

When Chloe the sloth arrived in downtown Beirut, the commotion in front of the United Nation's ESCWA building immediately caught her attention. Walking past the demonstrators, she noticed a young boy, almost hidden behind a column, tears streaming down his face. Chloe jumped upside down, then right side up, hoping to see a smile. There was none. Chloe - "What is your name?" "I'm scared." Chloe - "Where are your parents?" "They're gone. I'm alone, I'm scared." "What is your name." "I'm scared." "Would you like to come with me? You can ride on my back." "Yes."

The sloth and the frightened young boy started the journey to the small village of Aita al-Foukhar, where Chloe hoped to meet Samuel's parents. It had been three years since Ahmed and Nisrine Karam's lives were forever changed by the death of their son.

On that day, during his morning walk through the vineyards, Samuel, seeing smoke in the distance, started running. A house, its roof, windows and doors, was totally engulfed in flames, a young boy standing outside screaming. "Somebody help me! My dog, Argos, is inside. He can't get out!" Samuel ran into the house, the dense smoke making it impossible to see, difficult to breathe. Through the intensity of the flames he started yelling "Argos, where are you?" He heard a whimpering in the distance. Samuel took off his shirt, picked Argos up to cover him, then turned to find a way out. At the moment the roof began to collapse, Argos jumped from his arms. Samuel died before he arrived at the hospital.

Before taking a walk among the surrounding fruit orchards, Samuel's mother began each day going outside to feed the birds. Never before had one jumped on her hand. "Do you know that in the last thirty years, four hundred and thirty one million of us have been lost?" "Four hundred and thirty one million birds have disappeared?" "Yes. Thank you for feeding us." The village of Aita al-Foukhar, its narrow streets filled with small houses, was in a valley surrounded on three sides by mountains. As Nisrine began her walk, processing what she'd just heard, when a sloth appeared in the distance she was more intrigued than startled. The animal, moving jauntily, was carrying a small child on its back.

Never having seen a sloth, all she knew was the tree dwelling species was known for its slow and somewhat clumsy gait. As Chloe rapidly approached, the communication began. “Hello. I am Chloe. Would you be so kind and direct me to the residence of Ahmed and Nisrine Karam?”

“I am Nisrine Karam. How may I help you?” Briefly explaining her connection to Shilli, Emilie, Asha, Julian Lapis and Marcus the Labrador, Chloe asked “I would like to talk with you.” Nisrine graciously invited Chloe to return to her house. Once they were inside, a golden retriever puppy, sensing the youngster was in need of both care and support, walked over to the boy, nudging him gently. Nodding to the kitchen door, Nisrine asked “Would you take him for a short walk? He won’t run away.” Avoiding eye contact with Nisrine, the child nodded and left with the puppy. Separation anxiety would never be a problem for either one of them again.

Nisrine - “Are you comfortable sitting on a chair?” Chloe - “Yes, thank you. Will you please tell me about your son?” Nisrine began, smiling as she spoke. “Samuel sang before he talked. He had a golden voice. Since he was a boy he had premonitions, could sense things before they happened. Not knowing what to do with the information, he kept it to himself. He loved animals. When he was little, he’d climb down the ladder from our bedrooms on the second floor to sleep with them. I remember the day he asked his Grandfather. “Jiddu, What are the most important things in a life.” “It’s the little things, the small moments. Always remember. You are only as good as your word.” The next day he asked “Father, when will I be a grown-up?” “When you can admit you are wrong.” We expected him to go to Seminary and become a Deacon in the Greek Orthodox Church. His decision not to enter the Church had nothing to do with his faith, everything to do with church politics.

Nisrine stood up, “Please excuse me for a moment.” Returning with a tray of leaves, tender buds, shoots, and small pieces of fruit for Chloe, she continued. “Samuel sensed something was wrong with the man who claimed he was an animal activist. Because he said nothing about his suspicions, he felt he was responsible for Marcus’ murder. When he came home, not knowing how to deal with his guilt, despair, and anguish, he was numb, incapable of feeling anything, Again and again he said “Why didn’t I speak up?”

Nisrine - “ Lapis was Samuel’s best friend, their shared love of music just one of many mutual interests. Knowing the brain receives information faster through music than words, they both believed music predated language. Samuel was devastated at Marcus’ death, Lapis heartbroken when Samuel died. The golden retriever Samuel saved from the fire. . . ” “Argos?” “Yes, Argos. He was our wedding gift to Lapis and Emilie. He and Lapis are inseparable.”

