

## Pets Are Family

ers keeping a dog who has destroyed thousands of dollars' worth of rugs and furniture or a cat that had not used the litter box in three years would say, "We can't get rid of him. He's a member of the family." More than 70 percent of our subjects considered the animal to be a family member. Dr. Ann Cain, a nurse and family therapist, found that 87 percent of her subjects placed the animal within the family. Barbara Jones, who studies adolescent pony-club members, found that more than 80 percent considered the horse to be a family member. Thus the feeling that pets are kin is not dependent upon the animal living in the house.

Someone living with a pet is living with a family. A pet owner is greeted at the door when she returns at night; she has someone to sit on the couch with and share the television. There is someone she must shop for, feed, and care for and who thus gives to her own life the paced, circular rhythm of family life.

Family members are devoted to each other, and even when the family member is a pet, there is a strong feeling that family members should stick together. We rescue our dogs, and we believe that our dogs are capable of rescuing us. Franklin Roosevelt was accused of sending a destroyer to the Aleutian Islands to rescue his family pet, Fala. There is no doubt in anyone's mind that Richard Nixon's family pet, Checkers, saved his campaign for the vice presidency. Both men are remembered for speeches in which the image of their family pets was used to enhance their own image. The scene of a dog waking the sleeping members of a family as smoke fills the house, drawing an unconscious person from the flames, or bringing the fire fighters to an unconscious master hidden beneath rubble are constant elements of dog stories, real and invented. Animals are family, and the family sticks together.

Pets are usually not just any member of the family, however. They are children, a designation partly reflecting the realities of our treatment of pets. Like children, the animal must be continually cared for: fed and watered, kept from

Do OUR FAMILY members have to be human? A geneticist would say yes, but most pet owners would answer with an unequivocal no. In this chapter we will explore how we treat our pets as family and why it might benefit our health and well-being to do so.

One of the first news films following the Mount St. Helens volcanic eruption in May 1980 showed a gnarled old woodsman in checkered shirt and suspenders being rescued by helicopter. His first act was to place his dog carefully on the seat of the helicopter; then, and only then, did he enter the aircraft. It was clear that he would not leave without the dog, in spite of the exploding volcano, because the dog was family.

In less dramatic ways, clients in the veterinary clinic demonstrate again and again that their pets are family. Own-

cating dangerous foods and objects, bathed, groomed, protected against the elements, clothed when necessary, brought to the doctor, and spoken for at the doctor's. Like children, pets are petted, stroked, and touched at the will of the owner. The pet's range of motion is curtailed to protect it from harm, and its sexual expression is controlled and limited. However, the act that critically defines a pet as a child is our willingness to put up with the excrement of cats and dogs—to handle it, to permit it in the house, to accept it in the streets.

Dogs are the quintessential pet because, more than any other animal, they have been shaped genetically to look and behave like juveniles. The cat is much more adult in form and behavior, and domestic cats closely resemble the wild forms. In contrast, think of the difference between a wolf and a basset hound or a Chihuahua. Even horses, with their massive size and power, are only a partial exception. Although most riders think of their mounts as children, adolescents frequently think of their horses as brothers or sisters.

Most pets are members of families that also have human children. Yet pets are treated like children, even when human children are around, because they provide continual access to the kind of uncomplicated affection that parents exchange with young children. As soon as children grow into independent beings, they are not available for affection on demand. Love becomes complex, and affection must be meted out according to the child's behavior. The child, sensing the relationship between affection and subordination, begins to refuse his mother's and father's kisses and hugs in search of his or her own independence.

But pets are constant. They do not grow up the way children do. A mother of a high-school junior, distraught at the death of her dog, said of her son, "He's a big boy now and I'm proud of him, but he just grabs breakfast and is out the door with a quick good-bye, hardly ever a hug. But Tibbs [the dog] was always there for me in the morning. He stayed on the couch with me while I took my coffee, the cup in one hand and the other around his neck."

