

Changing attitudes toward companion animals

Richard Avanzino

ABSTRACT

Our society is going to the dogs (and cats) - and just in time, too.

As our culture becomes more surreal and impersonal humans are turning to their animal companions to re-establish contact with the true rhythm and meaning of life. What Thomas Jefferson called "nature and nature's God". Or, as Joni Mitchell said, "We've got to get back to the Garden". Animals are our guides on that journey.

This paper seeks to explore the pathways.

INTRODUCTION

The human-animal bond stretches back into pre-history. Though the dog and cat were probably domesticated for utilitarian purposes (the dog for hunting and protecting, the cat for catching vermin) it didn't take long before humans began prizing these animals for their sheer companionship.

Our attitudes have gone through cyclical changes ever since. The ancient Egyptians revered cats so much that when one died all the human members of its household shaved their eyebrows and went into deep mourning for a year. But by the 13th century Europeans considered cats to be agents for the devil and very nearly exterminated them (leading, ironically, to the bubonic plague epidemic of the 14th century, which was carried by rats).

Now, at the end of the 20th century, our attitudes are shifting again - this time in a decidedly pro-animal direction. The most obvious evidence is a recent Gallup poll in which 55% of American pet owners rejected both the term "pet" and the term "owner". Instead they prefer to think of themselves as parents and their animals as surrogate children.

Their attitudes are reflected in their behaviour:

- 65% give their pets Christmas presents
- 48% give their pets special foods designed for their age or dietary needs
- 41% display their pet's picture on a mantelpiece or wall at home
- 29% prepare home-cooked meals for their pets
- 24% celebrate their pet's birthday
- 17% carry their pet's picture in their wallet or purse

In a sharp departure from tradition, only 12% put the family cat out at night any longer. In fact, given a hypothetical choice of whose company they'd prefer if they were stranded on a desert island, more than half (54%) said they'd rather have a dog or cat than another human.

Of course, sentimentalising companion animals is nothing new. In the 18th century, George Washington named his two favourite dogs "Truelove" and "Sweetlips". Anyone who has read Dickens or Trollope remembers those endless scenes of Victorian heroines gushing over their lapdogs.

But I believe the current trend is something different. Instead of anthropomorphising our pets as the Victorians did, turning them into ersatz humans, we are learning to appreciate their animal natures. Instead of valuing them for the work we can get from them, we are starting to value them for what they can teach us.

THE CHANGING NATURE OF SOCIETY

It's a clichè of late 20th century life - and no less true for being so - that ours is becoming an increasingly alienated and lonely society. The reasons are both demographic and cultural.

Statistics show that we are marrying later and having fewer children. An increasing number of people never marry at all. As the baby boomer generation ages we face a growing population of older people, many of whom are newly alone after outliving their spouses.

Meanwhile society itself is changing in ways that increasingly isolate people. Both the rural small town and the urban neighbourhood are disappearing with most people living in generic suburbs where they are, basically, strangers even to their next-door neighbours. Concomitant with this is a marked decline in the membership of private organisations - from service clubs to bowling leagues. Participation in the public sector is also waning, as marked by declining voting patterns.

At the same time, our work world is changing even more rapidly. Our attachment to the workplace as a surrogate family is weakening, not the least because most people entering the work force these days can expect to change jobs at least five times in the course of their career. In addition the corporate trend toward telecommuting means more people are working alone at home rather than in an office. Population growth and its attendant social consequences - urban sprawl, traffic gridlock and overwhelmed mass transit systems - will provide even more incentives to telecommute.

Added to this is the fragmenting cultural influence of technology, which is occurring at an ever-accelerating pace. A generation ago the rise of network television meant that audiences were no longer sharing the same experience in a movie theatre. But at least they were still watching the same shows, whether it was "I Love Lucy" or the assassination of President Kennedy. Now the advent of cable and satellite TV has taken the process one step further. With viewers choosing among a potentially infinite choice of channels, no single event - save for the occasional slow motion white Bronco freeway chase - will ever command the universal viewership that past programs did. Even if space aliens destroy the earth, somebody will still be watching Beavis & Butthead on another channel.

What is happening goes beyond isolation from others; it's alienation from society itself.

COMPANION ANIMALS IN AN ALIENATED SOCIETY

In other eras in which animal companions were held in high esteem the tendency was to anthropomorphise them. Whether it was Dora dressing her lapdog in doll's clothes in "David Copperfield" or the kitschy '50s painting of dogs playing poker, the tendency was to sentimentalise pets and try to turn them into imitation human beings.

