

Calling or conduit?

It literally fell out of the sky landing at my feet. This fluffy, flapping fledgling, black and grey, swarking, only encouraging my dog to crush more of its fragile frame.

It has happened to me all of my life. Injured, orphaned and wayward animals find me.

They stay for days, weeks, sometimes months. Not all with successful outcomes.

I have been their physical conduit, providing protection and care and a ticket to freedom, or a car drive home.

Others have said that I look for animals to care for, and that it is not the animals who find me.

But how do you explain a large cow lying in our carport with her blind, newborn calf asleep hard against the gate to the house, covered in the frost of the early spring night?

I had to cover it with a blanket.

I had to warm the milk and feed it through the finger of a glove.

I had to do something for the mother cow who had not delivered her offspring in the carport, but had walked from some other part of the 120 acre paddock with her calf at foot.

I did, albeit prolonging the inevitable.

It's much easier caring for humans. 34 years of nursing has convinced me of this. At least most of them can tell us what hurts, or where they live.

On a weekend bushwalking/camping trip with my young son and another family it happened again.

We were in a remote national park area of the far south coast NSW, over 100 klms from our home town.

We had hiked about 20 klms along beautiful coastline and after setting up camp, Russell drove me to collect my car from the days start point.

It was a windy, dusty route of narrow tracks and small creek crossings..... Dusk.

I was concerned about finding my way back to the campsite. The forest darkening, shrouding the dust from Russells car a short distance ahead. I stayed on his tail, his dust my only guide.

A sharp left turn and over a small rise, the dust from Russells car settling to reveal 2 King Charles Spaniels sitting like a pair of Royal Doulton figurines in the middle of the narrow track, looking straight at me. I stopped quickly to avoid running them down.

They sat, looking, blinking my dust from their large glossy eyes.

I sat looking. I had never seen anything so out of place!

Reluctantly, I opened the car door, fearful that it was some sort of trap to catch me, a soft target.

Without a word, or encouragement, the dogs jumped onto my lap then onto the seat beside me.

They sat looking. I sat looking.

I called out into the forest for someone, anyone, the owner to reply. Calling out only to hear the echo of my frightened voice coming back to me.

Now it was dark. By this time Russells dust had long since settled, and somehow I found my way back to the camp.

Russell had not even seen the dogs, and confidently confessed that "I wouldn't have stopped for them anyway, they shouldn't be here. It's a National Park".

Our young sons excitedly made a bed for the dogs in the back of the covered ute.

They created a competition out of plucking the plague of ticks from their long coats.

While we adults, under the cone of smoke from the campfire, confabulated...were

they dumped? A breeding pair..... Unlikely. No collars. The female was

whelping.....were the puppies out in the forest too? Did I leave puppies behind?

Not a peep from the pair all night. They curled together looking like one perfect

black and white being, indiscernible as two.

The next day I was rostered to work an evening shift. I had to forgo the planned morning activities, instead leaving my son with Russ and his family and make my way home, with two dogs!

Fifty or so klms of dusty fire trails then fifty or so of highway I arrived home.

My husband was not happy. I had, again, arrived home with animals needing attention, and I was heading off to work!

It was Sunday. No point looking for a microchip scanner today.

The dogs would stay with us until we could locate their owner, no matter how long it took.

The little 20 bed rural hospital was full, and busy.

The ED had been hammered. After handover we moved some 'short-stay" patients to the now decommissioned childrens ward to clear some trolleys.

Helen was to stay overnight until her husband came to transport her the next day. He had "things to do". They lived nearly 2 hours away.

As we whisked Helen from the ED I asked her the obligatory questions. She had fallen 2 days ago in the bush and she had an ankle fracture. She had been sedated in the ED in order to manipulate her ankle and apply a backslab. She needed an orthopaedic opinion. That meant a trip to Canberra.

Helen didn't want to be in hospital. She didn't want to come in the first place. Now she'd be away from home for days!

In the frenzy of the afternoon, and the haze of her lingering sedation, Helen laid in the bed, in the corner of the darkened, decommissioned room, quietly weeping.

It's these patients we nurses can all recognize as those with a deeper story to tell, if only we gave them our time. Time, with sincerity.

For these patients it's easier to deny a need to "open up" than it is to respond to a hurried, superficial gesture of concern.

And for us, with the pressures of other demands, its easier to be declined by the patient when we offer an ear, because there are other buzzers to get, pills to give, patients to be fed.

Herein lies confirmation (for me at least) of my 'calling' ...that I am a 'physical conduit'.

Helen is a childless, isolated woman who lives for her dogs.

She and her husband live on a remote farm. Her dogs went missing 3 days ago. Helen and her husband had been scouring their property and surrounding forest day and night, calling their substitute 'children' home. Helen had fallen in the bush and fractured her ankle but continued calling, seeking, hoping for 2 days all the while on her untreated, unstable ankle.

'My' dogs were Helens dogs.

I can't describe the desperation in Helens voice as she told me about her dogs. Her husband had gone home to continue the search. This was all that seemed to keep her 'going'.

I can't describe the feelings I had when I realized that our worlds had literally collided !

I had to question Helen delicately for every detail. All the while not giving it away until I was absolutely, 100% certain, that this desperate womans dogs were in my backyard.

Helen totally disbelieving, acted like I was playing a sick, satanic joke in her hour of depleted desperation.

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I rang my equally disbelieving husband, who arrived a short time later with a dog under each arm, placing them on Helens lap, in the bed, in the corner of the darkened, decommissioned room.