Chloe - “Shilli told me how Samuel told him how laughing was good for human hearts and immune systems, how it could help someone in pain. Emilie loved his expression *From your mouth to God’s ear*. Your son taught Asha that animals grieve as profoundly as humans. Samuel shared with Julian what Snug the cat had said. Julian knew it by heart. “No matter how scared, or tired, or ill you are, no matter how lost, or confused, or desperate you become, no matter how lonely, depressed or cranky you feel, just do what you can with what you have, from right where you are, it will always be enough.”

Chloe got up from the chair, jumped upside down then right side up. “Shilli, Emilie, Asha, Julian and Lapis promised themselves, and each other, they would always follow your son’s example. Be as good as your word.”

Nisrine and Chloe walked outside to sit in the garden. When Chloe asked Nisrine how her life had changed, Samuel’s mother began crying, softly. Nisrine - “Our son was deeply moved by what Marcus communicated during the morning meetings in Prague. It was weeks after his death that we discovered Samuel had written everything down, Reading his notebooks, my husband and I decided to follow Marcus’ example. We began by arranging meetings first in our village then in Beirut. Organizing men and women is difficult in a country where one gender is consider superior to another. Every gathering begins with a message from Marcus.

Marcus the yellow Labrador, leading five young people to awareness that animals understand human communication had ushered in the possibility of a very different world. One of the last things the beloved dog told Shilli, Emilie, Asha and Julian was clear. “Never lose your purpose!”

“It seemed to Samuel that the perceptive animals he’d spent time with enjoyed their lives far more than many humans. I know so little about sloths. Tell me about yourself.” Chloe - “The earliest thing I remember is a dragonfly talking to me. “I am PANKHURST. I can fly backwards and upside down. Maybe you need to think backwards and upside down to see what comes to mind.” It wasn’t very smart for me not to pay attention and just walk away. I didn’t know I wasn’t like other sloths. Sitting upright and walking fast are normal for me. I had to learn how to hang upside down.”

Chloe, deciding to practice her newly learned skill, walked to the other side of the garden, jumping on the lowest branch of the olive tree, hanging topsy turvy, smiling one tiny ear to the other. Nisrine moved to the nearby bench.

“Has that been hard for you?” “Not at all. I’ve never had a problem being different. Hanging upside down has given me a new insightful perspective. I’d never relaxed until I learned what every other sloth already knows. My normal behavior was to sleep only three hours a night. With added hours of sleep came more dream solutions, sometimes more relevant than my awake thoughts. Do you meditate?” Nisrine - “No, I pray each day.” Chloe - “I began when I was little; meditating upside down helped me see things differently.”

While Chloe and Samuel’s mother were talking, the puppy and young boy were getting to know one another. They hadn’t walked far from the house when a feral cat appeared, following close behind. The classic gray tabby had the M mark on his forehead, with a unique body marking on his back - a flourish that changed shape as he walked. The golden retriever spoke first. “My name is VULNERABLE. This is METTA. As the three turned the corner, nearing the fruit orchards, METTA darted ahead then suddenly turned around. “I am a lap cat and need a lap to sit on.” Looking at the boy, “Will you sit down on that tree stump?” The boy hesitated, but did as METTA asked. When the cat jumped into the boy’s lap, the frightened youngster yelled “I’m scared.” METTA - “We’ll just stay here a while and enjoy the beautiful trees. Is it all right if I knead?” “What does that mean?” “I push against you with my paws, it makes me feel good. “Yes, you can do that.” After five minutes, the boy had relaxed. “That makes me feel good too. My name is Samuel.”

Samuel trusted VULNERABLE and METTA. It didn't take long for them to learn what had happened. Samuel and his parents, two aunts and an uncle had traveled to Syria from the United States to fulfill his grandmother's dying wish, place her ashes where she'd been born. In the middle of the night, men went from one house to another, shouting for everyone to go outside, everyone, men, children, women carrying infants. When Samuel's mother pleaded with him to hide and not cry, "They will hear you," he'd crouched beneath an oversized basket in the kitchen.

Shots, screams, silence. Hours of silence. At first light, looking cautiously out the window, he saw people covering bodies with sheets and blankets. When he went outside, he told the first person he saw what had happened. METTA - "How did you get to Lebanon?" "A man said he'd take me where I'd be safe. We drove and drove. I fell asleep and woke up lying on the sidewalk in front of a big building. The man was gone. Chloe found me. "I don't know how to stop being scared." METTA - "We will watch over you."