But today many people are starting to question whether humans really are, as once believed, "the measure of all things". The more frenetic our lives become the more we need our animal companions to remind us to wake up and smell the kibble. Their ability to live in the moment, to savour the simple pleasures of life and find joy in loving and being loved, is the perfect antidote to late 20th-century alienation. We don't want to make them like us - we want to become more like them.

As a result, we are beginning to understand that our animal companions are sentient creatures in their own right, with their own rights and privileges. In San Francisco this trend first surfaced publicly about 15 years ago, during a landmark case to save the life of one little dog. Her name was Sido. She was a friendly 11-lb sheltie mix whose owner had died and left a will directing that Sido be put to death. But the SF/SPCA had a better idea. We rallied public opinion behind a campaign to save Sido. After six months of intense legislative and legal battles a new law was passed by the California legislature and Sido's life was spared. She went on to live another five years with a new family, who loved and cared for her and treated her like a queen.

What was even more extraordinary than the outpouring of public support was the sea-change in public attitudes that it revealed. Sido's case showed that it was no longer acceptable in San Francisco to treat animals like Kleenex, to be tossed aside when no longer needed. Moreover, San Franciscans discovered that they liked the feeling that their city is a place where diverse, often conflicting, communities - black, white, young, old, gay, straight, male, female - will work together to save one little dog.

Another example of this trend is the change in public policy toward animals that used to be considered useless - feral cats. It wasn't so long ago that they were thought to be little better than vermin and were enthusiastically rounded up and killed.

Today, there are teams of volunteer feral cat caregivers in six different neighbourhoods of San Francisco. Working in close cooperation with The SF/SPCA they humanely trap the cats and bring them to The SF/SPCA Clinic for free medical checkups and spay/neuter surgeries. If the cats are tame enough to adopt they are placed in loving homes. If not, they're released back to their colonies where the caregivers will continue to bring them food and monitor their well-being for the rest of their lives.

But the most telling example of this trend toward what I call de-anthropomorphism is the outpouring of sympathy that flooded into The San Francisco SPCA last spring following the death of an immigrant from Down Under named Perth. His passing even rated mention in the San Francisco Chronicle.

Perth, a Bearded Dragon Lizard, came to The SF/SPCA 10 years ago from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. The Service had intercepted a suspicious-looking package from Australia labelled "camping goods". Inside they found hundreds of infant Bearded Dragon Lizards that someone was trying to smuggle into the country. Most already dead, having suffocated during the journey. But Perth, although severely dehydrated, survived.

After being nursed back to health at The SF/SPCA he embarked on his lifelong career as an ambassador of good will. Under the auspices of The SF/SPCA's Humane Education Program Perth visited hundreds of local schools. Under the Animal Assisted Therapy Program he visited hundreds more hospitals, psychiatric units, rehab centres - even the county jail. All in all it is estimated that he met more than 10,000 people.

Unlike a dog or cat Perth wasn't "cute" in the conventional sense. He didn't have big eyes or an adorable expression. He looked like one of the monsters from a cheesy '50s science fiction movie. Yet the genuine, unaffected grief his death evoked, especially from schoolchildren, proved that an animal no longer has to resemble a baby human to be deemed lovable and deserving of life.

PREDICTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

It isn't hard to extrapolate from current trends and see a clear pattern of what lies ahead. As pets become surrogate children the number of businesses catering to working pet "parents" will increase. Such services, including summer camps, play groups and day care for dogs (such as The San Francisco SPCA's Doggy Daycare Centre, which offers rest areas, play areas, regularly scheduled walks, play and agility equipment - even a television and VCR) will proliferate and prosper.

Attitudes in housing will also continue to change. Currently, The SF/SPCA's Open Door Program, which seeks to open up more rental housing to responsible pet owners, is getting more than 150 calls per month. These calls come not only from tenants, but also from interested landlords seeking advice, counselling and "how to" information.

In 1981 The SF/SPCA lobbied successfully in the California legislature for a new law overturning the summary ban in public housing against senior citizens with pets. This became the model for similar federal legislation later that year. As people who have animal companions continue to gain political clout this protection will probably be extended to tenants of all ages in private, as well as public, housing.

People may be able to list their pets as dependents to gain tax deductions. Just as some companies offer daycare for children, it could become widely acceptable for employees to bring their pets to work (it's already standard practice here at The San Francisco SPCA and each year we're pleasantly surprised to find more and more businesses joining us).

Currently, American pet owners pay an average of \$1,500 each year out of their own pockets for health care, toys and other expenses for their pets, spawning a healthy satellite industry in pet health insurance companies. It is logical to expect that some day this will be part of an employee benefits package, with companies offering health insurance for pets through a national program.

