

Chapter 2

HOW DID I BECOME THE WAY I AM AND ARE THERE MORE LIKE ME?

It used to be thought that the ‘top bananas’ (forgive the pun) in terms of intelligence, after humans, were the chimpanzees, some of whom I have been growing up with. They can make simple tools, perform a variety of tasks and a few have been able to learn some basic human sign language. But, this century, it has been shown that African Greys have the intelligence of four or five year old human children – and that was before a select few of us have received some help from medical science. Unfortunately, most of us have the temperament of three year olds!

A couple of years ago the prof, who is considered to be a leading authority on parrot and primate behaviour, was asked by a drug company if he would do a test trial on a couple of older apes. The company believed it had found the right formula to stop human minds from gradually closing down with dementia, but they were obliged by law to conduct tests on animals first.

The prof understood, with his scientific training and lifetime of work with animals, enough about the new drug to feel confident it would not harm the animals and he agreed. After completing the tests, he produced a report to confirm that there were no negative reactions and that there was a definite small improvement in the

reasoning ability of the test cases. This was quite true and it was exactly what the drugs company wanted to hear. They sent him a big cheque in return, which was much needed for the lab's finances.

What the prof did not tell the drug company was that, being a person who was used to thinking and experimenting 'outside the box', he had also tried out a tiny test on an older pair of African Grey parrots – and the results had been extraordinary. Drop dead extraordinary. Positively supernatural in fact.

The brains of Greys are only the size of walnuts but they are very dense. They are also 'wired' differently than those of primates (humans, monkeys, apes, lemurs, etc.). Just a couple of small doses of the drug produced a huge growth in intelligence, allowing birds which could already talk to hold normal conversations within a short period of time. It was way beyond anything that could have been expected in the prof's wildest dreams.

Even without any artificial help, many African Greys have demonstrated that they are not just able to repeat words but to understand, quite often, how they are used. But the prof's test birds, after a year, were able to form properly composed sentences and ask intelligent questions. He had to take them home to live with him because he couldn't risk word getting out about it. Within another year, the birds had vastly extended their vocabulary through listening to radio and TV programmes and through discussions with the prof.

The parrots' names are Winston and Clemmie (after the wartime British prime minister, Winston Churchill, and his wife Clementine). Their code names are BBB 1 and BBB 2.

The prof has bought them a voice assistant/listening device so that they can direct it as to what radio or TV programmes they wish to listen to or watch each day while he is at work. When he gets home, they discuss with him what they have been watching and

listening to and ask him about his latest findings. In addition, they provide the useful role of reminding him where he has put things and prompting him with shopping lists and other mundane tasks that absent-minded professors are often not very good at dealing with, such as attending to the wheelie bins on certain days of the week.

Also, Clemmie – who has had several broods in her lifetime – tends to ‘mother’ the prof. If she has heard a not very favourable weather forecast, she will suggest he take a scarf and gloves on cold days or a more rain proof outer garment on wet ones. She tells him if he has got food in his beard and she reminds him to get a hair cut when his appearance becomes too unruly – and she always asks for a kiss before he leaves for work for the day. “Now, give me a kiss and promise me you will take proper care of yourself all day”, she says, and he gives her a quick kiss on her beak.

And, both parrots, having spent much time watching and listening to cookery programmes, often suggest new recipes that the prof might like to try when cooking for himself and tell him what ingredients he needs to get in to make them. This means they also get to taste some of the resulting concoctions!

The prof, who is in his early 60s and widowed, has loved having these new companions to interact with at home, but he was only too well aware that he had created a major dilemma which he was going to have to deal with sooner rather than later.

One time, he ventured to ask Winston and Clemmie: “Are you happy being the way you are now or were you happier before I caused you to change?”

Winston gathered his (Triple B) thoughts together and spoke for both of them when he responded (very formally): “We now know what we did not know before. We were happy before because we were well treated, we had friends and family around us in the aviary

at the zoo and that life was all we knew. But then it was as if a blanket was lifted from our brains and, since then, we have never stopped making the most fascinating discoveries. It has given us both a new lease of life and we would not have it any other way. We realise we would not fit in any longer back at the zoo and are well settled where we are.

“Every day we look forward to learning something new. We don’t like many of the things we learn. Some of them give us much cause for concern, but we would rather know about them than not. We both love having a much greater understanding of what is going on around us. It is a wonderful thing that you have done for us and we wouldn’t change it for anything”.

Clemmie added: “We feel very special and very grateful and you have made us extremely comfortable in your home. It feels like we belong and we hope you will allow us to see out our days with you”.

What Winston and Clemmie had to say brought tears to the prof’s eyes and he felt totally vindicated for what he had done. He said to them: “The way that you two are going, I think you might outlive me, but I can assure you that you will have special care for the rest of your lives. I will see to that. If I am here to give it, I will, but I will make provision for you”.