Chloe and Nisrine enjoyed each other's company. Chloe - "The boy and I are leaving in the morning for Beirut. May we stay with you tonight?" "Certainly. I'll drive you. It's a short hour and a half trip. Our weekly meeting is tomorrow. Last year, the owner of a hotel in Beirut's Central District offered us one of the conference rooms, at no cost. As word spread, more and more people are coming. Would you like to be the guest of honor?" Chloe - Jumping upside down then right side up. Yes!" Nisrine - "Just have one quick stop at the zoo." "The zoo?" "I'd never been to a zoo before Samuel died. Zoos thrive on the suffering of animals. We're working to close it and build a sanctuary." Chloe - "Have you always liked animals?"

"Yes. Since Samuel died, I've spent my free time learning everything I could about the natural world. Did you know a specific bird can perceive ultraviolet colors? The goshawk reacts to different stimulus without using his brain, not needing to think to react. Samuel told me the official explanation for the first outage was an *electromagnetic pulse*. That's now being questioned. That a bird can detect the earth's magnetic field, can be stimulated by something, a noise, a movement, and without thinking find its next meal is intriguing, to say the least. Excuse me Chloe, they'll be back from their walk soon, best to have lunch ready."

Nisrine walked into the kitchen to see, intertwined and fast asleep on the large semicircular table, the sun streaming through the window, a child, a golden retriever puppy and a gray tabby cat.

In the middle of the night, Nisrine heard crying. Chloe and the young boy were sitting together in the main room. The boy turned to Nisrine, tears streaming down his face. "My name is Samuel. Everyone in my family is dead. I want to talk about death. Do you know what its like to die? Can I find out if they are all right, wherever they are?" Hearing the name Samuel, Nisrine knew what was happening was no coincidence.

The three talked through the night, Samuel moving nervously around the room, standing, then sitting, going from one chair to another, walking into the kitchen to check if someone was there, then returning to look outside. As soon as he would sit down, METTA the cat jumped into his lap to begin kneading, Gradually, Samuel began to relax.

When the sun came up, Nisrine and Samuel were in the kitchen. Nisrine - "Talk to your family, Samuel, tell them what you're feeling. He answered, almost whispering. "My Mom painted lady bugs on the walls of my room." When a scarlet bug, black spots on its wing covers, flew through the window, landing first on his right hand, not moving for several seconds, then flew to his left hand, Samuel stared at the bug, then looked at Nisrine with a quivering look, almost a smile.

The drive from Aita al-Foukhar to Beirut went quickly. Having been up all night, Samuel, VULNERABLE the puppy and METTA the cat slept soundly in the back seat as Nisrine and Chloe talked. "When Samuel died, I could never again be a bystander. Lebanon is one of many countries where literacy isn't valued by fathers, husbands, even mothers and wives. The challenges facing women, not to be educated, to be given as a bride at eight years old, have to be addressed. Learning to believe in myself hasn't been easy, how to respond to the palpable look of disgust from a male when I speak my mind takes practice. Samuel probably wouldn't recognize me."

“Have you always lived here?” Nisrine - “Yes. Our village has been known for many years for those of different religions living together peacefully with mutual respect and affection. My husband , Ahmed, is an Arabic-English translator. He works in Beirut during the week. My younger brother is a deacon in the Greek Orthodox Church. My older brother is a priest. When we started our meetings in the village, we discovered many of us were afraid to have conversations of any kind, to say anything to anyone. A safe place to talk was the beginning step, why the gatherings continue to be a success. Deeply rooted feelings about religion and politics are the first thing talked about. With three different religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, seeing the same territory as their holy land, one would hope peaceful coexistence would be possible. The opposite has proved true. Violence crossing borders, one belief system fighting another, *terror* has become an everyday word.

Beirut was adjusting to the challenges of the ongoing outage. From those walking the Heritage Trail to the Garden of Forgiveness, new perspectives were unavoidable. Crops reappeared shortly after being harvested, with no explanation. Community kitchens. and food stalls were city wide. Trash collection was addressed. Barter was the currency. Sanitation was all important. Youngsters continued school, the elderly looking after the very young. Doctors and pharmacies weren't needed. No one became ill. Would this end when the outage did, or was something else at play? Passenger pigeons carried messages. After eating seeds of one region, flying to different geographical areas to leave their droppings, new plants appeared. That large dogs arrived to correct any and all illegal activity in progress had an immediate effect. A revival of music and dance performances, chess, backgammon, and card matches, lawn bowling, street theater engaged young and old alike, many for the first time. At dusk, candles appeared in every window. The one thing no one dared discuss was their new found ability to communicate with animals and others in the natural world.

