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Laurent's Circus

Abandoning Companionship

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Recently, some academics published an article in the new *Journal of Animal Ethics* calling for us to rethink our language with respect to non-humans. Specifically, people shouldn't think of themselves as owners of their pet dogs, cats, guinea pigs, lizards, parakeets, etc. Nope. We are caretakers of our companion animals. The idea behind this terminology shift is twofold. First, humans who regard animals as companions will be less likely to abuse and neglect them. Secondly, the use of derogatory, demeaning language — like “pets”— is insulting to animals. I got to thinking about these notions.

I think it's a bit of a stretch to think that changing the verbal model from chattel to chums will reduce cruelty. The abusive human relationships I have witnessed didn't change because bullies consulted new thesauruses. They changed because the victims decided that “punching bag” was no longer a suitable synonym. From a human-animal point of view, this would be awfully close to *Conquest of the Planet of the Apes* (the one where enslaved apes revolt). If simply changing terminology will stave off futuristic apocalypse, who am I to argue? In the case of my dogs, however, it will confuse them mightily to be put on a par with the household primates. They'll actually have to do something to earn their keep besides look cute and do simple tricks. Or not. Celebrity careers have been built on as much.

I am curious about how this might affect the one peculiar characteristic of the human-animal connection: we do eat them. Bird lovers who thrill to the sight of rare species at their carefully maintained feeders often enjoy common species more well done. Kobe cattle are

massaged not to increase interspecies bonding but rather market value. Kosher meat must be slaughtered in a manner meant to minimize pain and suffering. That's an act of kindness, but I wouldn't call it companionable. If my caretaker assured me that my imminent death would be quick, painless and marked by a debate over claret versus burgundy, I wouldn't thank him for his kindness. I'd back away while dialing 911 and looking for a weapon.

The second reason for the shift from pet to partner is to maintain and reinforce the dignity of animals. As someone who has owned (or partnered with) dogs most of my life, I offer this counterpoint: Really? No, *really*?!

My companions are standard poodles, canines whose breed description refers to great intelligence, social savoir faire, trainability, and dignity. My mileage has, uh, varied. Tyler was friendly, but could lose toys between his own feet. Julian earned a reputation as a butt-biter early on. Charley learns most commands and tricks very quickly, but has never learned to do them independently. He always defaults to the impulsive, stupid thing. Then there was Teddy.

The late, great Teddy was a fine example of the breed. Smart enough to fake a paw injury when he didn't want to go for a walk. Socially sharp enough to hypnotize little kids into sharing their graham crackers. So trainable he could learn by watching other dogs do tricks. And dignity? That's the characteristic he had in spades, and one the Oxford academics didn't consider from an alternative point of view.

Teddy knew demeaning behavior when he saw it. His dignity would have found equity intolerable. I saw to his grooming, his meals, his social engagements, and his transportation. Was I his companion? Perish the thought!

I was staff.

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