

The Story of Naco

Josh Kennedy, Allentown, PA and Jayne Meyers, San Francisco, CA

At holiday time, we focus on the people and things for which we are grateful, like the times that bring us joy, and especially the moments that touch our hearts. Companion animals provide many of those special moments and we have long been aware of both the emotional and physical benefits of their companionship. In the area of service animals and animal-assisted therapy, much progress is being made. The following story of Josh, a young, blind college student and Naco, a bright young parrot, illustrates the ease with which a mutually beneficial bond can be forged between man and animal companions.

Josh is a 21-year old student at Kutztown University near Allentown, Pennsylvania. Gifted with languages, Josh is majoring in Spanish and German and hopes to use his skill either as a teacher or translator and interpreter. Josh has plans to take his education to the highest possible level, including graduate school. What makes this fairly typical scenario extraordinary is the fact that this intelligent, loving young man has been blind since birth.

Recently, while visiting a college friend's home for the weekend, Josh had his first close encounter with a parrot when he met the family's six-month old male Eclectus parrot named Naco. Perhaps it was Josh's skill with languages that enabled him to have an immediate and intense appreciation of Naco or perhaps it was simply the loving energy that flows between people and parrots. More than likely, it was a combination of these things, along with that unknown magical spark that makes such an event special.

This story is made poignant by the fact that companion animals have not been conditioned to discriminate based on race, age, religion, or disability. They simply love and accept love, something that all God's creatures have in common. Here is the story of one special parrot named Naco and one special young man named Josh

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Josh shares, "Two weeks ago, I went to my friend Angel's house to visit for the weekend. I had no idea that my view of pets in general, and birds specifically, was about to change dramatically. When I arrived at the family home, Angel told me that the family owned three dogs and an Eclectus Parrot named Naco. My grandparents had an African Grey Parrot that I had never handled because of their fear that I would be bitten. Angel's mom explained that Naco was gentle and she encouraged me to hold him and pet his back. I was immediately captivated, thinking that I had never "seen" a bird like this before. After a short visit, Naco went back to his cage and I went upstairs to bed.

"I awoke at around 4:30 in the morning and went downstairs to lay on the couch and try to sleep a little longer. Because the couch was short, I fell asleep in a half-sitting position with my feet hanging over the edge of the sofa. Angel woke me an hour or two later and both of us were surprised to hear Naco exclaim 'Aaaahhh,' as he flew into the kitchen and landed on the hard floor. I had been completely unaware that Naco had somehow gotten out of his cage and had been perched on the arm of the couch, watching me as I slept. Nor did I know how long he had been there. I went into the kitchen and cautiously picked him up. I was a little hesitant because Angel's mom had told me that a parrot's beak is very strong and that a bite could do some real damage! Yet, I was not terribly worried because the night before when I held him on my hand, Naco had gently taken my finger in his beak and rubbed his tongue over it, presumably either to feel its texture, to taste it, or both. I was able to locate Naco in the kitchen quite easily because I could hear the click of his claws on the floor as he walked.

"When Naco first climbed up my arm and sat on my shoulder, I was not quite

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sure what to do with him so I took him over to his cage. But he did not want to be in, or on, his cage. He made it clear that he wanted to stay on my shoulder. Because I had so little experience with animals, especially birds, I was a little frightened and uncertain of what to expect. What if he pooped on me? Very slowly, I made my way back into the living room and sat down. Naco and I sat together for about half an hour. Right away, Naco started to use his beak to play gently with my ears and curly hair. At first, I pulled away a bit, still wary of being bitten. When he had tried to use my ear to climb higher on my neck, I turned my head away, slowly pulling my ear or hair out of his grasp because I did not yet trust him completely.

“That first day, Naco did not talk much nor even make his ‘*awwww*’ happy sound again. He did sit on my shoulder and he did respond to me when I turned my face toward him and talked to him. Not only was he fascinated with my ear and hair, he also attempted to preen my cheek, trying to remove the small hairs on my face. I spent three or four hours with Naco and in all that time, he had only one ‘accident’ that I was able to clean from my clothing with relative ease. As the day went on, I began to trust Naco more. As he moved from one shoulder to the other, tickling the back of my neck with his feet and feathers, he made me laugh aloud.

“The next day, when I awoke, I could not wait to see Naco again. I went to his cage to take him out and asked Angel, who also is completely blind, if she would like to pet him. Her emphatic reply was, ‘Don’t you dare put that bird on me! I hate that bird...he squawks and screams and he is annoying.’ Naco must have realized that she was afraid of him because he moved away from her and clung to my right shoulder. By now I was quite comfortable with Naco and could allow him to play with my ears and hair without concern. As he began to make his happy ‘*Aaaahhh*’ sound, I sensed that Naco realized that I trusted him more than Angel did. Soon, Naco began speaking, saying ‘*hola*’ (hello in Spanish) and his name, ‘Naco.’ He seemed to enjoy having me pet him, and he allowed me to put my cheek and ear gently on his back when he cuddled close to my neck for warmth. I hoped that he was feeling as comfortable with me as I felt with him. Angel expressed her surprise at my growing interest in the family parrot. No matter how I tried to explain, she did not seem to understand my increasing fascination with what she considers the family’s feathered nuisance.