The problem to be resolved by the prof was – where should he go from here with the discovery he had made? Was it a fluke? Dare he risk trying it out on younger parrots? And, if he did, and if it was successful, what would he do with such super intelligent birds?

Whilst trying to decide how to progress, he realised it would be a good idea to ‘cover his back’ by officially getting permission to try out the revolutionary new drug on parrots (albeit belatedly in the case of Winston and Clemmie). So, he wrote to the drug company

explaining that he would like to carry out his own experiments, purely for his lab's research purposes, and asking for their permission to do this. He received a very prompt affirmative reply and a new supply with their compliments. The company were clearly keen to maintain a good relationship with him in case they wanted him to trial future drugs.

After much deliberation, the prof finally decided to try out the drug on a younger parrot – me! And I quickly found a world of knowledge opening up to me. Albeit, initially, I had the frustration of not being able to share the joy of my enhanced brain power with anyone other than the prof, who emphasised to me from the start that I was a secret experiment and my intellectual abilities were to be kept hidden and only ever displayed to people he confirmed it was safe to divulge them to. He warned me that I must not reveal myself to anyone without his say-so for fear of ‘freaking them out’ – or being declared a freak myself. I might become a target for people determined to put me down because of irrational fears and I would certainly become a target for thieves. My value, he said, was incalculable.

But, that aside, I had the joy of continually learning new things – either directly from the prof or by watching and listening to things on one of his devices. And I discovered something truly delightful – humour! The human sense of humour is one of the best things of all that I came to appreciate. What a wonderful thing it is! I often cannot follow comedians' jokes but I much appreciate self-deprecating humour and ‘slap stick’ comedy where humans make fools of themselves. And what I find amazing is that there never seems to be a shortage of people prepared to make fools of themselves! Being able to laugh at yourself and your own behaviour, I have discovered, is just as important as laughing at disconnected things.

I now find myself studying human behaviour as closely as the researchers have studied me in the past – and frequently struggling to make sense of it. For instance, I don't understand why humans, being as clever as they are, put on so many different items of clothing each day and why so many of these garments seem to have demanding clasps or buttons or zips. If their skin is not durable enough to withstand the climate and the weather and the conditions they need to endure, why don't they just design one-piece pull-on clothing to fit the bill? But they don't – and not only do they have all these different items, in a whole selection of colours and styles, but they don't seem to like the smell of themselves and they cover themselves in unnatural aromas. And many of the women – and more and more of the men – don't seem to be content with their faces or their hair either and engage in all sorts of vain practices to improve them. All very strange!

That said, when I shared this thought with Zoe after I got to know her well, she had an explanation for it. She pointed out: “When you birds fluff up your feathers, you capture air pockets in them, which keep you warm. You also look as cute as cute can be when you are all ‘fluffed up’ but humans have no natural equivalent to employ. Hence all the other measures we turn to in order to regulate our body heat with different thicknesses and amounts of clothing and also to ‘make the most of ourselves’ and attract partners”.

Zoe did struggle a bit more, though, to explain the very unnatural and uncomfortable looking footwear that some women adopt. I really couldn't understand why any woman would willingly make the decision to walk about precariously with the back part of their feet hiked up onto spikes (especially on uneven pavements). How do they manage not to fall forwards on their faces?

The answer I was given was that these shoes made the woman's posture different and more attractive and they showed off their legs to best advantage.

I don't 'get it', I'm afraid, but I can see that I am going to have to accept that there are many aspects to human behaviour which I am probably never going to be able to comprehend. Like hoarding all sorts of things that they are never going to use or shouting at the television when a sports person or favourite team is on it, when they know full well that they cannot be heard by the individual or team they are supporting. That is definitely nonsensical! Don't try and tell me that illogical behaviour is confined to non-humans! However, I'm getting ahead of myself here and need to go back to when the prof shared his big secret about the 'Triple Bs' with Zoe. It was a day, I sensed, when a great weight lifted off him.

FACTS CHECK

Psychology and African Greys

Margaret T. Wright, author of 'African Grey Parrots: A Complete Pet Owners Manual', has written and blogged extensively about African Greys. She aligns with avian behaviour consultant Chris David in believing that Greys are "always thinking". She reckons that the combination of high intelligence and sensitivity causes Greys to want to be in control. This being the case, it is important for the owner of a Grey to establish himself or herself as 'the flock leader', ie. the 'top bird' as soon as possible. She admits, however, "This can be a constant challenge since these creatures are so smart and observant and possess an ability to pick up on owners' thoughts, feelings, mood and energy.

Nurturing a Grey, according to Maggie Wright, is more like dealing with a child than a pet and often requires the same sort of psychology as is applied to children – but people should never forget that they are not children, they are intelligent wild animals only once, twice or three times removed from the wild.