TWO DOGS AND A PARROT

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What Our Animal Friends
Can Teach Us About Life

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THE CAIQUE

INTRODUCTION

All my life I wanted a dog. After all, I was an only child. To a child without neighborhood friends, without sisters who could become eternal confidantes, without brothers as co-conspirators in life, a dog was the only obvious substitute for companionship. Or at least it was obvious to me. It was not at all obvious to my mother. Our house, my mother insisted, was not the kind of place where dogs belonged—a walk-up in a northern city given to lake-effect snowstorms. And furthermore, the landlord agreed with her.

But my mother could deal with the idea of my having a bird. On Good Friday, Billy, a blue parakeet, became the Easter gift of my life. Nothing has ever quite matched it since.

I couldn't take a bird for a walk, of course, as I had seen so many children my age do with their dogs. And we couldn't play ball together. But, on the other hand, I learned that having a bird meant having a companion where the interaction was more intense than it was with a dog. Dogs, at least to some extent, had a life of their own. Billy's whole life, on the other hand—every drop of water, every bite of food, every ounce of attention, every bit of play—depended on me. It was an amazingly warm and personal thought. It grew me up in ways I could never have expected.

"Joan," my mother said, "you taught that bird to eat out of your hand. Now you get home here and feed it." So, I quit the swimming lessons that were not half as important to me as Billy was, and did. Billy became my playmate, my ally, my first guide into the depth and meaning of the animal-human bond.

Billy came and filled my empty hours, learned to talk to me a little, flew to my finger when I called her off the curtain rods, woke me in the morning—and then, several years later, simply disappeared one day. And broke my heart.

No one knew how it had happened or where she'd gone. I only knew that, at the age of thirteen, I had lost something irreplaceable.

All over the world, everywhere, humans and animals form great bonds that give them both another kind of gift of life. Which is one of the reasons I'm writing this book. Nevertheless, I hesitate to begin it. A book of this nature brings with it a kind of intimacy and spiritual insight that seems to demand a special kind of privacy. After all, if you begin to talk about your pets as if such talk merits some kind of genuine attention, spiritual as well as psychological, what will people think?

So, this book has been in process for a long, long time. Years. In fact, I had to go through several levels of spiritual growth myself before I realized that it was, indeed, a book worth writing.

At first, I thought of it as nothing but the opportunity to tell a series of anecdotes about the animals I'd lived with in various stages of my life. After all, I had regaled groups for years with stories that smacked of depths far beyond either the usual tales of animal behavior or human appreciation of animal companions. Writing the stories down would simply provide the opportunity for a lot of people who like animals, who have lived with pets, to compare their own experiences to mine. Maybe to have a few laughs. Maybe to cry a tear or two.

Many of the stories, I knew, were funny. But some of them,

I also knew, were quite surprising for the level of spiritual insight they brought to my own understanding of the human-animal relationship.

Then, one day, in a public lecture I gave, I found myself beginning to explore the differences between the two creation stories in Genesis that have shaped the consciousness of the Judeo-Christian world for thousands of years. At that point, I suddenly realized that there is something quite spiritually profound in the question of what it means to be entrusted with nature, to live with a pet.

In the first creation story, Adam and Eve, first couple and prototypes of the human race that would come after them, are given dominion over what we call The Garden of Eden.

Who doesn't know the story? Who hasn't heard its conditions and its promises? Who doesn't take for granted the power conferred on humans there? Who doesn't recognize that, as part of the human condition, the story awards humankind dominance and precedence over all other living creatures?

The second creation story, however, far less commonly preached—in fact, commonly overlooked—challenges the reader in very different ways than the first. In this story, God the Creator brings the animals to Adam to be named—which, commentators commonly explained, is the proof that Adam had been given "power over them."

But, I could see, there are very serious problems with this interpretation.

Scholars tell us that this second creation story, which gives us the naming of the animals, is actually older than the so-called first creation story. It was, in other words, written earlier than the domination story. Only at a later period in biblical history

was this creation story about the naming of the animals repositioned. The effect of that kind of editing on the understanding of the nature of creation and its implications for humans has been momentous.

