

Introduction: A New Era for Companion Animals

“Acquiring a dog may be the only opportunity a human ever has to choose a relative.”

—Mordecai Siegal (b. 1934)

Companion animals have become essential to “the new American family.” They are reliable, responsive, available, and reportedly give the kind of unconditional love typically attributed to supreme beings. They have become not only our companions, but also our teachers, our children, our confidantes, our healers, our friends, and sometimes, our *raison d’être*.

Pet-human partnerships are at an all-time high, according to the American Pet Products Manufacturing Association (APPMA).¹ More companion animals than people live in the United States: 382 million companion animals in a population of nearly 300 million people, as estimated by the U.S. Census Bureau for 2006. Sixty-three percent of Americans—representing more than 71.1 million households—now live with a companion animal. That is an increase from 64 million homes in 2002 and 51 million in 1988, which was the first year of APPMA tracking. American households contain 74.8 million dogs, 88.3 million cats, 142 million freshwater fish, 9.6 million saltwater fish, 16 million birds, 24.3 million “other” small animals, and 13.4 million reptiles. The APPMA reported in 2005 that approximately 45 percent of Americans live with more than one companion animal.

The recent surge in the population of companion animals is indicative of a distinct paradigm shift in the way we think and feel about them; we cannot get enough of them. Companion animals are not required to work for their keep, as is the historical custom for animals associated with humans. For the most part, there is neither livestock to herd, ranch to guard, nor mouse to catch. We simply want to *be* with them. What is behind this phenomenon?

One factor is that Americans have become increasingly isolated from one another, and basic social units have changed.² Perhaps technology is stripping us of the ability to genuinely connect with other people. A quick phone call here or an e-mail there does not a relationship sustain. Our social contacts are characterized by the Internet, iPods, Blackberrys, cell phones, or television. In

2006, the *New World College Dictionary* bestowed Word of the Year honors on the term “crackberry,” which refers to our incessant need to check our Blackberry or other electronic device for messages. The need borders on addiction.

To make matters worse, standard methods for developing social contacts are underutilized. For instance, in many places, excessive traffic is a deterrent to socializing with colleagues and friends. Attendance at worship services, a primary way to meet people, is declining in the main denominations.³ Social facilitation is not helped by the increasing transience of our populations, such that we no longer know many people outside of our jobs, and we have superficial relationships with coworkers. Neighborhoods where families live for generations, sharing history, culture, and social activities are rare.

In fact, we are learning to be wary of each other, constantly vigilant against crime and other threats. With terrorism as the new watchword, Americans have never felt so fragile, so exposed, or so threatened. Many of us do not have another person in our proximity: Census 2000 revealed that the number of people in America living alone is growing. Single-person households were shown to outnumber married couples with children.

Consequently, companion animals are the only family that some people have. Many young, single adults often acquire a companion animal to complete their first home away from home. Many “DINC” families (pronounced dink and stands for dual-income, no children) are established with companion animals, and many single divorcees build new families around their animals. We are not shocked even to see a homeless person with a faithful dog or cat, and we should not be. We may think that life for these companion animals is harder, but not necessarily. “Most homeless people will put their pets before themselves,” said Robert Leslin, a homeless man who, with his wife Karla, has been homeless for two years after losing his job as a cook. Sharing their meager resources is not a sacrifice for homeless people who say that what the animals give them in return is priceless. That sounds pretty familiar, yes? In fact, companion animals may mean more to this segment of our population. Karla Leslin said that their cat, Stormy, has kept her from going over the edge and is sometimes the only thing in the world that makes her feel human.⁴

Animals have become integral to the family, on par with humans or in an established separate category: a family member who *happens to be an animal*. More to the point, the family simply would not be complete without them. The new American family unit consists not only of parents and children, but also companion animals. Sometimes, the companion animal is the only *other* that creates the immediate family. For example, I had the amazing privilege to meet Craig Peel, an older gentleman who survived Hurricane Katrina, but was separated from his beloved dog, Sassy. When Red Cross volunteers asked him about surviving relatives, he gave Sassy’s name.

Before I met my husband, I described my family as “Muffin and me,” referring to the miniature Schnauzer I raised from a puppy. Peel and I are not alone in our

attitudes about our animals. Unquestionably, companion animals have risen to a new level in our society.

Forty percent of respondents to the American Animal Hospital Association's 2004 Pet Owner Survey said they would select a dog if allowed only one companion on a deserted island. An equal percentage thought that their companion animal listened better than their spouse or significant other. Fifty-four percent of the respondents said that they thought about their animals a few times a day when separated from them, while 21 percent said they think about them "all the time." Ninety-four percent added that their companion animals have "human-like personality traits."