Touching an animal, as this woman did, is part of the way we treat it like a young child. In touching and talking to animals, people achieve a kind of intimate dialogue, even if they have just met the animal. Their contact resembles the most intimate exchanges between a parent and an infant or between lovers who know and trust each other. When petting animals, a person's face changes: the lines of tension smooth out; the smile becomes less forced, more relaxed and open; and the voice becomes softer, slower, and slightly higher in pitch than normal, with prolongation of vowels and ending consonants. Much of the speech consists of questions framed for the animal. Said one cat owner, "What's a mattah? Are you all right? All right? What are you doing there? Yes! Yes! What are you doing there? What d'yah see? Nice cat! What d'yah see there?" Between each question the speaker looked at her cat as if waiting for a reply, petting the animal to draw its attention. Sometimes the owner will take the animal's head in hand to force direct eye contact or solicit a kiss or both. Such dialogues parallel the talk and touch between mothers and infants. The childlike position of animals brings forth a loving intimacy that is appropriate to children. The dialogue between owner and pet confirms the family role of the pet.

Smiles and strokes are not the only vocabulary used to express the childlike position of pets, and dogs in particular. Dogs are disciplined and restrained with physical force. It is possible to hit them when they disobey or jerk them about with their leash. In turn, dogs are permitted to bite other family members. Only very young children are restrained and disciplined in this way and permitted to strike back in return. In this respect, too, pets are more privileged than children, and few children over the age of two would be permitted to assault adults the way some pets do.

To gain an impression of the dimensions of their feelings toward their pets, we asked our subjects, "What about your animal gives you the most satisfaction?"

They're the best friends any time and all the time!

He is pleasant, self-sufficient, friendly, independent, and has his own relationship with people and other animals.

He is the greatest thing to love. I take care of my André like I take care of my children. We all love him very much. Her personality being geared toward people. Her love of children. Her friendliness. Her companionship. Her cute behavior. The obvious love and affection shown in return. The fun of enjoying her company. Knowing she enjoys us and is content in an adopted home. (She was six years old when we got her from the SPCA.)

His presence seems to contribute to a complete home.

My five children are fairly grown. Three are not living at home, and the activity that pets provide is appreciated—noise, interaction of cat and dog, plus the physical care of animals. I like to see the cat and dog play or sleep together while I work. It's rewarding to feed them and walk with them.

She is so loving, affectionate, adorable, is tiny, so I can take her with me anywhere practically.

His love all day and night.

He is a cat. I love cats. He is always around. He's interesting. He's cute. He responds. He needs me. He purrs. He plays. He loves me. When I come home from work, he is always at the door, and he meows and is happy to see me.

There were many other long answers and many more of only one or two words. The common words, repeated again and again, were "love," "affection," "companionship," "trust," "loyalty," "need," and "care." These words seem to be at the core of almost all descriptions of the bond between people and pets and are also central to any intimate family relationship. Play, activity, obedience, and control were mentioned only slightly less frequently. These sentiments are also central to our life with children. We found, then, that our subjects' perception of their most important feelings about their pets can best be expressed with the metaphor of the pet as a family member.

Family members can be close or distant, and it is possible to get people to describe how close they are to their pets within the family circle. There is a very simple but effective technique for obtaining this information. You simply draw a

large empty circle on a sheet of paper and designate it as "the family circle." You then ask the person to draw herself within the circle, to place the other family members in the circle as well, and then to mark the position of her pet or pets. When people do this, they almost always draw their pet closer to themselves than other family members. Pets are not only family members, they may be preferred family members, the ones we feel closest to.

People who do not intuitively feel that pets are family tend to view them as only substitute children for those who are childless. They are in part correct. When Katcher's barber, who is happily and militantly gay, heard of his interest in pets, the comment was, "We can't have children, so we teach school or have pets. Teaching school, you only have children for a year, but pets you have for a long time. They're the closest thing to children we can have." The barber shop was guarded by an obese ten-pound mongrel dog called Wolf, who had huge liquid eyes and approached each customer with lowered head and wagging tail, begging to be petted. When she was petted, she would collapse, belly up, waving her paws in pleasure, while the owner would call out with delighted irony, "That's right, Wolf! Kill, girl! Kill!"

Most pets, however, are members of families that also have human children. Among our sample of veterinary-school clients, only 15 percent of pet owners lived alone, and the number of these who considered their pet a member of the family was no higher than in homes with children: seven out of ten. A survey by the American Veterinary Medical Association found that 72.4 percent of households with children also have a pet, compared with 54.4 percent of couples with no children having pets. The high percentage of pets found in families is partly because they are said to be good for children and partly because a family has more resources for raising a pet and is more likely to live in the kind of housing where pets are permitted.