As cats and dogs become truly valued members of our society their hierarchical status in the world will increase. Dogs completing obedience courses might receive access rights - much like today's Guide Dogs for the Blind or the Hearing Dogs in The SF/SPCA's Hearing Dog Program - to restaurants, hotels and motels.

Of course as animals become more and more like surrogate children they face a downside: namely, what happens to them if the marriage breaks up. Like children it is increasingly common for pets to become pawns in a divorcing couple's war games. "California Lawyer" Magazine recently highlighted some canine and feline custody battles that eventually wound up in court. Dogs have even been "dognapped" by spouses or significant others trying to revenge themselves on former partners. Unfortunately this trend, too, will probably accelerate in coming years - which will force some imaginative rethinking of our divorce and custody laws to include companion animals as well.

As a group people with companion animals can afford to give them the best of care. A survey commissioned by the American Veterinary Medical Association showed that people who have pets have higher than average incomes. Their desire to pamper their pets has created a burgeoning market for gourmet pet food and treats.

The growth in cat popularity and the move toward keeping cats safely indoors has ushered in fleets of innovative products including the feline version of MTV -videos of lively birds. Pets in the future may keep themselves happily occupied indoors with high-tech interactive video games that have symbols they can push to produce visual sounds, smells (such as aromatic food odours) or visuals.

As society continues to become more industrialised, products like commercial pet food (rather than food scraps) should gain an international market. Increased knowledge of medical care, nutrition and animal behaviour - everything from state-of-the-art surgery to more nutritious pet foods - will continue to better our animal companions' lives.

Unfortunately, despite the bright outlook for dogs and cats, the trade in inappropriate pets: i.e. exotic animals - remains a problem. Although the enforcement of existing regulations and the enactment of new laws has put a dent in the exotic pet trade, the demand for exotic pets (both legal and illegal) continues to devastate wildlife populations.

Humane education is the hope of the future. Already many airlines are refusing to transport wild birds for ethical reasons. As people become more aware of the issues surrounding exotic pets - as they learn to appreciate animals for their true natures - the demand for these animals will decline.

Education will also play a key role in another animal welfare problem: vicious pet dogs. In the '90s the headlines have been full of horror stories. The first wave of the media frenzy obscured the fact that the real problem is the irresponsible people who breed and train these dogs. That is changing. Laws that target human behaviour, such as stiffer sentences for those who train and keep aggressive animals, are proving to be far more effective deterrents than banning specific dog breeds. As such laws are strengthened future generations will hold humans - and not abused animals - responsible.

CONCLUSION

It may seem perverse that at the same time we humans are busy wiping out species after species in the wild, we are simultaneously elevating our companion animals to a status never before achieved in history. But in the latter lies a ray of hope for solving the former. Much of human cruelty to our fellow creatures stems from arrogance fed by ignorance. We unthinkingly assume that animals don't feel the pain or emotions we do, that they are somehow "lesser" creatures.

A relationship with a companion animal changes all that. It is the beginning of wisdom. To value one creature for its true nature is first step in learning to value them all.

It is the author's fervent hope - as well as his belief - that our growing understanding and appreciation of our companion animals will lead not only toward more benign behaviour toward them, but also to their brother and sister creatures in the wild.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard Avanzino

President, The San Francisco SPCA

2500 16th Street

San Francisco, CA 94703

Telephone: (415) 554-3000

Fax: (415) 552-7041

E-mail: publicinfo@sfpca.org

Richard Avanzino has been President of The San Francisco SPCA for 20 years. In that time, he has transformed it into one of the premier no-kill shelters in the United States. Among the many groundbreaking programs he has instituted are the Hearing Dog Program, the Doggy Daycare Centre, the Pet Grooming College and the Sido Service, which places SF/SPCA members' pets in loving new homes after their original owners die.

But the crowning achievement of Mr Avanzino's administration was the Adoption Pact signed in 1994 between The SF/SPCA and the city shelter. Under the terms of the pact every adoptable cat or dog in San Francisco is guaranteed a home. Since the pact not one single adoptable dog or cat has been euthanased in a San Francisco shelter. This is a record no other city in the United States can match.

In addition to leading The SF/SPCA, with its \$8.3 million annual budget, its 130-plus staff and its more than 2,000 volunteers, Mr Avanzino also writes a weekly column that runs in seven different San Francisco Bay area newspapers. He, his wife, son, two dogs, a cat and a canary, live in Moraga, California, in which he served as Mayor in 1989.

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