

Both Ends of the Leash

Love Story: Our extraordinary love affair with dogs

Patricia B. McConnell

In 1992, I fell in love with a dog name Luke. I brought him home from a herding dog trial one chilly October evening, not sure whether I'd keep him, not sure I wanted another dog. A gangly adolescent, Luke had been a disappointment to his first owner, who reported that he wouldn't come when called and had failed his first herding lessons. I'd had my eye on him ever since he was a pup, and had told the owner to let me know if she ever decided to sell him. When she did (I had more dogs than I needed, but every time I saw Luke something clicked inside, as if I'd finally found the combination to an old padlock I carried around, unopened), I took one last look at his bright, expectant face, wrote out a check, and drove him home through the red and orange hills of a midwestern autumn.

By sundown of the next day, Luke and I had fallen in love. I don't know any other way to describe it. I say "fallen in love" with the knowledge that eyes will roll, lips will purse, and heads will shake. "That's pathetic," someone said to me once when I described my love for Luke. It seems that people either get it or not; like the yes-no simplicity of digital computers, the world sorts us into those people who've been deeply moved by an animal, and those who can take them or leave them. I learned to censor myself, to test the waters by volunteering some platitude like "Yep, he's a great dog, Luke," instead of a deeper, more complex attempt to express how much I loved him.

"I'll Never Leave You"

Although the love we have for our dogs is often trivialized, there's nothing trivial about it. A few weeks after my father died, one of my mother's dogs was killed by a car. A visitor had come to help sort out my father's affairs, and unbeknownst to anyone, Jenny the exuberant Irish Setter had dashed out the door, running free and wild and no doubt, full of



innocent and cheerful abandon. She was killed half a mile down the road, in front of the church where my father's service was held. My mother, stalwart and noble after my father's death, sobbed so hard and for so long about her dog's death that it seemed as if her grief would physically rip her apart. I thought at the time, as did many, that Jenny's death allowed my mom to truly grieve the death of her husband. I don't think so now. My mother loved my father, but their relationship was burdened with disappointments and perceived betrayals. But Jenny? Jenny sparkled with nothing but joy and devotion. She asked for little and gave everything she had in return. There were no hard words late at night, no angry glances or saturated silences. No baggage. She loved Mom; Mom loved her: simple as that.

We're not always comfortable with the depth of emotion we can have for our dogs, but profound love isn't uncommon. I recently read an article about a teenager who risked his life to save his dog from a burning building. A tough-minded rancher once told me he'd rather die than abandon his cattle dog in a snowstorm. The evidence is overwhelming that during the days leading up to Hurricane Katrina, hundreds if not thousands of people chose to risk death rather than leave their animals behind. The state of Florida learned this lesson well during 1992's Hurricane Andrew, when thousands of people refused to evacuate because the shelters wouldn't take pets. These decisions compromised the safety of so many people that the state now provides shelters for pets as well as for people.

The lengths that normal people will go to in order to protect their dogs testifies to the love and devotion

many of us have for them. I remember a Wisconsin woman who was interviewed after a tornado destroyed her home and all her belongings. “We’re okay,” she kept saying, clutching her dog to her chest, “We’re okay” meant her husband, her children, and her dog: she wasn’t sorting them out by species. After the tragedy of Katrina, I heard discussions all over the country about what each of us would do if we were told to evacuate without our pets. What would you do if you had to choose between the safety of evacuation and risking your life to stay with your dog? Everyone at my office said we couldn’t imagine living with the knowledge that we’d left our dogs behind, although we’d do it if we were forced to evacuate to save our children. Merely the thought of making such a choice was so upsetting we could barely talk about it. Our response wasn’t unique to people whose lives and careers are devoted to dogs. My farm’s pragmatic chain-sawing, brush-clearing handyman said that someone would have to shoot him before he’d leave his Rat Terrier behind to die.

What in heaven’s name is going on here? Risking your life for a member of another species? Loving your dog as much as you love a human? That’s flat-out amazing if you think about it. And yet, even if some people think it’s crazy, those of us who love dogs love them like family or perhaps more accurately, like the family we always wanted.

Surely love, “an intense feeling of tender affection and compassion,” is the foundation of our relationship with dogs. I remember when I got my first Border Collie, Drift. Like an infatuated teenager, I was obsessed with his every move. I thought about him constantly, watched with a sense of wonder as he licked his paws, purred with comfort and completion when we cuddled together on the couch. There are millions of people who feel the same way, whose dogs bring them a unique happiness not found in other relationships.