One of the roles that an animal can play within the family is that of a bridge between people. Two people within the family who have difficulty talking to each other can sometimes

interact through or around a pet. Katcher interviewed a young wildlife photographer who was accompanied by her dog, Need. "I named her that," the woman explained, "because I needed her and she needed me." She had found the animal at the scene of an accident in which both its front paws had been severely damaged, with fragmented bone and extensive tissue injury. No one could find the dog's owner, so the driver of the car that was responsible took both the dog and the photographer to the hospital. He offered to pay part of the costs of the animal's extensive surgery. The woman tried in vain to locate an owner. Instead, at the site of the accident, she found several witnesses who were willing to contribute toward the animal's care. During the months of repetitive operations and recovery, she maintained contact with this network of people who were connected to her through the dog. On the afternoon that Katcher interviewed her, they were having a small party at her apartment to celebrate the final removal of the casts. The party was her first in the new apartment where she now lived with Need and four other stray animals. Need had brought all these people together.

This same woman described her own family, in which pets were the only bridge to her father. As a child she could approach him only when he was with his dog and only by starting to pet and play with the dog. Her father would join in the play and begin to talk. At other times he was at best taciturn and frequently would not talk at all. Now, because he no longer has an animal, she always takes Need or another pet along when she visits. As it was in the past, their dialogue is always through the animal.

Parents frequently attempt to engineer this kind of bridging when they obtain animals for their children. For example, a family moves to a distant suburb and buys a horse for one of their children. The process of keeping the horse and teaching the child to ride and even to compete in shows becomes a family occupation in which large amounts of resources are pooled. In less dramatic fashion, buying a dog for a child is one way that some parents hope to establish a

renewed bond of activities with children. It is not surprising that while 30 percent of all families own dogs, 56 percent of families with children under thirteen have at least one dog.

This effort at bridging the generations is not always successful, and difficulties arise when the child rejects the parents' attempts. A parent, usually the mother, ends up assuming the entire burden of the animal's care, while the child treats the animal quite casually, like a toy, playing with it intermittently at most. The animal may become the focus of family conflict and, instead of bringing parents and children together, push them further apart. There are two possible solutions to this standoff. The parent may get rid of the pet, taking it to a shelter. The "pet incident" then becomes another failure recorded in the child's family history or for the child may become the memory of another arbitrary parental crime—"giving away my dog." Alternatively, the mother may keep the animal as a substitute child, enjoying with the dog the kind of closeness and intimacy that is no longer possible with the child. Many mothers who complain that pet care devolves to them actually welcome the perpetuation of care and intimacy that the animal brings.

At the other extreme, children can close themselves off from the world of adults with an animal. We have already described Alasdair Macdonald's study of Scottish children who regarded their animals as their most significant social contact. When Katcher was growing up, he was very small for his age, two grades ahead of his peers in school, and somewhat uncoordinated to boot. After-school games and sports offered him only pain, failure, ridicule, and isolation. He filled the time with reading unless his mother drove him out of the house. Then he would take his dog, Wags, to the park, avoiding schoolyards and corners where his classmates played. Once he was deep in the park, he could begin a constant dialogue with the animal. They were in a safe world of their own.

In a study done at the University of Minnesota, Michael Robin, a social worker, investigated pet ownership among high-school students who stayed out of trouble with the law

and those who had a police record. He found that delinquent youth had pets just as frequently as the other high-school children. This result alone was important because there are wide-eyed animal lovers who believe that pets are the answer for most of the world's ills. One overly credulous veterinarian we encountered was sure that pets could protect against delinquency, venereal disease, and teenage pregnancy. When Robin investigated the relationship between child and pet, however, there were significant differences between the two groups. The children who had no difficulties with the law considered their animals to be companions and members of the family. The delinquents, however, considered their pets to be personal friends, a bulwark *against* the family and the world.

"Trixie was very special to me," said one delinquent. "We went on walks together, went to the park and played. She even slept on the edge of my bed. When I was sad, I could cuddle up to her and she wouldn't hold anything against me. She just sat there and loved me." Said another, "My favorite pet was my dog Bell. I loved her very much. I took care of her all the time and never mistreated her. Sometimes she was the only person I could talk to." Or again, "My kitty was the joy of my life. She never hurt me or made me upset like my parents. She always came to me when she wanted affection." The anger behind the delinquent's defensive love of animals was revealed by another child. "Pets are important especially for kids without brothers and sisters. They can get close to this animal and they both can grow up to love one another. Men have killed for loved animals."