Clearly, the relationship between humans and animals had once held a very prominent place, a very primary place, in the human catalogue of spiritual lessons. The human-animal relationship had once held pride of place in the spiritual agendas of human development. The repositioning of the naming story not only made it secondary to the domination story. It also made the dominance theme seem more basic, more fundamental, to human purpose.

God bringing the animals to Adam to be named was hardly proof of "power." On the contrary. Naming is an act of relationship, not dominance. We name our children; we name our friends; we name those with whom we develop an emotional bond. But we do not name them in order to get power over them. We name what is near and dear to us. We name the animals we take into our families, the animals we commit ourselves to care for, the ones we take responsibility for, the ones with whom we develop a personal relationship.

Naming gives our relationships character and recognition and respect. Without doubt, then, the biblical story of naming the animals has both personal and spiritual implications for the way we deal with all the creatures of the earth.

The first creation story is the domination story. It defines the process of creation from one level to another. It gives human beings the right to use the rest of the planet for our own use.

The second creation story is the relationship story. By asserting a particular bond between humans and animals, it inserts

us into the animal world and animals into ours—with everything that implies about interdependence.

With all of that in mind, I began to think differently about human-animal relationships. I began to realize what happens to human life and values when humans begin to separate themselves from the rest of life. Or worse yet, when humans begin to construct a hierarchy of life, with themselves at the untouchable top of it.

I began to comprehend more completely that life is about more than us. I began to understand that there is something necessarily spiritual about the human-animal alliance. There is something to explore there about the very nature of bondedness. There is something to be learned from relationships that demand more than words to make them real—and yet are clearly and certainly real, nevertheless.

More than that, there is also another level of reality that accounts for the writing of this book. The truth is that my own life demands it. I have never planted a flower. I have never staked a tomato plant. I have never watched anything grow or harvested it or had to wait for it to ripen in order to live.

Like most of the rest of the human race at this moment in history, I have been raised almost entirely in cities. And I have begun to see the effects of that on the human soul.

In the neighborhood where I live, we have children who have never dug up a potato, who have no idea where radishes and other vegetables come from, who are amazed to learn that peaches grow on trees. These are children who learn about food in cans and animals from picture books. And yet, pets are everywhere. So how to explain that?

The modern tendency to accept pets into our lives and our

homes is, I think, a subconscious human attempt to cling to nature in a world made of glass and steel that has divided us from it.

At least my own life is proof of that, and I recognize that as both a human and a spiritual lack. I also recognize that I am not the only one for whom this is true.

More than personal deprivation, social isolation, and emotional disconnectedness confront us as a species now. Crowded into high-rise apartment buildings, we are a century away from the smell of grass and the care for animal habitats. The effects of such physical and psychological distance from the natural world around us are sobering. It is the ability to destroy life without grief, to live life devoid of layers of consciousness, to develop technological relationships bare of affect.

And it shows. Our rain forests are being reduced to money. Our animals are being driven from their habitats to die on barren wastes while we wonder why they're disappearing. Our lakes and oceans are denuded from overfishing.

Unless we begin to align ourselves with nature, nature will be endangered and our own lives with it. Our own souls with it, in fact. We are here as part of creation, not as consumers of it. We are here to care for this planet, not to exploit it. We are here to find our proper place in it, to grow with it spiritually as well as physically.

But in order to do any of those things, we may need to rethink our theology as well as our role on the planet.

Seduced by a theology of superiority and domination, sure that the world and everything in it had been made for human consumption and human control, the narrative of human relationships with animals has a very mixed and sad history. Only

the findings of science concerning the intelligence, feelings, and place of animals in the human enterprise, and the realization that we are all made of the same stuff, have begun once again to reverse the story of human-animal relationships and return it to an earlier cosmology.

We know now that if human beings disappeared tomorrow, the existence of birds, insects, water creatures, and land animals wouldn't be affected at all. If animals disappeared tomorrow, on the other hand, human beings could not possibly live without them—as long as bees are needed even to pollinate so many plants. As the top of the food chain, we would be the first to go. The interdependence of the species that has become so clear in our age has also shed new light on the concept of creation itself. The Creator of all, the scriptures tells us, saw all of creation as "good." It is our role to protect it, to guard it, to develop it, to sustain it—not to destroy it for our own purposes.

