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The Creature Connection

By NATALIE ANGIER MARCH 14, 2011

Bashert is a gentle, scone-colored, 60-pound poodle, a kind of Ginger Rogers Chia Pet, and she's clearly convinced there is no human problem so big she can't lick it. Lost your job, or bedridden for days? Lick. Feeling depressed, incompetent, in an existential malaise? Lick.

"She draws the whole family together," said Pamela Fields, 52, a government specialist in United States-Japan relations. "Even when we hate each other, we all agree that we love the dog." Her husband, Michael Richards, also 52 and a media lawyer, explained that the name Bashert comes from the Yiddish word for soul mate or destiny. "We didn't choose her," he said. "She chose us." Their 12-year-old daughter, Alana, said, "When I go to camp, I miss the dog a lot more than I miss my parents," and their 14-year-old son, Aaron, said, "Life was so boring before we got Bashert."

Yet Bashert wasn't always adored. The Washington Animal Rescue League had retrieved her from a notoriously abusive puppy mill — the pet industry's equivalent of a factory farm — where she had spent years encaged as a breeder, a nonstop poodle-making machine. By the time of her adoption, the dog was weak, malnourished, diseased, and caninically illiterate. "She didn't know how to be a dog," said Ms. Fields. "We had to teach her how to run, to play, even to bark."

Stories like Bashert's encapsulate the complexity and capriciousness of our longstanding love affair with animals, now our best friends and soul mates, now

our laboratory Play-Doh and featured on our dinner plates. We love animals, yet we euthanize five million abandoned cats and dogs each year. We lavish some $48 billion annually on our pets and another $2 billion on animal protection and conservation causes; but that index of affection pales like so much well-cooked pork against the $300 billion we spend on meat and hunting, and the tens of billions devoted to removing or eradicating animals we consider pests.

“We’re very particular about which animals we love, and even those we dote on are at our disposal and subject to all sorts of cruelty,” said Alexandra Horowitz, an assistant professor of psychology at Barnard College. “I’m not sure this is a love to brag about.”

Dr. Horowitz, the author of a best-selling book about dog cognition, “Inside of a Dog,” belongs to a community of researchers paying ever closer attention to the nature of the human-animal bond in all its fetching dissonance, a pursuit recently accorded the chimeric title of anthrozoology. Scientists see in our love for other animals, and our unslakable curiosity about animal lives, sensations, feelings and drives, keys to the most essential aspects of our humanity. They also view animal love as a textbook case of biology and culture operating in helical collusion. Animals abound in our earliest art, suggesting that a basic fascination with the bestial community may well be innate; the cave paintings at Lascaux, for example, are an ochred zooanalia of horses, stags, bison, felines, a woolly rhinoceros, a bird, a leaping cow — and only one puny man.

Yet how our animal urges express themselves is a strongly cultural and contingent affair. Many human groups have incorporated animals into their religious ceremonies, through practices like animal sacrifice or the donning of animal masks. Others have made extensive folkloric and metaphoric use of animals, with the cast of characters tuned to suit local reality and pedagogical need.

David Aftandilian, an anthropologist at Texas Christian University, writes in “What Are the Animals to Us?” that the bear is a fixture in the stories of circumpolar cultures “because it walks on two legs and eats many of the same foods

that people do," and through hibernation and re-emergence appears to die and be reborn. "Animals with transformative life cycles," Dr. Aftandilian writes, "often earn starring roles in the human imagination." So, too, do crossover creatures like bats — the furred in flight — and cats, animals that are largely nocturnal yet still a part of our daylight lives, and that are marathon sleepers able to keep at least one ear ever vigilantly cocked.

Researchers trace the roots of our animal love to our distinctly human capacity to infer the mental states of others, a talent that archaeological evidence suggests emerged anywhere from 50,000 to 100,000 years ago. Not only did the new cognitive tool enable our ancestors to engage in increasingly sophisticated social exchanges with one another, it also allowed them to anticipate and manipulate the activities of other species: to figure out where a prey animal might be headed, or how to lure a salt-licking reindeer by impregnating a tree stump with the right sort of human waste.

Before long, humans were committing wholesale acts of anthropomorphism, attributing human characteristics and motives to anything with a face, a voice, a trajectory — bears, bats, thunderstorms, the moon.

James Serpell, president of the International Society for Anthrozoology, has proposed that the willingness to anthropomorphize was critical to the domestication of wild animals and forming bonds with them. We were particularly drawn to those species that seemed responsive to our Dr. Dolittle overtures.

Whereas wild animals like wolves will avert their eyes when spotted, dogs and cats readily return our gaze, and with an apparent emotiveness that stimulates the wistful narrative in our head. Dogs add to their soulful stare a distinctive mobility of facial musculature. "Their facial features are flexible, and they can raise their lips into a smile," Dr. Horowitz said. "The animals we seem to love the most are the ones that make expressions at us."

Dogs were among the first animals to be domesticated, roughly 10,000 years ago, in part for their remarkable responsiveness to such human cues as a pointed

finger or a spoken command, and also for their willingness to work like dogs. They proved especially useful as hunting companions and were often buried along with their masters, right next to the spear set.

Yet the road to certification as man's BFF has been long and pitted. Monotheism's major religious texts have few kind words for dogs, and dogs have often been a menu item. The Aztecs bred a hairless dog just for eating, and according to Anthony L. Podberscek, an anthrozoologist at Cambridge University, street markets in South Korea sell dogs meant for meat right next to dogs meant as pets, with the latter distinguished by the cheery pink color of their cages.

As a rule, however, the elevation of an animal to pet status removes it entirely from the human food chain. Other telltale signs of petdom include bestowing a name on the animal and allowing it into the house. Pet ownership patterns have varied tremendously over time and across cultures and can resemble fads or infectious social memes.

Harold Herzog, a professor of psychology at Western Carolina University, describes in his book "Some We Love, Some We Hate, Some We Eat" how the rapid growth of the middle class in 19th-century France gave rise to the cartoonishly pampered Fifi. "By 1890, luxury and pet ownership went hand in hand," he writes, and the wardrobe of a fashionable Parisian dog might include "boots, a dressing gown, a bathing suit, underwear and a raincoat."

In this country, pet keeping didn't get serious until after World War II. "People were moving to the suburbs, 'Lassie' was on television, and the common wisdom was pets were good for raising kids," said Dr. Herzog in an interview. "If you wanted a normal childhood, you had to have a pet."

Pet ownership has climbed steadily ever since, and today about two-thirds of American households include at least one pet.

People are passionate about their companion animals: 70 percent of pet owners say they sometimes sleep with their pets; 65 percent buy Christmas gifts for their pets; 23 percent cook special meals for their pets; and 40 percent of married

women with pets say they get more emotional support from their pets than from their husbands. People may even be willing to die for their pets. “In studies done on why people refused to evacuate New Orleans during Katrina,” said Dr. Herzog, “a surprising number said they could not leave their pets behind.”

Pets are reliable from one year to the next, and they’re not embarrassed or offended by you no matter what you say or how much weight you gain. You can’t talk to your teenage daughter the way you did when she was 3, but your cat will always take your squeal. And should you overinterpret the meaning of your pet’s tail flick or unflinching gaze, well, who’s going to call you on it?

“Animals can’t object if we mischaracterize them in our minds,” said Lori Gruen, an associate professor of philosophy at Wesleyan University. “There’s something very comforting about that.”

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