

Guarding the Guard Dogs?

Are you a dog "owner"—or a dog "guardian"? *By Jon Katz*

Last month, In Defense of Animals, a California-based animal rights organization, sent me some materials about its "Guardian Campaign." A polite letter complimented me on my most recent book, then requested that I use the term "guardian" rather than "owner" in future writings about dogs.

The benefits of relating to animals as guardians rather than as owners would be "far reaching," wrote IDA president Dr. Elliot Katz (who's no relation). Changing how we speak would help change how we act. In a world where dogs are protected rather than owned, Katz argued, it would be easier to crack down on animal abuse, end the puppy-mill trade, and stop the killing of animals at shelters.

As a dog lover, owner of a rescue dog, and member of two rescue groups, I'm not convinced there will be concrete benefits from this metaphoric, even Orwellian revolution. How exactly will these semantic changes improve the lot of animals? Why can't we shut down puppy mills, end some cruel animal research, save the lives of dogs and cats in shelters, prosecute animal abuse, and still call ourselves "owners"?

IDA's letter proudly pointed out that San Francisco; West Hollywood; Berkeley, Calif.; Boulder, Colo.; Amherst, Mass., and the state of Rhode Island have already enacted ordinances changing owners into guardians. (Some of those jurisdictions have also embraced the animal-rights movement's other language crusade, changing "pets" into "companion animals.")

Although IDA cited these cities and state as evidence that the notion of "guardian" is spreading, to me it suggests the opposite: Its successes are confined to left-wing pockets. I'll be impressed when Kansas City takes up the idea.

Social movements are only as effective as their ability to win popular support. I'm currently living in rural upstate New York, and I showed the IDA packet to Sandra, a sheep farmer who lives down the road with her female partner. She was shocked. "I love my Rottweiler," Sandra told me. "But I'd love to marry my partner and I can't. I have to say I'm a bit uncomfortable with dogs having more rights than I do. Me first."

Sandra had just filed legal papers to have her partner declared her legal guardian in the event of serious illness. She said she was not about to do the same for her dog.

I reminded Sandra that animal rights don't really come at the expense of human rights—there's no reason both species can't have some protection. But her reservations are important. Easing animal suffering is inarguably worthwhile; turning animals into a kind of human is another matter.

And such a transformation seems the goal of some animal activists. My IDA packet contained a testimonial from a Michael Mountain of the Best Friends Animal Sanctuary. "People of other genders, races and even age groups were once treated as property in this country," Mountain wrote. "Now, it is time for 'people' of other species to be accorded the same simple dignity of being recognized, not as someone else's property but as beings in their own right."

Mountain couldn't have made the point more dramatically—or offensively. I don't care to jump in with a moral value system that equates my beloved border collies with human slaves. Nothing about this comparison helps animals. It distorts their true natures and diminishes ours.

The guardian campaign is a vivid example of the growing tendency to blur the boundaries between us and our pets. Many Americans have already stopped seeing their dogs and cats as animals. They're family members, emotional support systems, metaphors for issues from our own pasts, aids for healing and growth, children with fur.

Seeing them the way we see ourselves—as having human thoughts and needs, human rights—is another kind of abuse and exploitation. It is cruel to crate a child, but it's often helpful and soothing to crate a dog. No human would want to spend five minutes in a kennel, yet good kennels, much maligned by deeply attached pet owners, are often the safest and best places to leave dogs when we leave home.

Seeing dogs as piteous, deprived, abused, and needy can lead us to treat them unwisely. Vets cite overfeeding and the resultant epidemic obesity as a major killer of dogs and cats in America. Yet I can't count how many times I've heard somebody say, "I feed him because I just can't bear to starve him." Or "I just can't resist when he begs for food. He's so cute." Any vet or animal nutritionist would tell these people that they're doing as much harm to their cute little beggars by overfeeding them as they would by kicking them.

