

Both Ends of the Leash

Pet Peeves

Let's hear it for the family dog

Patricia B. McConnell

“Just a pet.” How many times have you heard someone say that? Perhaps it was a conformation breeder who observed, “This pup doesn't have a good top line, so he should be sold as just a pet.”

You've probably read the phrase in articles about how much we love our companion animals: “It is remarkable how much money the American public spends just on pets.” And companion animals lovers use it – ask any veterinarian, who too often hears: “We just adore our little Cocker Spaniel, she's the greatest joy of our lives, but we can't afford to spay her because she's just a pet.”

I like to think of myself as a reasonably patient person, but I find I'm losing patience with those three little words. I suppose it's because of what I do. I've spent almost 20 years working with people whose pet either brings them joy, relaxation and love, or anxiety, frustration and pain. Within the same day I might see a client whose dog prevented her children from walking across a busy highway, and another client whose dog mutilated someone's face. All this from the family pet – an individual who is looked upon with ambivalence by society at large. On the one hand, many of us afford our dogs a bounty of luxuries, as well as a kind of social and emotional intimacy usually reserved for members of the same family or, at least, the same species. On the other hand, pet dogs – companion dogs – have never been given the same level of import as working dogs.

Of course, part of this ambivalence stems from the inherent and obvious value of a working dog. Technology still can't replace a good herding dog, and there's not a machine in existence that can do a better job than a trained search dog finding a buried bomb. However, the value of dogs who comfort our children and lighten our lives is less obvious. These



dogs come without clear job descriptions, carrying metaphorical résumés that contain vague generalities with little inherent power. “Sweet, loving, with liquid eyes and soft fur. Great social skills. (Or not.) Easy to get along with. (Or not.) But worth it (see above: “sweet, loving, with liquid eyes and soft fur”).

Perhaps part of our ambivalence stems from our conditioned response to the word “pet” itself. The word has been used in reference to companion animals only in recent times; it originally described “an indulged or spoiled child” (thus the derivation of the phrase “teacher's pet”). By the mid-16th century, it was used to describe orphaned, hand-reared lambs, and eventually was applied to any “little animal that was fondled and indulged.” Notice the words “spoiled,” “fondled” and “indulged” – adjectives that do not inspire admiration, and certainly not words that engender our respect. No wonder many of us have started using the phrase “companion dog,” aware as we are of some amorphous negative connotations of the word “pet.”

I suspect there's another reason behind society's ambivalence toward companion dogs: our discomfort with the emotions they evoke. Emotions are private, primitive things, and sometimes we are better off keeping them to ourselves. An athlete isn't well served by walking toward a competitor with a grimace of fear on his face. Tears of frustration aren't going to move anyone up the corporate ladder. And yet, look what dogs do to us. They strip us bare and play with our deepest emotions, just as a Terrier shakes a rat. Dogs and people are connected not at the hip or even the heart, but at the limbic system, joined by the most primal part of our brains. Dogs

make us vulnerable, pure and simple. That's fine with some of us, but it may make others uncomfortable and motivate them to downplay the importance of the family dog.

Thus, it's at least understandable that the value of companion dogs is often demeaned by society in general. However, people in the dog fancy itself are the ones who surprise me – people who love dogs and devote much of their lives to them. Surely it's this group, and I count myself as a member of it, who should be aware of the value of a dog in the heart of a family. We need to think of family dogs as the most important product of our breeding and training efforts. Consider what we ask of our companion dogs: to live with well-intentioned people who might know little about dogs or how to communicate with them, to put up with a variety of visitors and intruders with grace and good manners, to ignore most things of interest to a dog (dead squirrels and cow pies, for instance), and to keep their weapons safely sheathed behind their lips at all times.

I write this knowing the value of a good working dog as well as anyone. Last week, I made a judgment error and my ram ended up on the highway in front of my farm. If I hadn't had Lassie, 13 years old and still a brilliant herding dog, someone could have gotten killed. Sound, healthy puppies bound for the show ring are equally important – the knowledge and dedication required to produce quality cannot be discounted.

But we must never forget the role of the pet dog in our society, and acknowledge that there is little that is more important than breeding dogs who bring love and joy into a household. If anything, we should charge *more* for the “pet” puppies, for surely they have the most essential job of all.

Price of a well-bred pup with the potential to become a great cattle dog? \$500 to \$750. Cost of a potential breed-ring champion? \$1,000 to \$5,000. Value of a companion dog who adds joy and love to your home? Priceless.

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