Nisrine, her husband Ahmed and her two brothers, a deacon and priest in the Greek Orthodox Church, were loved and respected in Aita al-Foukhar, Nisrine's reputation as the finest cook in the area unchallenged. Recipes for babagannouj, tabouleh, kibbeh, and baklava had been passed down verbally, (never written), by generations of women in her family. For every meeting, in Aita al-Foukhar and Beirut, she graciously brought trays of delicious Lebanese food for everyone to enjoy.

The large rectangular conference room had no windows, taupe walls, chairs placed randomly with a large table at one end. Once everyone was settled, Nisrine introduced Chloe who jumped from the floor to sit upright on the table. No one in the room had ever seen such an animal.

Chloe - "I am a sloth. What has happened is unambiguous. I would like to start with a message from Marcus the Labrador. "Have you ever played a game where your opponent was a beginner who didn't know the rules and strategies? When that person made a foolish move, what did you feel knowing you'd probably win the game, not because of your skill, but because the other player didn't play that well? Everyone's a beginner now. There's nothing you can't do!" Chloe continued. "Collateral damage can occur from each and every choice you make, as can collateral hope. Both generosity and irresponsibility will be immediately obvious. Borders will no longer have purpose or importance. There are leaders among you who will set the tone, take the risks, make the sacrifices, not for their own good, but for the good of all. Your species' survival depends on cooperation, not competition. The ant, who works collectively, knows this well. Instead of harming living creatures with experiments, humans could have listened to animals. Teaching you how to communicate using brain control signals and electrical pulses will be our pleasure.

Each of you will decide how to turn frustration, fear and anger into understanding and positive collaboration. Standing for your beliefs when no one agrees will be easier for some than others. Your species is no longer in control, As does action, restraint has its own rewards. Acquiring more isn't as important as learning how to do more with less. Failure leads to innovation and ingenuity. Learn the ability to adapt by practicing.

When a Bateleur Eagle, red face and black beak, narrow legs (also red) and a short tail, flew through the open door, landing next to Chloe. the sloth somersaulted off the table, jumping into the nearest empty chair to sit upright and listen.

Bateleur Eagle. I am BIKO.

“We are all different. Everyone absorbs the values of the culture in which they were raised. No matter how rational you attempt to be, emotions are often the factor that predominate in your decision making. Never underestimate your own potential. Remember that facts and opinions are not the same thing. Try not to succumb to the contagion of inaction. Speak up against injustice and ignorance. Knowledge has little meaning if not joined with action.

Your species has not yet arrived at a universally accepted definition of *right* and *wrong*. Unjust laws can be changed. If you become aware of abuse and do nothing, ask yourself if you are, in any way, responsible for the abuse continuing. Learning is not dependant on institutions you call schools. Imagination. Animals are not property to be bought and sold, treated as humans wish. Animals communicate brain to brain. Captivity affects humans, as it does other species. Animals have minds and experience pleasure and pain; they don't complain. They possess empathy when many humans do not. No animal should be used in your scientific research. Have you considered the possibility that you avoided extinction, owe your very existence as a species today, because of your relationships with ancestors of what you call a chimpanzee?”

A woman dressed in a black hijab got up, walking toward the door. Two other women followed, the Asian and Caucasian shouting in unison “Some people always go looking for trouble!”

The women leaving in frustration and anger served as a positive catalyst. A group of teenagers, male and female, were sitting together nearest the door. As the first boy spoke, his friends all nodded. “We're here because we have something in common.” “I'm not looking for trouble. My cousin has been trying to recruit me. “My parents will be angry if they find out where I am.” “Someone told me God says it's our duty to kill anyone who doesn't practice our religion. If I joined, they'd give me money and a phone.”

“They told me the same. They’d pay me for each person I got to sign up.” “Some of us are thinking of joining. We haven’t told our parents.” The starting point was talking about the difference between facts and propaganda, ethics, morals and non violence.

The two hour meeting was coming to an end when a little girl, sitting on her mother’s lap, finally asked what everyone was thinking. “Am I the only one who understood what CHLOE and BIKO said? My dog tells me things every day. Is this my imagination, is something wrong with me?” When everyone started talking at once, it was clear she was not alone.

Leaving the meeting, Chloe and Samuel went to say their good-byes. Nisrine put her arms around Samuel, kissing him on both cheeks. “Your mother and father, your aunts and uncle are in a different place, but their love for you will never end. Would you like to stay with us for a while, until you feel better?” Samuel looked at Chloe for help. Chloe - “It’s your decision.” Metta the cat ran and jumped into Samuel’s arms, staring at him, starting to blink, slowly, one purposeful blink after another. When the tabby jumped to the floor, he appeared to be choking, coughing out a hairball. Samuel’s eyes registered shock. A single small blue pearl was embedded in the hairball. “My mother’s name was Pearl. I’d like to stay.” Chloe’s work in Lebanon was finished.