I’m not talking about people who love animals *more* than they love people. I’m talking about people who love people, who have enriching, healthy relationships with friends and family and co-workers, and yet who love dogs so much they describe them as one of their greatest joys in life.

People who skip having drinks with co-workers after work because their dogs have been alone too long; people who take their dogs on vacation, who use

limited funds to buy them toys and food, who borrow money to pay the vet bill. I meet people everywhere who just want to talk about their dogs, about the silly little trick their Cairn Terrier learned all by himself, or the endearing way their Greyhound cuddles with them on the couch.

Our love for dogs is intense, pervasive, and sometimes heroic. If you think about it, it’s as remarkable as the physics of electrons and the wonder of outer space. It deserves our attention, and a good place to start is with the biology of love itself.

The Biology of Love

In a 2005 op-ed piece in The New York Times, the biologist Bernd Heinrich said: “Functionally, I suspect love is often [a] temporary chemical imbalance of the brain induced by sensory stimuli that causes us to maintain focus on something that carries an adaptive agenda.” Doesn’t make you all warm and mushy, now does it? However, Heinrich’s point was not to diminish love’s beauty, but to argue that love has a biological basis, and that there’s no reason to believe that we can claim it as uniquely human.

Oxytocin also plays a significant role in other kinds of love – familial, romantic, and even sexual. Oxytocin levels rise when friends hug, when mothers cuddle their babies, and when lovers have sex. It’s a “one size fits all” hormone, mediating love and attachment in all social relationships that involve feelings of care and connection. Women have higher levels of it than do men, which is not surprising, given oxytocin’s role in childbirth and lactation. Social animals have higher levels of it than solitary ones, a fact exemplified in two species of small mouselike animals called voles. The females of one species, which is highly social, have high levels of oxytocin, while, in the other, downright unsocial species, the females have exceptionally low levels. In people, higher levels of oxytocin correlate with higher levels of attachment and connection. Researchers have even found that spraying oxytocin into the nasal passages of human subjects doubled their tendency to trust others in a “game” that involved giving over custody of their money. In the not-too-distant future it will be wise to steer clear of blind dates with nasal spray bottles.

The central role of oxytocin helps explain why some people, and some dogs for that matter, seem to be

more loving and nurturing than others. Individuals vary in how much of the hormone they produce and how effectively they can utilize it when it's circulating. Individual experience can have a profound effect on people's ability to feel warm and loving towards others, too; one study found that children adopted from neglectful orphanages had lower levels of oxytocin after cuddling with their mothers than normal children did. However, remember that the impact of experience is constrained by the brain and the body it acts upon. Just as a painter can only work with the canvas and colors she has in front of her, so the effect of experience is influenced by the brain that absorbs it. I often wonder about oxytocin levels when I meet a dog whose aloof behavior breaks her owner's heart – does the dog have low levels of oxytocin, owing either to genetics or to early development? At present, I know of no one who is using oxytocin therapeutically (except for medical conditions relating to birth and lactation), but perhaps someday we'll be able to spray stand-offish dogs with oxytocin and turn them into social butterflies.

Love's Perfect Storm

Oxytocin and dopamine may help us understand the biology behind our strong feelings of attachment, but it doesn't explain why members of one species – ours – should be so ready to lose their hearts to a member of another species. Not only that, but why dogs? Of all the animals on earth, why is it dogs who have settled into our hearts like rain on the desert? Just sitting in a room with a dog can decrease your blood pressure and heart rate. Petting your dog makes oxytocin flood your body and increases the frequency of brainwaves associated with feelings of peace and contentment. Dogs can even elicit positive responses from emotionally damaged people when the best efforts of family and doctors have failed. Every group that takes dogs to nursing homes has its own story about an unresponsive patient who opened up for the first time in years after petting a dog. But why? Why are dogs such masters at working their way into our hearts as no other animal can?

The traditional answer to the question of why we so love dogs is that they give us “unconditional love” or “nonjudgmental positive regard.” To a large extent, this rings true. The cheerful, loving nature of most dogs brings us a purity of emotion hard to find anywhere else, no matter how much we want it. But

I think we need to address this question in more depth. Perhaps our love for dogs, and their love for us, is too complex to be explained by any one factor. It seems most likely that, at its best, the special bond we have with dogs is the result of a number of things, combining together into a “perfect storm” of love and devotion.