As a family member would, animals frequently become our emissaries in the neighborhood. Many of us do not know our neighbor's names, but we know the names of their animals, especially their dogs. One of my neighbors, who is married, but she and her husband do not have companion animals, remarked proudly while we were socializing over dinner that she could amass a jury of peers for a dog who had received a ticket for jaywalking.⁵ She knew the names of 12 dogs in the neighborhood, and she does not even have a dog.

MAKING SENSE OF IT ALL

This book examines why our relationships with companion animals have become paramount in our lives. It examines the complex relationships between humans and companion animals from the beginning to the bitter end, while revealing and explaining as many associated conundrums and contradictions as possible.

Chapter 1 begins with the origins of the relationships, beginning with human dependence on wild, then domesticated animals, for food, clothing, and most frequently, safety. The early relationships, even those with animals destined to become our companions, were *all* about the humans. Now, the relationships are about what we do *for them*.

One of the great contradictions of the human-animal connection is how humans care so much for certain species of animals, treasuring them as constant companions, while other species remain sources of food, clothing, entertainment, or sport.

In his unprecedented book, *In the Company of Animals*, Dr. James Serpell,⁶ offers interesting, provocative insights into "why on earth, out of all the species available to us, we choose to "lavish so much affection on two medium-sized carnivores. . . ." ⁷

What makes them so special? When it comes to animals, each person has a place where we draw a line between "us" and "them." In America the dividing line is usually behind cats and dogs. But why?

For one thing, we are suitably matched to dogs and cats—the most popular animals with whom we choose to live. We share with them a proclivity for

sociability, at which dogs excel over cats because they are pack animals, as are we. As such, dogs prefer to live in groups, so joining *our* family groups is not a great leap for them or for us. Fortunately, the groups do not have to be large to be rewarding. Many families are essential “packs of two”: a dog and his or her person.⁸

Clearly, a shared preference to live among others does not account for the impressive increase in the quantity and quality of relationships between humans and companion animals—dogs and cats in particular.

THE HEART KNOWS

In Chapter 2, I will examine what motivates our great attraction to cats and dogs. It could be that the relationships we have with our companion animals simply make perfect biological sense. Humans are quite possibly “hardwired” with an innate tendency to care about animals and nature. *Biophilia*⁹ suggests just that, as you shall read.

Whatever the reason, we take certain animals into our hearts, but why? The answer, like most truths, is pure and simple: Love. We love them. My premise is that love is the operative word behind the oft-described insanity about companion animals—behaviors that some people without companion animals have trouble understanding. Sometimes we love them more than we love the people in our lives, and frequently companion animals are credited with teaching us how to love at all.

Trying to prove love sounds like a fool’s errand because love is hard to define and even harder to measure. This is especially true when referring to a feeling between two particular species—one human and one composed of “individuals who happen [primarily] to be dogs [or cats].”¹⁰

Psychology is my field of choice when trying to decipher individual behavior, but psychological models of relationships are designed for human-to-human connections and presuppose, among other factors, a shared mode of communication through language. Adding to the complexity of proving that love applies is that most psychological research on love pertains to romantic love, which if applied to human-animal relationships indicates a pathology that is beyond the reach of this book.

In spite of the difficulties in connecting how love applies to relationships with our companion animals, love is the word most people use when asked to describe how they feel about them, as they do when asked to describe how they feel about cherished family members. In Chapter 2, I will look at several theories of love and apply certain of their aspects as a litmus test to the unique bond we have with our companion animals.

My goals, you see, are to address the ever-present question of why we bestow such attention and status on companion animals and to enlighten those who “don’t get it.” They do not get what the rest of us understand—we love our companion animals, and maybe, just maybe, they love us. In spite of the naysayers,

I maintain that the value we place on our relationships with our companion animals is manifested in how we treat them, and those behaviors are indicative of love.

Most people who love animals, *know* that they love them, and are not concerned about science and statistical analyses to justify their feelings, but we are all best served if we appreciate the importance of the research that validates these impressions. If the capacity that humans have to love companion animals made sense to more people, I believe that both humans and animals could benefit. A more generalized awareness and appreciation of our relationships with companion animals is crucial for the full potential of the relationships to be realized. Consider the quote by M. Gandhi, “The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way in which its animals are treated.”

Whether you accept love as the appropriate descriptor or not, it is clear that people feel very strongly and react dramatically about animals. What is the nature of the relationship that makes people feel so attached to their pets? How is it that people form such powerful bonds with *creatures*, bringing them into their homes and treating them, well, like family?

My intention is to provide sufficient scientifically based information to substantiate the validity of the relationships, thereby eliminating the shame associated with caring so much for companion animals and grieving so profoundly when they die. This is the heart of the book.