Unfortunately for these delinquent children, their families did not protect their pets. At the time of the study, half of the untroubled children still had their special pet, but fewer than 50 percent of the delinquent children had theirs. More strikingly, more than a third of the delinquent children's special pets had been deliberately killed by family or others. The rate of such loss among the other children was only 12 percent. This kind of violent loss characterizes the

family life of many delinquent and disturbed children, and both child and pet suffer. In an English study that looked at the characteristics of families who were reported for animal abuse, there was a close association between disturbed family life, maltreatment of children, and abuse of animals.

Pets can also isolate people from each other. In the film *Le Chat*, Simone Signoret and Jean Gabin play a husband and wife bound together by dependency and hatred. The husband's cat was the only object of his affection, the center of his emotional life, his friend, affectionate partner, and constant companion in the house. The wife, finally overwhelmed by the contrast between her state and the cat's, shoots the animal. Love for the pet became magnified into hate for another family member.

The same sentiment is captured in an Honoré Daumier etching from *Humors of Married Life*. An elderly couple is shown sitting at a table, the woman knitting, with a cat on her shoulder, and the man hand-feeding the dog, who sits on the table. The caption reads, "She has her animal. He has his own, and the four get on like cats and dogs."

Pets can also cause problems in the bedroom, most frequently when the pet's owner introduces a new sleeping partner. In one case a graduate student became engaged to a young woman who had lived alone with her cat for two years. She was now quite attached to her pet. Her new fiancé was the first friend to sleep overnight in her apartment. When he began a sexual relationship with her, the cat was disturbed by the "new" activity. He had never seen male genitalia and attempted on several occasions to bat at these strange objects with his paws. Although the graduate student avoided contact or injury, he became frightened and began to lose his erection when the cat was present. The young woman did not wish to ban the cat from the bedroom, insisting that the cat's howling and scratching when it was put out spoiled the experience of lovemaking for her. The conflict was resolved simply by having the graduate student reassure his friend that he liked and accepted her cat, while

she was able to agree that it would not be harmful for the cat to learn to spend a little time outside her bedroom. Obviously the initial responses of both parties indicated other problems, and managing the pet did not remove the male client's castration anxiety or resolve the young woman's ambivalence about an adult sexual role. It did, however, permit them and the cat to continue life together.

Some sexual conflicts that involve a pet cannot be so easily resolved, and animals can be among the mechanisms that people use to avoid sexual encounters. One couple was seen in consultation at the veterinary school because they were having difficulty agreeing to put down their terminally ill pet. The dog had severe arthritis and was incontinent. Over the past five years, he had been a major source of friction in the marriage. The husband felt sexually inhibited and turned off when the animal was in the bed, yet his wife would not otherwise have intercourse. "The dog would feel punished," she said, "if he were not permitted to sleep in his usual place." The dog never took any notice of sexual activity when it did occur but simply curled up at the foot of the bed. The husband felt particularly humiliated because he was forced to lift the dog when the animal's arthritis prevented it from jumping into bed. The battle over sex and the dog was only one of a number of chronic quarrels between them, and the animal was used by the wife to subordinate her husband's needs to her own.

In similar fashion, pets can be used to express a variety of quarrels between family members. A mother can complain loudly to her cat about the way in which other people are treating her. Our ability to talk to animals permits us to express feelings about other people that we cannot express directly. We can do this either by talking to the animal in private or by going through the charade of talking to the pet when others in the family are around to hear. This is safer than complaining directly, because if the words bring conflict, it is possible to retreat by saying, "I was only talking to the cat."

Sometimes animals are used in more direct combat. At her animal-behavior clinic, Victoria Voith received a call from a terrified wife who complained that she lived in constant fear of her husband's German shepherd, which would growl and threaten her whenever she came into the same room as the dog. During the day she would have to sneak about the house, peering around corners to avoid the animal. Her husband refused to discipline his pet and delighted in the animal's "fighting spirit." The wife was bitten and twice required emergency-room treatment. Each time the husband blamed the wife, not the dog. The woman called Voith when her husband was away and said that she was too frightened to talk to him about treatment for the animal. She was encouraged to come in and talk and was given an appointment, which she did not keep. When a social worker called her, she refused to talk to him and asked that he not call again.

