by opening himself up to what is alive in the group. And if that doesn't work, by waiting for a suitable moment to speak.

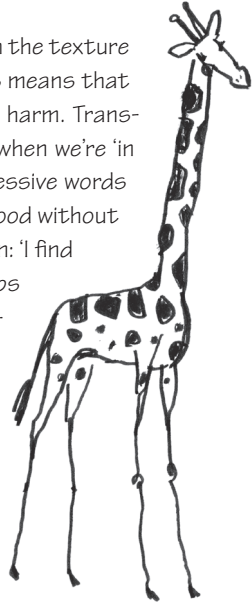
A 'teenage' giraffe who, out of a conviction that his feelings have never counted, has always kept his feelings to himself, can at this stage of development, be quite effluvious about his irritation or his sadness, whether others are interested or not.

I also know some 'teenage' jackals. You might think a baby jackal, listened to directly with giraffe ears, would be satisfied with a quick grumble. In practice, I have noticed that when a jackal is given space, he sometimes has the tendency to let all his inhibitions go and spit venom. Bottled up judgments and irritations emerge, unrelated to the moment. My giraffe responds to this with a smile and quietly continues to translate the poison into feelings and needs. It's easy to see when I've done enough. There's a big sigh or the person's body relaxes: in other words, his or her giraffe takes over and restores the connection with what's alive at that moment.

To return to the resolution with which I started this chapter (to be understanding of everyone at all times): what I also tried to do initially was to stop making judgments and every time I caught myself doing it, I'd beat myself up about it. I was actually judging myself, being a jackal to myself. I was unaware of this and started feeling increasingly weighed down and discouraged.

The giraffe has a strong, tough tongue, with the texture of something akin to rubber or plastic. This means that he can chew on thorns without coming to harm. Translated into human terms, this means that when we're 'in our giraffe' we're able to 'chew up' the aggressive words of the jackal and turn them into harmless food without damaging ourselves. Think of the expression: 'I find what you're saying hard to digest'. Perhaps the messages we hear will become more digestible if we get ourselves fitted out with giraffe tongues.

Giraffe tongues are also long, so they can easily fold themselves around the long thorns of the acacia tree. They don't run away from the jackal's vitriol. They surround it with love.



In the word 'jackal' we find the word 'jack'. The different sources I consulted did not agree on the etymological link between 'jackal' and 'jack', but I enjoy playing with associations.



The English language is full of 'jacks', often with a wicked or negative connotation. To mention a few, a 'Jack-a-dandy' stands for a 'silly person', a 'Jack-in-office' is a self-important civil servant and a 'Jack-in-the-box' is a little devil. The Dutch verb 'jakhalsen' (=to jackal) is used in the East Friesian dialect for 'to long for something strongly'. I find recognition in these expressions for the idea that a jackal is a villainous, stupid or silly person who longs for the fulfillment of his needs for autonomy, appreciation, rest and space or any other need.

In jackal society the social unit is that of a monogamous pair which defends its territory from other pairs. These territories are defended by vigorously chasing intruding rivals away and marking landmarks around the territory with urine and feces.