It is indeed time for us to begin to listen to the animals.

There are those who remind us now that the liberation of animals may well be the great liberation movement of this century.

But if that is the case, we must begin to think with the animals. We must begin to realize that they do not belong to us—they belong to God. They have lives of their own. And their lives affect ours. Whatever happens to the animals will eventually happen to the human animal.

This is a book about the role of animal companions in the development of our own spiritual lives. It is written for those who have pets and already understand that. It is also written for those who do not have pets and wonder why so many people do. It is a book about reestablishing the human-animal

relationships Creation meant us to have. So, I am starting at the personal end of the subject—because my animal friends drew me out of myself and made me aware of another whole level of what it means to be alive. They gave me a much broader vision than it would have been if I had shaped it for myself out of nothing but work and time and things. In them, I have seen another face of God.

THE IRISH SETTER

DANNY COMES HOME

Acceptance

Danny was an unexpected birthday gift from a friend. The small convent, in the small town in which we were teaching at the time, was also "not the kind of place that dogs belonged," I suppose. But the difference was that this time, we all agreed to give the situation a try.

And that's where Danny came in.

Danny was a big red Irish setter. To those who know, the very name, Irish setter, rings of action and excitement and an unbounded, and unboundaried, love of life and of people. The problem was that I was not one of the people who knew that. Dogs were . . . dogs, I figured. Wrong. Dogs do not come in "one size fits all." Certainly not this one.

Danny was a total surprise to me, an absolute lexicon of lessons in life, the kinds of which I had never dreamed and was not expecting to learn. At least, not from a dog.

Which, of course, was the first spiritual lesson: Nothing and no one is exactly like anything else, no matter how much we may want them to be. The predictable is not what most pets bring us. They bring us life, yes. They bring us love, often. But predictability? Don't believe it.

Danny lived life on his own terms, and I learned to adjust.

Most startling of all, this wiggly, soft, and dewy-eyed puppy started his clawing, chewing search for independence and self-will early. It was the first night we had him, in fact.

I got the dog into the convent by promising the other sisters that Danny would stay in the empty garage that flanked our house on one of the main streets in the town. And I meant it. Students stayed after school that first day to build a doghouse for him in a dark corner of the garage, then lined it with covers, and secured a food and water bowl near its door.

We were hardly finished with the project when it was abandoned. "No dog can stay in that garage," the sisters told me. "No dog." Why? Because, they insisted, there were rats under the garage floor. Whether or not anyone had ever seen one, I'm not sure to this day. But since I didn't really want Danny there to begin with, I was quick to abandon the garage and bring the puppy through the front door squealing and squirming as we went. Now all I had to do was to rebuild the dog bed inside the house, at the foot of the basement stairs. Which, fortunately, were directly under my bedroom. From there I would be able to keep a watch on things. You know, control his puppyness, keep control, make sure that a dog did

not disturb the good order of the convent. I wanted the relationship, yes, but on my terms, not his.

For the next three nights, I forced myself out of bed when the howling began. I groped for the roll of newspapers I had learned to keep on the floor beside me and stumbled down the stairs. The trick was to open the basement door and slap the newspaper roll against the wall—hard—till the new puppy was alarmed enough to stop the howling.

When he quieted down, I tiptoed back up the stairs, fell into bed exhausted, and waited for the howling to start again. Which it did. For one, two, and three straight days.

Finally, sleep-deprived and carrying a white flag, at three o'clock in the morning of the fourth night of this new relationship, I surrendered. I left the newspaper roll on the floor and went and got Danny instead. Patiently, but firmly, I put him on the throw rug beside my bed and went back to sleep. Until, with no small sense of alarm, I felt him squirm next to me. Clearly, this would take a little repetition for him to get the idea that he slept on the floor and I slept in the bed.