Sometimes it is possible to make a therapeutic mistake by recommending that the wrong kind of family take a pet. Michael McCulloch was treating a woman who became depressed when she was disappointed by a lifelong dream not being fulfilled: she had always wanted a close and loving marriage but had married a man who was addicted to work. She then soothed herself with the belief that after his retirement they would enjoy the close, affectionate marriage she wanted. But her husband kept putting off retirement, and she became depressed. McCulloch suggested that she and her husband get a pet, which could act as a kind of a bridge between them. With characteristic enthusiasm, the husband bought a large Doberman, which terrified his wife. The dog, not the wife, became the center of his life and his wife's life-in-rival.

Another case had a happier ending. The family beagle, Postman, did not like the father. He would run and hide when the father returned home, and if the father approached, Postman would cower, leak urine, and sometimes growl. The father couldn't walk the dog, although the animal loved

walks, and couldn't even feed him unless he put down the bowl and walked away. The contrast between the dog's joyous affection for the mother and children and his fear of the father was troubling the whole family, making the father moody when the dog was about.

Since this family had always been close and truly wanted to remain so, the problem was solved simply by using the first motto of dog training: Food conquers all! Postman was given only water in the morning and spent the rest of the day trying to coax the mother or children to feed him, but with no results. When the father came home, he opened a can of dog food, laced it with some pieces of salami (a special treat), put the bowl down, and stepped back only a few feet. For a long time, Postman looked from the bowl to the father, then to the rest of the family. Finally hunger won out, and he approached the bowl, on his belly, leaking drops of urine in fear. He gulped his meal, eyes on the father, and immediately retreated.

The following day the routine was repeated, but Postman was less frightened and approached more rapidly. As time went on, the father moved closer, until Postman was at the dish before it left his hand. Then, before Postman was given his meal, Dad offered him pieces of salami from his hand. At first they had to be dropped on the floor, but after only a few trials, the dog caught them in midair and then accepted them from his hand. The next nights were spent training Postman to follow Dad for the salami bribes. It was not long before Postman was running down the garlic-paved road to the loving father.

For those who love their pets, cruelty to animals is inconceivable. Recent research has found that animal abuse is closely linked to other forms of abuse. Thus senseless animal abuse can serve as a warning, indicating the need for therapy. James Hutton, a British social worker, examined families that had been reported for cruelty to animals to determine if they were known to other social agencies for problems like child or wife abuse. He found that most of the families that had

been investigated for cruelty to animals were also known for other serious psychiatric and social problems. Thus if agencies were to share files, animal abuse could be a good early warning for abusive behavior toward people.

Dr. Randall Lockwood, when at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, designed a test in which patients in a child abuse treatment program ascribe meanings to drawings of scenes involving animals that may be at risk, such as when family members arrive home to find the dog standing by an overturned trash can. These modified thematic apperception tests and extensive interviews indicate that such patients often ascribe a variety of roles to the animals, including those of scapegoat and protector of a vulnerable family member—patterns that are similar for families with abused children. Lockwood, like Hutton, finds that animal abuse is very common in families with a history of child abuse. From this study valuable diagnostic measures may aid in identifying people with potentially distorted views of life before they commit acts that hurt themselves and others.

Animal cruelty is thus receiving some serious legal and scientific attention, both to protect animals and to better understand the people involved. There is far less commitment to understanding zoophilia, which is often addressed only when it occurs in conjunction with other psychiatric disorders. Few people appear willing to speculate, if only transiently, on its occurrence as part of a normal relationship.

One of the great taboos of our culture is using an animal as a collaborator in sexual activity. This prohibition is probably more effective than the prohibition against incest with children. Since the pet has the status of *favorite* child in the family, sexual exploitation of pets is seen as a particularly loathsome kind of incest.

Boris Levinson, who was among the first people to use dogs in the therapy of disturbed people, hypothesized that one of the main reasons people resist sterilizing their dogs and cats is that they recognize the animal's sexuality and appreciate it, either vicariously or directly. For some, watching dogs mate is repulsive, but many enjoy watching and may

even hold the animal. Others, especially youngsters, enjoy watching, even masturbating at the same time. Undoubtedly, for many people, animals provide the first real insight into how sexual intercourse is accomplished. Dr. Heini Hediger, a European zoologist who has spent most of his career working in zoos, reports that the sexual behavior of zoo animals is a major attraction.