People who see their dogs as humanlike often struggle to train them properly, especially if they believe they were abused or mistreated. Owners sometimes think their dogs have already suffered so much that they couldn't possibly inflict any more criticism. Yet it's that very firm, effective training that would make those dogs happier and more secure. And what about the growing number of owners who find neutering cruel or unbearable, because they would find it so? Refusing to neuter may put their own pet or someone else's in danger—causing aggression, running away, and unwanted litters. Or the pet owners who make their dogs hyper by believing they need to "play" continuously, like overprogrammed boomer children? They drag them to unruly play groups, toss Frisbees and balls night and day, haul them to an endless round of organized activities—but fail to teach them how to be calm.

The humanlike view of dogs affects the decision about when to euthanize a sick or elderly pet. I recently attended two veterinary conventions where scores of vets told me their biggest recent problem is people who see their pets as so human that they simply cannot end their lives or suffering, no matter the cost or the pain.

There is no evidence that dogs have the kind of complex emotional lives and value systems that we do. It's one reason why we love them so much, in fact. They are neither "good" nor "bad." They don't hold grudges, act in petty ways, or seek revenge. They read our moods, but not our minds. If they did, we'd start loving them as we love other humans—which could mean a lot less than we love them now.

Dogs are not "people" of another species. They are another species. To train and care for them properly, to show them how to live in our complex world, requires first and foremost that we understand that. I owe my dogs much—more than I can say—but they are not my "companions"—as if we voluntarily chose to hang out together but none of us has authority over the others. I bought and/or acquired them. I own them. I am profoundly responsible for their care and well being.

Guardianship, a word always applied to human beings, implies equality—the highest and perhaps most noble of all goals in this democratic nation. Ownership implies responsibility. Americans who own dogs need to be more responsible for them, literally and emotionally—not more equal to them.

The drama of the modern dog is that he is segregated from society—from work, children, public places—and then blamed for not knowing how to live in our world. The things he wants to do—have sex, roll in gross stuff, roam freely, squabble with other dogs, chew shoes, pee on every other tree—are either illegal or frowned upon. His challenge isn't to become a free and equal person in the best traditions of our society but to learn how to live in the alien world of people.

Guardianship suggests dogs have a right to live their own lives as they wish. This is impossible in our dog-unfriendly world. Ownership implies a human duty to help the dog adjust to this difficult, inhospitable place.

"Dog owner" is a proud title. It suits me fine.

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Litter Box Aversion

If you are having a problem with your cat using its litter box, you are not alone. It is one of the most common gripes owners have with their cats. We've called in Linda Case, a behavior specialist and adjunct assistant professor at the University of Illinois College of Veterinary Medicine, Urbana, Ill., and owner of the Autumn Gold Dog Training Center in Mahomet, Ill., to help explain some of the issues surrounding litter box usage.



Case explains that cats don't use their litter box for one of two simple reasons: either they have developed some aversion to their litter box or some stressor is causing them to stop using the box.

The most common cause of litter box aversion is the simple, undeniable truth that it may not be clean enough. Case says, "If you are having any inkling at all that this could be your problem, the first thing we say is to scoop every day and completely change the litter more often than you have been." Another reason a cat might develop an aversion to its litter box is simple accessibility. Some cats don't want to have to work hard to get to the bathroom, and by placing the litter box in an accessible place you're removing this obstacle. Or, your cat may simply not like the spot that you have designated for it.

Stressors can cause your cat to urinate outside of the litter box. Oftentimes multiple cat households create stresses that are undetectable to humans. Group dynamics amongst cats are a burgeoning field in behavioral research. Recent literature suggests that even though one cat may not be being kept away from the litter box, there may be anxiety that is manifested in inappropriate urination or in marking behavior. The rule of thumb is that an owner should have a litter box for each cat, plus an additional one. These litter boxes should be placed in various locations to allow your cats to have some choice in location and with whom they choose to share their box.

"Litter box aversion often goes hand-in-hand with location preferences. Cats tend to prefer either smooth porcelain surfaces or soft absorbent surfaces," says Case.

She reminds that cleaning the spot well, keeping the cat away from the location, and covering up that spot are ways to break the cycle of litter box aversion and location preferences. In some cases you may need to retrain your cat to use his litter box. This may require isolating the cat to a small amount of space, perhaps a single room, with the litter box. You can then gradually allow the cat more space privileges as it successfully uses its litter box.