You see, I agree with the French novelist, Emile Zola, founder of the literary naturalist movement, who said, “The fate of animals is of greater importance to me than the fear of appearing ridiculous. . . .” Through the ages, people who love animals have been accused of everything from witchcraft to bestiality. Some of the most damning criticism is that we care less for other human beings because we love animals so much, a notion I can easily debunk. Megan Daum said, “. . . those of us who fret over animals must cope with a social stigma that suggests we’re all a bunch of friendless oddballs.”¹¹ I intend to provide evidence that contributes to ending the shame and also confirms and affirms these authentic, meaningful relationships.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF OUR AFFECTION

Even if we accept that we love them, the question of “why?” still begs an answer. Whether we ask our companion animals to sing for their supper or simply sit by the fire, *why* do we treat them the way we do? Why do we bring them into our homes and let them into our hearts? What are they doing for us? *To* us?

Sometimes my husband picks up our adopted five-pound Maltese, Máni, and says to her, “Who are you and what are you doing in my house?” He is asking the question in jest because Máni joined us unexpectedly after the death of Grace, our beloved dog for fourteen years, to whom this book is dedicated.

Although he was being flip, good psychologist that he is, my husband raised a valid question. Who are these creatures we call companion animals, and what *are*

they doing in our houses? In Chapter 3, I will explore some of the reasons and the roles they play. Along the way, you will meet animals who act as rescuers, social workers, and matchmakers.

Because people select dogs as companions more than any other animal, you will read a lot about dogs, then cats. Other animals, such as birds, pigs, fish, horses, smaller mammals, and reptiles fill companion duties, as well. The populations of more uncommon animals as companions, such as rabbits, ferrets, and reptiles are also increasing, and I will extrapolate why some people prefer creatures not typically considered candidates for companionship.

Conclusive evidence exists that various animals can have a positive impact on the social and emotional development of humans. There is no limit to what can be achieved and learned from our relationships with companion animals, as you will read in Chapter 4. The possible influences that we have on them will also be covered in this chapter.

PAMPERING AND PROTECTING

No holes are barred when it comes to our companion animals. We treat them like beloved people and we share every benefit of human living. In Chapter 5, you will read how we have embraced companion animals into our human world, lavishing them with all our world has to offer.

Turns out that we take care of them—and they take care of us—in unexpected ways. Science has shown that companion animals can improve our lives, even beyond the obvious social support. They can be therapeutic and have been part of interventions with children and adults, particularly the elderly. In Chapter 6, you will read how certain animals offer palliative care, and I will introduce you to dogs who have been trained to detect bladder cancer, low blood sugar, and seizures.

In return for the many benefits, we do everything we can to not only pamper, but also protect our companion animals. They get a day at the spa, and they get their day in court. Ours is a litigious society, and we employ legal remedies to protect our faithful companions and their assets, as you will read in Chapter 7. Issues related to management of trust funds are just one of the reasons companion animals are appearing on judicial dockets.

There are many ways to extend protection. At the core of our democratic society is the ability to implement and utilize laws for justice and safety. It probably never occurred to the founding fathers that animals would influence political platforms, but people are working at grassroots and national levels to promote laws to establish what they see as the rights for animal companions. Our relationships with companion animals are fueling local and national government policy and influencing elections. In Chapter 7, you will read about the important work of activists for companion animals and the first political action committee that identifies “animal friendly” politicians.

BROKEN HEARTS

Impermanence is an unavoidable and tragic fact of life—nothing lasts forever. Where our pets are concerned, the end comes all too soon. The lifespan of most companion animals is painfully short. Even those who give us twenty or so years leave us desperate for more. Horses, some birds, and many reptiles enjoy a longer natural lifespan, but many dogs live less than 10 years.

What, then, do we do when our hearts are broken? Many of us face this heartbreak more than once, never learning how to effectively deal with the enormous grief. Sometimes the only sympathy comes from people who have also suffered the death of a companion animal. Otherwise, the bereaved are forced to keep their grief to themselves, carrying on in the face of a monstrous emotional upheaval.

Regardless of how it happens, the loss can be profound. In Chapter 8 you will read about the grief associated with the death of a beloved animal companion and methods of healing and recovery.

BROKEN HONOR

Our companion animals are completely innocent of the tragedies that befall them because of their association with us, as happens in natural disasters and accidents. However, they seem proud to stand by us. This makes it all the more shameful that they often suffer at our own hands. Having established how we benefit from our relationships with our companion animals, I will examine whether *we* are good for *them*? In Chapter 9, I will examine how our animal companions fare in their relationships with us and look at some of the ways in which we fail to live up to being the kinds of people they think we are. You will read about issues such as animal abuse, pet-overpopulation, target breeding, and puppy mills.

Finally, I will look to the future, for us and those creatures we hold so dear—our companion animals.