People's treatment of animals often includes behaviors that at least mimic intimate human behavior: gentle touch, petting, soft and loving speech, scratching almost any part of the body, and kissing. Words of frank affection accompany these gestures and are openly used. But for the vast majority of owners and handlers of animals, the interaction stops short of actual or prolonged genital contact; for a few people, it does not.

In their research on people's sexual behavior, Dr. Alfred Kinsey and his associates asked questions about animal contact, but only after the person being interviewed had developed trust in the scientific purpose of the interview and believed that the researchers made no social judgments. They did not ask whether the person had sex with animals but how often, as if to imply that a positive answer would not be surprising or shocking. Between 40 and 50 percent of farm boys, especially city-bred boys now living on farms, indicated some actual sexual activity with animals, perhaps in response to the unavailability of females in the religious or moral setting of the time. Eight percent of urban men, mostly adolescents, also reported such activity. Only 3.6 percent of adolescent urban women reported similar activity—74 percent of it with dogs—and in only 1.2 percent was there repeated genital contact to orgasm. The behaviors included genital contact and masturbation—dogs and cats were encouraged to lick the person's genitals, and actual coitus was performed with the animal.

Education was strongly associated with this behavior: the higher the education, the more likely sexual activity was. This may reflect some reporting bias, as it is generally assumed that better-educated people are more open with in-

vestigators, but the more educated people also reported increased involvement with other, less traditional forms of sexuality, such as a greater variety of sexual positions during intercourse with people. Generally, educated people are less tradition-bound and more experimental. It should be noted that Kinsey's findings on the incidence of zoophilia were that "no other type of sexual activity . . . accounts for a smaller proportion of the total outlet of the total population for both males and females."

While in graduate school, Beck attended a psychiatry class taught by Dr. John Money. A female patient agreed to be interviewed before the class. She complained that she always developed a psychosomatic case of stomach gas (belches) whenever she tried to have sexual intercourse with her husband. She also tended to gently feel the genitals of the young babies in her care. Almost in passing she mentioned that she did have intercourse with the family dog. She had been in therapy for many years but had never mentioned this aspect of her troubled life because she felt the doctors would not understand. She was more afraid of the judgment that might be passed on her activity with her dog than of being unable to have normal intercourse or being a pedophile. It was only after she heard Money lecture on zoophilia at her church that she realized she needed to discuss this problem, and she sought his help. (Incidentally, Money gave such lectures because he believed that this problem has been driven so far underground that people were not getting the help they needed. He was apparently correct.)

In another report a man and woman, their fourteen-year-old daughter, and the family's Doberman arrived at the emergency room of a veterinary hospital. They wanted the dog examined for any venereal diseases that could be transmitted to the daughter because they caught her having intercourse with it. The fascinating aspect was that their first response was not to go to a psychiatrist or a gynecologist but a veterinarian. The dog was examined and cultured for leptospirosis and found healthy. There was no follow-up.

In New York City the Department of Health received a



call from a woman who said that she was picked up by some men with a dog while she was hitchhiking. They drove to a secluded place and made her have intercourse with the dog while they watched. She was concerned about disease. She refused to give her name or come in for an examination, and there was no way to confirm the truthfulness of the story. In any event, it indicated that for some, voyeuristic and rape fantasies include roles for animals.

In fact, pornography using dogs, horses, and pigs is relatively common and available. Beek collected data by visiting a peep-show theater and observed patrons depositing quarters to view films of sexual action; nearly one-third of the choices involved animal subjects. Many of the paperback books and magazines being sold there combined human and animal partners. In large cities one can find newspaper advertisements for "party" dogs that are specially trained to service people.

Such cases are not common, but they and others like them provide additional evidence that animals, especially dogs, can be "people" or "family" in a most intimate way. Sexual interaction can be a chance or even accidental encounter, a fantasy, or a full-blown sexual act leading to orgasm for both partners. The feelings about sexual encounters with animals are more important than the actual acts themselves, and we will examine them later in the book.