The second time he crawled in beside me, I took him off the bed and put him down on the floor again. And the third time, too. The night was going by quickly now. When it happened the fourth time, I figured out what to do. I attached the leash to his dog collar and put the other end of it under one of the legs of the dresser across the room. He could sleep on the rug at the foot of my bed for tonight. Tomorrow, he would go back to the basement where, more familiar with it now, I was sure he would finally sleep through the night. But for the rest of this night, at least, the problem had finally been solved.

Triumphant, I heaved a sigh of relief and fell deeply asleep.

It was when I felt something wet against my fingers that I knew I had a problem. I reached my hand above my head carefully and quietly and flipped on the bedroom light. There lay Danny the puppy tucked in tightly beside me, still leashed to the dresser he had managed to jockey all the way across the room. It was tilted now against the bottom of my bed. I unsnapped the leash, turned out the light for one last time, and let the dog go on sleeping where he was so I could sleep, too.

But I got it. There are some things in life that are simply not worth spending energy on. Danny knew what his priorities were; I had misunderstood mine. Danny was struggling to relate, to be accepted, to find a place in life that was worth reaching for, where he was safe and wanted and at home. I, on the other hand, was struggling to keep life within the boundaries I had independently defined for it years before Danny arrived to reshape it.

As Roger Caras put it, "If you don't own a dog, at least one, there is not necessarily anything wrong with you, but there may be something wrong with your life."

Until then, acceptance had never been high on my list of spiritual virtues. It was Danny who, that very first night, brought me face-to-face with the power of it.

Lao-tzu wrote, "Life is a series of natural and spontaneous changes. Don't resist them; that only creates sorrow. Let reality be reality. Let things flow naturally forward in whatever way they like."

It is at those times of acceptance that our souls come to peace with the world. Acceptance becomes the sacrament of

the present moment, the point at which our struggle becomes useless and the unknown becomes the next step in life. If we learn to accept life as it is, as it must be—despite our best efforts to change it—we can keep on growing, even when we least want to.

All the great religions, too, teach acceptance of the vagaries of life and even signal this need for openness to life physically for all the world to see.

The Christian stands, for instance, hands uplifted to receive the grace of the moment—whatever it may be—with open hands. "Give us this day our daily bread," we pray. Give us, in other words, whatever it is that will nourish our souls the most, the best.

The Buddhist meditator sits cross-legged, stolid, trusting, inviting us to welcome life as it is—whatever else we might at that moment want it to be.

The rabbi stands, hands up, and pleads for the grace to welcome the unknown as friend, as sign of the presence of God.

The Muslim kneels, forehead bowed to the floor as sign of his submission to the Will of God, to what is happening.

It might take a while, but eventually we learn that accepting life as it is—learning to shape ourselves to it, rather than forever trying to wrench it to our own designs—is itself a virtue. It opens our souls to consider what parts of the present challenges of life must be changed—and must be accepted.

The kids in the neighborhood didn't accept the kid next door; he was a humpback and ran with flapping arms.

Rejection, I discovered, affects the way people view the world. Sometimes painfully. Always seriously.

The humpback kid kind of vanished into thin air. As a child,

he was daily entertainment. He could be seen running up and down the street after other kids, trying to be included, wanting to be chosen—for anything. As the years went by and he got older, he stayed inside more and roamed the neighborhood less and less.

It was a study in the classic effects of rejection: Some of us become invisible, even to ourselves, feel worthless, cease to even try to be part of the crowd. Some of us became violent in our simmering reactions to exclusion, until one day we "snap" in public and people look puzzled and say, "I can't imagine what happened to him." The rest of us wilt and hide inside our houses, our workshops, ourselves, for the rest of our lives.

The lucky ones simply ignore the groups that won't take them and join other groups that will.

It's those groups, the ones who accept us, who teach us to accept the rest of life, as well. They enable us to trust that, in the end, we will find our way, be safe with someone, be cared for and grow. Everything will come out just fine—happy, life-giving, and lovingly secure.

Social acceptance, psychologists tell us, is a universal need bred into the human species by long childhoods and the lack of natural defenses.

They also tell us that social acceptance is absolutely fundamental to positive human development. Those who lack it, medical history reveals, live isolated and lonely lives, struggle with poor health, faltering immune systems, early death and depression.