First, as we've already seen, the faces of dogs are remarkably expressive, and many of their expressions are similar to ours. More than any other animal except our own children (and possibly chimpanzees), dogs wear their hearts on their sleeves. The faces of dogs are like living, breathing, fur-covered emotions, with none of the masking and censoring made possible by the rational cortex of mature adult humans. The expressiveness of dogs gives them a direct line to the primitive and powerful emotional centers of our brains, and connects us in ways that nothing else ever could. When we look at dogs, we're looking into a mirror. That they express happiness so well, and that happiness is contagious, is just icing on the cake.

Second, the sociability of dogs is similar in many ways to that of humans. Dogs evolved from one of the world's most social species and naturally seek companionship. That's why sheep-guarding dogs stay with the flock, that's why some dogs form friendships with horses that last a lifetime, and that's why your dog is waiting at the window when you drive home from work. Dogs will live alone if they have to, but as long as there are enough resources to go around, dogs will always choose the company of others. This is as true of adult dogs as of puppies. In many other species, the young can form strong attachments to others, but once they've matured, their interest in forming new bonds decreases. Not so dogs – you can become best friends with an older dog in just days or weeks, so strong is their desire for companionship.

Although dogs cling to any kind of social relationship, they don't treat humans as any port in a storm. They seem to be as attracted to us as we are to them. Even dogs who've been socialized for only minutes as puppies are able to form strong attachments to people. (Usually, however, only to a small group of highly familiar people; they remain uncomfortable around strangers all their lives.) By contrast, wolves must be taken away from their

mothers at three weeks and raised by humans to be comfortable around us as adults. And dogs want more than just to hang out with us; they seem to want to understand us, and to want us to understand them. They watch our faces all the time for information, just as humans do when they're unsure of what another person is trying to communicate. You can see people do the very same thing, in a game that dog trainers play to sharpen their skills. One person uses a clicker to train another to perform some action, in a kind of "warmer/colder" game. No words or visual cues are allowed; there's just the sound of the click to tell the trainee that she's on the right track. Yet even though trainees are told they'll get no other information, they turn to look at the face of the trainer when they become confused. Dogs do exactly that when they're confused about what we want: herding dogs will break their focused stare to turn and look at their handler's face with the visual equivalent of "What?!" Dogs might even be better at decoding certain types of human signals than our closest relatives, chimpanzees. In some studies, chimpanzees, even ones familiar with people, weren't able to locate hidden food if the experimenter pointed to it. Subsequent studies on dogs suggested that they were more adept than our closest relatives at the task.

A dog's desire to communicate with people fits within the bounds of a dog's evolutionary baggage, in which pack members hunted together, raised their young together, and fought to the death to keep the group together. You can't coordinate your efforts as a group without some kind of communication, so it's no wonder that dogs are as obsessed with social communication as we are. But dogs' desire and ability to communicate, and their formation of attachments, transcend species boundaries. Research found that in novel environments, kenneled dogs were calmer in the presence of a human caretaker than with a dog they'd been kenneled with for over two months. It's remarkable that an animal would choose an individual of an entirely different species for comfort and companionship. Imagine being lost and alone in the jungle and stumbling upon a person and a bird – and bonding with the bird and ignoring the person. In one study, dogs living in shelters formed attachments to people after only minimal contact. It took only three ten-minute sessions of petting for dogs to become attached, and for the dogs to stand at the door, waiting, if the person left the room.

Some explanations of dogs' attachment to humans are not particularly romantic. Psychologist John Archer argues that dogs are simply social parasites, who have learned to manipulate our emotions so as to obtain free food, safety, and, in some cases, appointments with certified canine massage therapists and animal communicators. Lord knows dogs are an evolutionary success story: just compare the numbers of dogs in any given country with the number of wolves. However, the biological success of dogs doesn't negate the profound feelings of love and devotion that go along with it; we don't dismiss the love of parent for child simply because it's to the parent's advantage to pass on his or her genes. I think it's shortsighted – sad really – to dismiss the love that dogs have for us in such mechanistic terms.