In the context of this chapter, however, it must be recognized that zoophilia can be a kind of incest, and thus our reactions to men having intercourse with animals are different from our notions about the equivalent acts for women. Men having intercourse with farm animals is a subject of humor and mild contempt, like masturbation. This attitude is reflected in our response to jokes about farmhands and heifers. Women having intercourse with animals, however, is not regarded as humorous. The idea is frequently horrifying and is used in fantasy as a means of punishing or degrading women. Yet women's sexual engagement with animals is continually fascinating to men. It is perhaps no accident that in the three

cases cited before—the only ones in our files—the human partners are women. This combination of horror, degradation, and fascination is identical to the feelings surrounding the idea of the male child committing incest with his mother.

Apparently, in our best and most innocent affectionate interchanges with our pets, and in some of the worst, the animal still acts as a kind of child. What value does the pet's child-like status have for us? In brief, defining a pet as a kind of child permits us to nurture the animal and to gain all of the benefits that such nurturing provides.

When Katcher was on a radio call-in show devoted to the health benefits of pets, a woman told him she had learned how much her pets meant to her when she had had open-heart surgery. Her heart stopped, and she felt herself floating over her body. At that moment she thought, "I can't die, my dog needs me." The surgery was five years ago, and since then the dog has been replaced. But she will never be without a dog, because her pet pulled her back to life.

Pets, houseplants, and gardens pull us into life by requiring care that must be performed day after day. They do not vary much from year to year, and they require simple skills and some patience. They are the kind of cyclical activities that once marked all human life and therefore pull us back into the security of cyclical time. The little acts of caring, feeding, watering, tending, and protecting all call forth a response, and the sum of the acts leaves the caregiver with the feeling that he or she is needed. The reciprocal feelings of caring for something and being needed are lines that can hold us to life. The solemn act of feeding an animal is often the first real connection that a child makes with the living world, establishing him as a caretaker. Some eighty years later, the same person, who may now seem to have little to offer any other human, can continue caring by setting out some crumbs for the winter birds. The pleasure in the act is the same, and the feeling of being needed is the same.

When people become depressed and cease caring, they

fall prey to illness and accident. This increased vulnerability is reflected in an increased death rate. Some illness may come from the failure to maintain normal patterns of eating and exercise. However, depression and the experience of giving up can produce subtle pathological changes that disorganize the body chemistry, reduce resistance to infectious disease, and accelerate the progress of chronic degenerative diseases, such as coronary-artery disease and cancer.

Psychiatrists have identified a syndrome they call helplessness/hopelessness, whose victims no longer believe that they can improve their lives and stop trying. The syndrome has been associated with greater rates of invasive cancer and even a vulnerability to sudden death. The kind of deaths reported by anthropologists that result when someone feels he has been the target of witchcraft may be an example of the lethal effect of this depressed emotional state. The frequent accounts of people dying suddenly after the death of a relative are also evidence of the deadly aspects of despair.

When people maintain patterns of caring, whether for a house, a garden, pets, or other people, they are protecting themselves against despair, against giving up. They are rewarded by feeling needed. The word "care" has many meanings, however, and one of them is "worry," as when someone is burdened with care. You do worry about the things you care for. Unfortunately, the association of care with effort and worry leads us to conceive of old age as a period in which one should live a "carefree existence." After retirement, people are urged to give up their cares. It can be a lethal trade-off. The person who stops caring for something may have taken the first steps to the hopelessness/helplessness syndrome. And those who cope best with old age are those who continue the daily acts of caring, especially the most satisfying ones—care rendered to living things, such as pets and gardens.

Nurturing engages mind and body, and the alterations in emotion and body chemistry created when we care for others influence our health. To understand why we feel better

and why we are healthier when we care for others, it is necessary to reexamine human evolution.

It is a reasonable hypothesis that the prolonged care of infants in primate and early human groups was facilitated and maintained by deeply rooted physiological, psychological, and social rewards. If child-rearing makes parents healthier and more socially attractive, their infants would have a better chance of survival. Survival of parents and their young would also be increased if competing adults without children were less attractive and more vulnerable to disease and death. If you wish to ensure the passage of your genes into the next generations, then stay healthy as long as you can, aid your children in the competition for resources, and then pass out of the picture rapidly when you become only another competitor.

