

Psychics offer contact with deceased ... pets



ASSOCIATED PRESS

Kim Pickett, an animal psychic, gets a lick from Wolfie, a show horse co-owned by Anne Strawbridge and Stacey Small, following a therapeutic session for the horse Friday at Strawbridge's Hetherbridge Farm in Chester Springs.

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PHILADELPHIA — After the loss of her dog Cassie, Sharyn Cerniglia wanted to know her golden retriever and friend of 12 years was OK. After consulting with an animal psychic, she found the answers she was seeking.

"I got pictures of her running by a stream in a field," Cerniglia said. "She was playing with a couple of kids and taking care of them, and it was always summer. ... It was very heartwarming."

Cerniglia is among a growing number of people who are consulting with psychics not to contact deceased relatives but to communicate with dearly departed pets, according to psychics and skeptics alike.

Part of the popularity is being chalked up to television shows like "The Pet Psychic" cable television program. And some people theorize that pets have been raised in many modern households to a status akin to family members, their owners want to bond with them in much the same way as a sibling or child.

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Psychics offer contact with deceased pets — skeptics warn of 'fantasy-prone personalities'

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Kim Pickett, who teaches pet owners ways to talk to their living and dead pets at two-day "Communicating with Animals" seminars at the Spring Haven Center in Malvern, says everyone has the ability to do like Doolittle.

"This is nothing supernatural ... it's an innate gift, it's hardwired into us but when we're enculturated to believe that it's not possible the instinct becomes atrophied and we forget how to do it," she said.

Cerniglia's quest started in 2000, after Cassie died and after she brought home a new golden retriever, Cedar, who was not following commands and showing other behavioral problems. Confused, she went to Pickett, who she says got Cerniglia and her former and current dogs talking.

"They were both in my head and I could talk to them," said Cerniglia, of Wayne. "When I actually talked to Cedar and Cassie at the same time, Cedar said, 'I am sick and tired of being compared to Saint Cassie.' It broke my heart."

She says she learned to not expect her new dog to be a duplicate of her former dog. "Now, Cedar is the best dog in the world. ... I wouldn't trade her for anything."

Pickett says most pet owners have experienced some of this psychic connection: a dog that clings extra close to an owner who's ill or upset, a cat that jumps in the window just before its owner comes home.

"When we're in a relationship with a dog or cat that lives in our house, that

animal is connected to us all the time," Pickett said. "Bonds develop. That's how you can connect with your animal and that's how you can do it after it's deceased."

That aspect of human nature — to want to speak to loved ones who are gone — makes people ripe for exploitation, said Joe Nickell, a senior research fellow for the Committee for the Scientific Investigation for Claims of the Paranormal.

"Like all aspects of the paranormal, this is tapping into the most basic of human hopes and fears and longings," Nickell said. "We hope that we live after we die, we hope that we're not alone in the universe."

Nickell, who has investigated pet and people psychics alike, said he believes that most people who claim to be animal communicators are "fantasy-prone personalities."

"This is kind of like a grown-up version of the child with imaginary playmates," he said. "They're fantasy-prone people who are conveying a message to people who are hopeful to get a message and who aren't thinking critically."

Many who have visited pet psychics disagree, including Erin C. Conlen, of Collegeville, a project manager for a construction company who said she communicates with her pet wolf Kapugen, who died in 1999.

"Some people are definitely skeptical ... maybe they think it's goofy, but it's real," Conlen said. "I took (Pickett's) class and it confirmed what I was doing and what I knew all along: Animals want to

talk to us, they do talk to us, and it's a matter of being open enough to hear them."

Nicole Roberts of Minneapolis, who has been doing psychic consultations for five years but says she has been able to communicate with animals all her life, said nearly all of her customers at the beginning were seeking deceased relatives and friends. Now that makes up only half of her business, with the other half coming from pet owners, she said.

"I've talked to mice, birds, turtles ... people are happy to pay \$100 to talk to a goldfish that has passed that they bought for 50 cents. Our animals mean so much to us."

Unlike people with living pets who often are looking for insight about a behavioral problem, "most people who want to communicate with a deceased animal are very grieved," Roberts said.

"They really miss the animal and they want to know that it's OK," she said. "Many of us were raised to believe only people go to heaven, not animals ... people want the reassurance that their animal exists in spirit."

Nickell understands the sentiment — but urges people to trust their logic and not their emotions in the realm of psychic communication.

"It surprised many of us skeptics that this kind of spiritualism made such a big comeback, but it really shouldn't have. The desire to speak with the dead is ancient," Nickell said. "If it really was possible to talk to your dead pets, would you do it? Of course you would."