On the drive from Beirut back to Aita al-Foukhar, Metta sitting in Samuel’s lap, kneading, Samuel began talking. “When a grain of sand slips into an oyster, the oyster’s instinct is to protect itself, to cover up what’s irritating it by spitting out layers of the same thing that created its own shell, It’s only by dealing with what’s annoying it that the oyster turns a grain of sand into a pearl. My Mom told me it was important when things irritate us that we pay attention, deal with whatever it is, look inside and ask why we’re reacting the way we are.”

VULNERABLE the puppy woke up from his nap in the back seat. “Families who live close to one another geographically care more about helping one another than their own individual success. Though parents and children may now be distanced from their extended family, this is an opportunity to experience *family* in a new way. I’m glad we’re going home.”

Beirut, with its cultural and historic treasures and panoramic views of the Mediterranean Sea, was known as the Paris of the Middle East. Rather than step back in the face of seemingly overwhelming challenges (and accompanying stress), more and more people were making a commitment to do exactly the opposite. Once new thoughts had been ignited, nothing could stop the building conflagration of imaginative ideas. That human science could learn from and use nature's design far more than had been done in the past was now understood.

The hotel owner had told Nisrine the conference room would be unavailable for the next two weeks; meetings could resume in mid-December. The outage began on November 22nd. Was it a coincidence that ten days of high level classified negotiations (scheduled three months prior) between diplomats from the United Kingdom, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Iran, South Africa, France, Israel, China, Russia, the United States, Germany and Jordan were to take place in the same hotel where, a week before, the communications of a sloth and eagle were clearly understood by everyone present? Hoping to meet informally with others prior to the start of the deliberations, several participants arrived early. Security was at an all time high, officers joined by Mastiffs, Rottweilers and Malamutes.

Was it inevitable that representatives of governments with different cultures, political systems and religions would each interact with an animal during their stay in Lebanon? Human brains change physically depending on what the person is thinking, feeling or doing. How Nature intended to influence the decisions of diplomats in their negotiations would soon be clear. Nuclear weapons, drones, satellite systems, cyber warfare and biological terrorism were no match for the natural world.

Was the latest outage connected in any way to the fact that humans could now communicate with dolphins, whales, bees, cows, dogs, rabbits, cats, horses, birds and a sloth? The world's scientists and religious leaders were thrown into a frenzy of explanations.

The Nobel Peace Prize is awarded to the person who had "done the most or the best work for fraternity between nations, for the abolition or reduction of standing armies and for the holding and promotion of peace congresses." Three years ago, on December 10th, the Nobel Peace Prize was shared by two Laureates, Victoria the chimpanzee and Ayres the orangutan.

Chloe the sloth had made arrangements with both the Indonesian government of the Island of Borneo and the President of Tanzania for a private plane to transport two of her friends to Beirut. They arrived three days before the outage began. The first day of the negotiations, all authorized parties unanimously agreed. Using sign language, Victoria and Ayres would take part in the deliberations.

The day the talks ended, Ayres the orangutan, opening his long arms, an amazing span of seven feet, went from one diplomat to the next, taking them into his embrace. Holding his fingers and thumb together, he first touched near his mouth, then moved his hand back toward his ear to touch his cheeks. Home. The earth was everyone's home. Victoria was at his side.

As the terms of the final pact were read to hundreds gathered outside the hotel, the reaction was disbelief. "How is this possible?" "Were the communication centers of their brains temporarily altered?" Not only had the diplomats each agreed to major concessions, they were united in believing the priority was not individual countries, backgrounds and perspectives, but planet Earth, the habitat of all humanity, all species. Consensus had replaced competition. What had happened during deliberations to arrive at a moral decision transcending cultural norms?

Horses, carrier pigeons and dogs began spreading the news to surrounding territories.

From the hieroglyphic text in Karnak (the oldest existing treaty) to the hundreds of covenants, protocols and letters between governments, armies and tribes since 1289 BC, the first international agreement with non human participants had been successfully concluded. Universal participation and collaboration, the human world and the natural world working together, was the next step

The feeling shared by those seeing the design appearing in the sky, an image shaped by clouds and contrails was an amplified sense of purpose. . . and hope. JASLEMS.