

Meg Olmert, author of *“Made for Each Other: the Biology of the Human-Animal Bond,”* presented to the 2010 NAIA Conference an exploration and expansion of the conference’s theme of the origin and explanation of the human/animal bond.

While doing research for the documentary, “Man Created Dog,” Ms. Olmert was asked to join a research team studying the neurobiology of social bonding, thus further developing her theory regarding the chemical component of Man’s attachment to animals, and especially the dog.

Ms. Olmert suggests that the environmental conditions during the ice ages brought humans and animals in close proximity, developing an interdependence, and that it was “chemistry” that was the bonding glue. It was chemistry that changed the wolf into dog and humans into herders.

She commented that during prehistoric times humans were prey before they became predators. Over 25,000 years, we were in proximity to animals and became comfortable and relaxed around them. Animals joined with other animals to become stronger, and she hypothesizes that the hormone oxytocin reacting deep in the amygdala part of the brain, (the primary site of memory and emotional reactions), was the biological factor behind this social bonding. Oxytocin, she says, is mutually beneficial. It creates close bonds between not only humans and animals, but between other different species. Guardian dogs raised from puppyhood among a herd of sheep, transforms what could likely be a predator into a protector. This exemplifies how social proximity becomes a useful behavioral tool.

The development of maternal care of animals by ancient ages’ human females started the brain attachments of the human-animal bond asserts Ms. Olmert. She again notes the soft, rounded physical resemblance between juvenile animals and human babies, which stirs hormonal maternal reactions and facilitates the young animal’s care.

During her 18 years of research, she found that researchers had discovered that heart rate and blood pressure in people went down when they were involved with dogs, even merely touching or caressing a dog. Showing examples of therapeutic effects of pets, Ms. Olmert asserts that these close relationships with other species are organically necessary for our well-being.

Ms. Olmert presented an interesting study by Russian behaviorist Belyaev who believed that the key factor selected for domestication of dogs was not size or reproduction, but behavior; specifically, amenability to domestication, or tameability. For 40 generations, Belyaev selected those foxes that were more social. He found that foxes changed not only behaviorally but phenotypically as well . There was also some increased retention of juvenile traits as the foxes developed, both physical, such as skulls that became unusually broad in relation to their length, and behaviorally, with whining, barking and submission.

Finally, Ms. Olmert offered her theory that while some behaviorists believe that the development of “barking” was maladaptive, she believed that it was adaptive. According to Ms. Olmert, it allowed humans to feel secure knowing that they were being protected by the guarding dogs, so it allowed our ancestors to sleep more deeply. She hypothesized that this allowed alpha sleep for the humans, the deep sleep necessary for creativity development in the brain.