The history of human evolution is a history of increasing time spent in nurturing infants as the size of the human brain increased. The continuing enlargement of the brain demanded that infants be born in an increasingly helpless state because more and more of the growth of the brain had to be completed after birth—the human pelvis is not large enough to accommodate the fully grown brain. It is reasonable to assume that as the period of infantile dependency on adults began to grow, members of the kin network became engaged in part of this child care. This would be an evolutionary efficient strategy, since kin fostering would also result in the passage of some of one's genes into the next generation. The progressive infantile dependence in succeeding evolutionary stages would extend the period of time and the kinds of people engaged in affectionate nurturing and also decrease the distinction between adult and childlike characteristics, blurring the distinctive traits that release affectionate care. One could hypothesize that greater generalization of the nurturing response would also extend to disabled and sick members of the band, resulting in a higher survival rate from illness and accident. There is some evidence for this generalization of nurturing in the fossil record. Archaeologists

discovered an eleven-thousand-year-old skeleton of a dwarf adult male with disabilities that would have made it difficult for him to hunt or even to keep up with his nomadic band. For him to reach adulthood, he must have been fed and protected by others in his tribe.

When human beings began to rear other animals, perhaps by bringing home the young of adults killed in the hunt, they extended their opportunities for involvement in nurturing activities. The care of animals became facilitated both by the practical value of the animals themselves and by the pleasure and the physiological rewards of caring for the animals. If nurturing plants and animals had some of the same rewards as caring for other human beings, then we would also expect that the health of those groups practicing domestication would be improved by better nutrition and by the direct beneficial effects of the increased opportunity to engage in nurturing activities. Domestication of plants and animals also extended the opportunities for rearing human children. The limited resources available to nomadic tribes required them to space out childbearing, whereas the increased food resources and opportunity for permanent settlement afforded by agriculture permitted a greater frequency of childbirth.

Agriculture was fully established some ten thousand years ago, providing for humankind a continual and almost universal contact with animals and engagement with the nurturing of plants and animals. This engagement persisted throughout the history of civilization until the last two hundred years. In those two centuries—only ten to fifteen generations, a trivial time in the genetic history of human beings—there has been an extraordinary disengagement of people from care of animals and plants. This process began well before the Industrial Revolution with the enclosure and expropriation of public lands and with a shift in agricultural practices to support trade in grain, wool, and cattle.

Changing patterns of agriculture, with the displacement of small or peasant farmers, continued into the beginning of this century in Europe and continues in South and Central

America to this day. Since the Industrial Revolution, there has been an enormous shift of people into cities, away from any contact with the rearing of animals or the care of gardens and orchards. In the space of two centuries, the United States and western Europe went from a population that was only 10 percent urban to one that was 90 percent urban. In the United States, by 1910 there were fewer farm workers than industrial laborers, and now farm labor makes up only a small fraction of the workforce. Many of those remaining laborers have tasks that are divorced from the care of animals, such as seasonal harvesting. In these relatively few years, there has been a radical transformation in the physical relationship between human beings and other living things, with a very large part of the population being excluded from contact and care of living things other than their own children.

This shift has made us particularly dependent upon our pets for the opportunity to nurture others. For instance, Gail Melson, at Purdue University, has noted that by preschool, children can appropriately appreciate the difference between dogs and puppies, cats and kittens; they know that adult animals are caregivers, not babies. Boys usually increase their knowledge about animals with age, but their interest in, and care for, human infants generally decreases; this not true of their interest in, and care of, animals, perhaps because pet care is not associated with gender, as with the care of human infants. Boys, in particular, may be introduced to the importance of nurturing with the aid of their pets.

The human family has contained domestic animals for thousands of years. It has been said that "to be a good human, one needs to be first a good animal." In *Pets and Human Development*, Levinson noted that the "values of pet ownership in promoting normal child development may be summarized as follows: A child who is exposed to the emotional experiences inherent in playing with a pet is given many learning opportunities that are essential to wholesome personality

development. His play with the pet will express his view of the world, its animals, and its human beings, including his parents and peers." It appears to us that companion animals are our children's children, and the best thing we can do for our children is to help them be better parents.

It is this healthful, and sometimes life-saving opportunity that we build into our culture we refer to when we describe pets as members of the family. Yet pets can sometimes be even closer than a family member; they can be a part of the self.