“Naco and I spent most of my visit to his home with him happily sitting on my shoulder as I made my way throughout the house. He accompanied me everywhere — whether it was to eat a muffin or wash my hands in the upstairs bathroom. A few times, I heard Angel on the phone, telling her friends, ‘I feel bad for bringing Josh home with me because he’s so bored. He has nothing to do here at my house.’ Nothing could have been further from the truth because I was thoroughly enjoying Naco and he was wonderful company. As the weekend flew by and Naco and I learned to trust each other, he became increasingly talkative.

“A few times, Naco got a little too rough while playing with my shirt collar and he accidentally pinched my skin. I only had to say ‘*ouch*’ and gently push his beak away while whispering, ‘Don’t chew my shirt, Naco.’ I don’t know whether or not he understood me, but I talked to Naco a lot that day, telling him that he was a pretty bird and generally giving him lots of attention.

“That evening, Angel’s dad put the dogs outside and he tried to take Naco from me to put him back into his cage to keep him safe from the dogs. Naco nipped him, as if to say that he wanted to stay with me. I could sense that this special bird was becoming attached to me. I don’t believe that Naco gets much attention from Angel and her other busy family members, which is probably why he especially enjoyed our interaction.

“By nightfall, I could tell that Naco had become completely comfortable with me because he fell asleep on my shoulder for a little while. When he awoke, I petted him softly and talked to him as he cuddled closer to my neck. I placed my cheek and ear gently against his feathers and told him that I would miss him tomorrow when I returned to school. He replied with his sweet little happy sounds, and the occasional ‘*hola*’ and ‘Naco.’

“I have always been told that birds and other animals can sense that a person is blind or otherwise different. Naco certainly seemed to be aware of my blindness and he was especially gentle and did not hurt me at all during our weekend together in spite of his intense fascination with my shirt collar. I wondered if he simply enjoyed chewing shirt collars, or if perhaps he perceived the collars to be a threat to me. The more I got to know him, the more amazed I was at how much this little parrot seemed to understand.

“I knew too that Naco could sense my tension that first day when I took him out of his cage. Because of the novelty of the experience, my shoulders had been tensed up instead of relaxed and easy for Naco to reach. Naco walked briskly, up and down my arm, making a rapid clicking sound in both a high and low-pitch voice. Since I was unfamiliar with the cage, I set him on the swing-out door and pushed it back very, very slowly because at the time I didn’t know that the top of the cage was higher than the door. He actually said ‘*ouch*’ in a low voice, which led me to stop and check. I then realized that the door was lower. When I reached down for him to get on my hand he stepped up and as I relaxed my shoulder, he climbed on. While we were engineering his climb out of the cage and ultimately onto my shoulder, he quickly but gently beaked my fingers as if to say ‘*relax your hand and put your shoulder down so I can get on...I won’t hurt you.*’ Although I thought that I was accurately sensing the message that Naco was trying to convey, I still was surprised that he did not bite me due to my awkwardness caused by inexperience and a lack of confidence. I told myself to relax, and as I did so, I became calmer and felt more confident. I believe that Naco sensed the change and he encouraged me with a soft-spoken ‘*awwww*’ as he gently

preened my hair.

On Monday, before heading back to school, I again held Naco and told him how much I would miss him while gently hugging and petting him. I wondered if he might instinctively know how sad I was about having to leave him and return to school. Angel's mother drove us back to the college where I became uncharacteristically quiet. When a friend wondered aloud what was wrong with me, Angel's mom explained, 'Josh is going through Naco withdrawal.' How right she was! I immediately set about researching Eclectus and other parrots and immersed myself in this study for the next four hours. I discovered many interesting facts and joined several mailing lists so that I could learn more about these extraordinary birds.

"Naco completely changed my attitude toward birds, as well as pets in general. Before meeting Naco, I thought of birds and other animals as just pets, never realizing that they could be so loving, nor that I could become so emotionally attached to one of them. I fell hard for Naco and would love to have a bird like him someday. My grandmother shared her opinion that I should get a smaller bird, such as a Cockatiel like the one we have at home. She believes that it would be safer for me because they do not bite as hard as larger parrots. However, if I could have taken Naco back to school with me, who knows how closely we might have bonded or what we could have taught each other.

"Before my wonderful weekend with Naco, I viewed all companion animals, whether dogs, cats, or parrots, as 'pets' and nothing more, but thanks to Naco, my attitude has changed. I especially look forward to sharing my life with a parrot when the time is right and my living situation permits. There may be problems to overcome, but when I recall my incredible weekend with Naco, and especially the amazing relationship that we developed so quickly, I am confident that with love, affection, and training, parrots can become true companions." ❖

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