Common feline medical conditions, such as urinary tract infections, can cause a litter box-loving cat to become an inappropriate eliminator. Cats also have unbelievable memories for specific incidents paired with people or locations. For example, a cat who has a urinary tract infection and goes to use its litter box may feel pain when trying to urinate. This cat will then associate the pain with the litter box, almost as if saying to itself 'Avoid that place, and you won't feel this pain.' If your cat is normally good about using its litter box and suddenly starts urinating elsewhere, it is a good idea to have your pet checked by your veterinarian for any medical causes.

Finally, some people complain that their cat will "misbehave" and urinate on a bed or on clothes when the owner leaves the house. People claim that their cat is "angry" with them for leaving and is acting out to spite its owner. This claim, however real it might seem, simply isn't the case.

"Cats don't develop separation anxiety in the same manner as dogs because their social groups aren't as strongly attached," says Case. Cats do, however, become stressed by change. This change causes anxiety which manifests itself by in appropriate elimination.

"Try to avoid blame placing. It is only anxiety and stress shown as this species way," says Case. Furthermore, placing blame will not help you resolve the problem any sooner.

For more information about litter box issues, contact your local veterinarian or animal behaviorist.

<http://www.cvm.uiuc.edu/petcolumns/showarticle.cfm?id=527>

Office of Public Engagement. University of Illinois College of Veterinary Medicine

Eli Lilly enters pet health market

Pharmaceutical giant Eli Lilly and Company launches a new business focused on making medicines for dogs and cats.

Lilly's director for companion animal health stated, "We appreciate that the companion animal sector is a dynamic marketplace, and our value to the profession will be measured by the performance of our products and our people." The company's first product introductions are expected within the year, pending approval by the FDA. These medicines will address serious conditions that negatively affect both pet health and the human-pet bond.

The pet market may be small by human health standards but is still lucrative. In 2005, U.S. pet owners spent \$17.4 billion on veterinary care, supplies, and over-the-counter medications, and the numbers are expected to increase, according to data assembled by the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association.

Lilly also announced a \$250,000 endowment for an annual lecture series at the Center for the Human-Animal Bond at the Purdue University School of Veterinary Medicine.

A New Beginning:

Rescue Dogs from an Obedience Instructor's Perspective By Linda Tilley

When we rescue a dog, they come into our lives from many different directions. We may seek them out, at a shelter or through a rescue group. They may come to us through unfortunate circumstances, such as the death of a loved one. Or, like most of mine, the flashing neon light in front of my house that says “sucker lives here!” No matter how we acquire them, they now belong to us and we are responsible.

According to the “Disney theory,” these wonderful creatures will forever be grateful for their salvation and go to great extremes to grant our every wish. Sorry folks, not reality! Reality is that they will not become the dogs they can be without our commitment, guidance and training. It is the nature of dogs to do what serves them best. Of course, they can come to love us, or perhaps, respect is the more accurate word. But, we must earn that respect, to show we are worthy of it. That’s done through consistency and training, from the very first minute they walk into our lives. There is no grace period when bring a dog into your home, especially since that dog carries baggage. What that baggage is, you may never fully understand, but it’s there. Often times I have heard it said “I don’t want to train him now because he was abused. He needs to feel secure and that I love him. I want him to feel at home before I ask anything from him.” Big mistake, huge mistake! First, most dogs have not been abused. A lot have been neglected. Some were just as happy as can be with their previous life. Second, from the moment a dog enters a new environment (your home) the ground rules are set. If you don’t set them he will.

If you’ll allow jumping on people then allow it from the beginning. If you don’t want grandma face down on the carpet, then don’t allow jumping. If your dog is permitted on the furniture, fine, if not, don’t allow it to begin with. If you want your house destroyed then leave the dog loose, unattended. If you want to housebreak the dog, keep it in the room with you or crated/confined when you are busy or not home. All dogs need to be crate trained. The crate becomes their inside dog house. Their place of security when they need to escape or nap. A place with their blanket and toys. Or somewhere for them to be if you need a moment of peace and quiet. Beside, where do you think they keep your dog at the veterinarian’s office or grooming shop when you drop them off? A dog can become stressed enough when needing veterinary care or grooming. Wouldn’t the wiser thing be to have it comfortable with confinement before it becomes a necessity? My dogs are rarely shut in their crates but they often use them. It’s their place. Being crate trained has allowed my dogs to visit relative’s homes where they wouldn’t have been welcome otherwise.

