

Cats & Kids: A Reflection On What It Means To Know

by Karly Mozdzen

I have a cat. Her name is Ellie, and I talk to her every day. It helps that she also likes to talk. She chirps and meows constantly. I, being the illustrious cat owner that I am (or crazy cat lady, you choose what you think fits best), chirp and meow right back. I know she is talking to me and whether or not she understands me remains to be seen. However, I am hoping that the majority of people who have a pet are willing to admit that they talk to their pets and that they believe there is mutual understanding between both parties.

In Shelby Van Pelt's stunning novel "Remarkably Bright Creatures," she explores what it means to be intelligent and how different beings in the world interact and understand each other (kind of like me and Ellie). I had some reflections about connection while experiencing the relationship that grew between Marcellus and Tova. Alongside Tova, I learned that Marcellus is a highly intelligent octopus. He understands the human language, knows about the different aquarium tenants, and can even identify individual fingerprints of the aquarium patrons. Marcellus is smart! The connection that grows between human and octopus is not something I ever considered. Which had me questioning: what does it mean to truly know someone or something?

To help myself reflect on what it means to know someone, I looked at my career in education. I've been a middle school teacher for thirteen years. You read that right. Thirteen years! It's quite a long time to spend with prepubescent children who are just learning the importance of showering and deodorant (and I teach them these things. You're welcome, world). Anyway, my reflection led me to thinking about my students and how well I know them. If I only looked at their test scores, I wouldn't really know them. If I look at how many behavior referrals they have, I wouldn't really know them. If I saw them walking in the hall with a group of friends, I still wouldn't really know them. The stuff you see on the outside doesn't give you the whole picture. This is what Tova and Marcellus taught me.

The only way to truly get to know someone is to engage with them. To ask them questions. To listen to their life experiences. To walk with them. To connect with them. Knowing someone is like peeling an onion—there are so many layers. Each layer is as important as the core, because each layer makes up the whole person. But, we have to be invited into the core. We will only be able to know as much as someone shares with us. Furthermore, our experience shapes who we are and how vulnerable we are willing to be with others. People have to open up and let us in for us to connect. Obviously, animals cannot necessarily share with us their deepest thoughts, but if we try to engage, we can only benefit from the experience.

We are surrounded by others everyday, beings of all kinds. So, do we truly know the others around us? Well, we have to do our best to try! I will still talk to my cat even though I may never know what she is thinking. I will continue to interpret her non-verbal behaviors as love, even if she is swiping the remote off the coffee table. Intelligence means a willingness to learn and to grow. To truly know anything means to understand that you don't know everything. We must constantly seek knowledge and learn about others while keeping an open mind. Above all else, we should always be kind and brave.