Still, there is an important truth to be found in an objective view of our relationship with dogs. Painful though it might be, we need to re-examine the belief that dogs give us unconditional love. There's no question but that most of our dogs love us, and there's little doubt that, sometimes, their love is often almost epic in its intensity. However, the chance that our dogs are never irritated with us is slim at best. How convenient, then, that they can never say so.

You may wish with all your heart that you could talk to your dog, but as we're often reminded, we'd better watch out for what we wish for, because we just might get it. The power of speech is a wonderful thing, but it comes with a price. It's not true that "sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me." We all know that bruises and cuts often heal faster than the damage done by a cruel comment. Personally, I'm glad my dogs can't nail me with the kind of hurtful remark that can come out of the mouths of even the kindest of friends. I'm quite sure that sometimes I'd rather not know what my dogs had to say. I'm reminded of the "words" of Washoe, a chimpanzee raised by Beatrice and Robert Gardner, who ordered trainers she didn't like out of the room with the American Sign Language for "You green pile of poop."

We might yearn to tell our dogs why they can't go on a walk while their injured foot heals, or to explain that we're only leaving town for a couple of days, but I doubt that we'd have the pure, uncluttered connections we now enjoy if the relationship were burdened by language. In *The New Work of Dogs*,

Jon Katz tells a story about a man who loved his dog because the dog was the only individual he didn't have to talk to. Katz suspects that men often love dogs because dogs never ask them to talk about their feelings. Women love dogs so much, he suggests, because they see them as being so supportive. A study reported in *The New York Times* found that half of the female veterinary students surveyed said they got more emotional support from their dogs than they did from their husbands. Surely our perception that dogs are supportive is bolstered by the fact that they can't tell us to shut up when we're talking too much. The fact is, some dogs probably do give us unconditional love, but not all dogs do, and most dogs don't every minute of every day. It just feels that way, given their expressiveness, their childlike cheerfulness, and bless it, their inability to communicate in words. Overall, it seems that what we can't say to dogs is a small price to pay for what we gain from our wordless style of communication.

As if emotionality, expressiveness, a high degree of sociability, and the inability to tell us to shut up weren't enough, there's another important factor that influences our devotion to dogs. We humans have evolved to be protective and nurturing to big-eyed, dependent young mammals, and dogs elicit this state of mind from us with a force stronger than any hurricane. Like young children who stimulate our feelings of nurturance, dogs are nonverbal and have limited abilities. They can't go to the store and buy food; they can't open the door and let themselves out. If we left for work one day and never came home, they'd die, trapped and alone and unable to take care of themselves. In these ways they are the exact equivalent of young humans – nonverbal and dependent, wrapped in a fluffy, fuzzy package that says "I'm cute and cuddly and I need you."

Our feelings of parental love and nurturance are not to be sneezed at; they've kept primates like us going for millions of years. The parents of many animals walk away without a care once the eggs are laid or the sperm is transferred, but we shower our young with attention and care over a prolonged period. Lions may raise their young with affectionate licks and cuddles, but they'll walk away and let their babies starve to death to save their own lives. Not so humans, dogs, or wolves: we're obsessed with raising, nurturing and protecting our young, and we'll sacrifice our own lives to save theirs. Just the sight

of young, helpless mammals can change our internal hormonal balance and increase the amount of oxytocin in our bloodstream. Although our complicated brains enable us to be rational and creative, underneath that complexity are ancient structures that generate primal reactions to big-eyed, fluffy mammals. As the writer and behaviorist Karen London so aptly said "Dogs, the source of so much pure joy and warm comfort, are a reminder that perhaps the passion in our lives is too great to be contained within the bounds of humanity." There's great truth to that, and it's based not on some neurotic need to replace our feelings toward people with feelings toward dogs, but on a deep-seated biological drive to nurture small, dependent things.

So there you have it, a perfect package of love, an animal whose looks and behavior leave many of us weak in the knees. Dogs elicit the love and the desire to nurture that we're designed to feel toward young dependent mammals, and their expressiveness just ups the ante. The mere sight of them bathes us with the hormones associated with love and devotion. At the same time, sometimes accurately, sometimes not, we feel from them the kind of love we want from our *parents*, that no-holds-barred, "unconditional" love that psychologists tell us we've all been seeking since infancy. It's a double whammy of epic proportions – we love them like children, and at the same time feel loved by them with the kind of pure, primal love that we needed when we were babies ourselves. Wow. Dogs get us coming and going. In truth, we're the ones who are helpless.

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