Decide what behaviors you are willing to accept. Those rules apply from the very first minute. It isn’t fair or beneficial to allow one set of rules at first and then think you can change the rules half way through the game. The dog will resist and I don’t blame it. You’ll blame the dog, because he should appreciate all you do for him -- “Disney theory” again. Rule changes aren’t fair. Dogs need consistency and dependability from those that guide them. They need the faith and belief that what they are doing is right. You have to be the leader or else the dog will lead and you might not be happy with his rules.

If you are having problems, ask for help. It’s out there. Talk with the shelter or rescue group for suggestions. Enroll in an obedience class aimed at pet dog training. Talk with a friend whose dog’s behavior you admire. Look for books on behavior or training. If you don’t find the answer immediately, then try someone or something else. There isn’t one solution for each problem. It’s as varied as the individual. If advice doesn’t make sense or seems unusually harsh then seek additional help. Your efforts will be worth more than you could ever imagine. When your dogs looks into your face with those wonderful eyes, eyes that reflect its soul, and you see trust, confidence, respect and love you will know that it’s been worth the effort.

So many dogs end up in the revolving door of abandonment and rescue because someone wasn't caring enough or committed enough to deal with the ups and downs of training the dog. If your heart tells you that you want to give a chance to one of these throwaways then let your mind lead the way.

Linda Tilley is a Board Member of North Carolina Responsible Animal Owners Alliance (NCRAOA) and is endorsed by the National Association of Dog Obedience Instructors (NADOI).

Why does my pet have stains beneath its eyes?

Many light-colored pets have brown or pinkish stains on the skin and hair below the corner of their eyes. Generally, the staining is a cosmetic issue due to tears spilling on the face, and is not a diagnosis or symptom of any specific health problem. These stains are caused from a normal pigment in tears that can tint light-colored hair.

There are many reasons that tearstains appear on the face, some of which require medical attention. One possibility includes pain or allergies that cause excessive tearing that spills over on the hair. Blocked tear ducts may also obstruct the normal exit of tears and makes them run down the face.

“Stains may also result from abnormal hair growth if it touches an animal’s cornea and ‘wicks’ tears away from the eye, over the lid, and often to the corner of the eye,” said **Dr. Terri Schneider**, a WSU ophthalmology resident. “This can come from hair growth in an abnormal place or misdirected normal hairs that touch the eye.”

Other causes include congenitally closed tear ducts, prominent eyes that compress the openings into the tear ducts and force tears over the lid, and poor tear quality.

“Different breeds are predisposed to this for any of these reasons,” Dr. Schneider said. “For example, Shih Tzus often have abnormal and excessive hair growth, miniature breeds like pugs have prominent eyes that can block the ducts, and cocker spaniels may have congenital problems, as well as abnormal hairs.” Poodles and Persian cats also are commonly affected. “The staining itself is mostly cosmetic, but if the face stays wet, the skin can become irritated,” she explained. “Breeds that have deep facial folds might experience corneal irritation that would cause tears to run along the folds and result in a skin infection.” Corneal inflammations and ulcers, as well as inflammation of the duct system, can also cause excessive tearing. Both are painful conditions and a veterinarian should evaluate these problems immediately.

“Any treatment would be specific to the cause of the problem,” Dr. Schneider said. “If a general practitioner cannot identify the problem, the animal can be referred to a veterinary ophthalmologist.

Washington State University. Community Practice Newsletters. Spring 2007 <http://www.vetmed.wsu.edu/depts-vth/newsletters/>

North Carolina Responsible Animal Owners Alliance, Inc. (NCRAOA) is a statewide organization of animal owners and professionals dedicated to animal welfare, responsible animal ownership, and maintaining the rights of responsible citizens to breed and own animals. NCRAOA, a 501(c)3 organization, provides education and information to the public and supports reasonable and humane animal welfare laws.

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