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Pet connections

Finding the balance between compassion and consumption, pets and plate.

by Geoff Olson

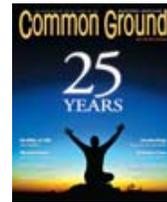


The late American writer Kurt Vonnegut once said his greatest joy in life was rolling around with his dog in the grass. We can only imagine what Vonnegut, who lamented his species' ecologically suicidal behaviour, would have thought about a recent study claiming that dogs have larger ecological footprints than an SUV. In *Time to Eat the Dog? The Real Guide to Sustainable Living*, authors Robert and Brenda Vale argue that resources required to feed a dog, including the area of land required to produce its food, translates into twice the eco-footprint of, say, building and fuelling a Toyota Land Cruiser. And there's no reason for cat owners to feel smug. It turns out a feline's eco-footprint is about as great as building and fuelling a Volkswagen Golf.

Eco-estimates like this have become the middle-class equivalents of medieval hair shirts and knotted whips. Imagine how much it would take to convince people to stop having pets, much less eat them, as suggested by the Vale's book title. By this argument's logic, chowing down on Prince and Snowball would only be a start. You and I and all the other 'useless eaters' would need to take a pledge to exit the planet early, to reduce our footprints to a dimensionless point. James Lovelock's Gaia is a vengeful God, after all.

I've always found pet people, the ones with a slightly unhinged enthusiasm for their furry dependents, a bit suspect. Yet a large part of the doggy daycare culture, with its organic biscuits and fashionable accoutrements, is the displaced nurturing behaviour of people without kids. What if we took to measuring the eco-footprint of raising children in the First World? I wouldn't

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be surprised if raising one kid, from infancy to young adulthood, was the equivalent eco-footprint of a factory floor of Hummers.

I have no children, but I do have a dog and cat. My wife and I discovered Mica in a shelter a year ago, shivering behind wire mesh. A rescue dog from the Kootenays, she was a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an animal shelter – part Black Lab and God knows what else. Possibly Border Collie and maybe some Rottweiler — and if her speed is any indication, a trace of cruise missile.

I'm fully aware of the irony of being one-half of a vegan/vegetarian couple that owns a 60-pound carnivore. In my defence, this dog-owning lifestyle snuck up on me. I had spent most of my adult life petless, killing a succession of houseplants through neglect. In contrast, my wife had never been without an animal. When we met, her two elderly dogs were preparing to shuffle off the canine coil (kindly freeing the planet from their dastardly ecological pawprint). So when they passed on, we both decided it was time to rebuild her furry fan base.

Over the centuries, human beings have bred dogs for size, stamina, speed, hunting, tracking and herding. No matter which obscure character or kink we selected for, the wilderness remained close to their hearts. Look into a dog's eyes and there's an ancient connection going back to the Neolithic era, when wolves shadowed the campfires of our ancestors. Two species entered into an unspoken arrangement: one would patrol the perimeter of the camps while the other left scraps in return. Their orbit grew closer and closer and over time the domesticated wolf was spun by artificial selection into dozens of shapes and sizes. The soft clay of *Canis lupus* was moulded into terriers, hounds, baiters and racing dogs. Today, some breeds look comic, and some just plain scary – from the rat-sized arm candy of rich socialites to the rippled hellhounds of heavily tattooed owners.

Our relationship with other living creatures has been fraught with paradox from the very beginning. Primitive, hunting-gathering people were caught in an existential bind, according to the late American mythologist Joseph Campbell. They regarded wild animals as Gods, but how can you kill a God for its flesh? Campbell believed an entire body of myth and ritual arose to reconcile this thorny situation. Before or after the hunt, animals were thanked for participating in their own death, a ritual that persists today among the globe's last remaining pockets of hunter-gatherers.

As our hunting partners, dogs became the intermediaries between the spirits of the wild and human culture. In the stories we told, the guardians to the Otherworld were often canine. In Ancient Greek mythology, the three-headed Cerberus guards the gates of Hades. In Eskimo shamanism, a dog with bared teeth guards the entrance to the undersea land of Takakapsaluk, Mother of the Sea Beasts. Dogs are 'psychopomps,' greeters and guardians at the boundaries of worlds.

Sophisticated, scientific sorts like you and me are a long way from the Paleolithic past, the shaggy dog tales of mythic literature and even our childhood imaginations. ("In a curious parallel with cave art, young children, ages three to seven, dream not about humans or family members, but about animals and animal life," observes author Morris Berman in his 1989 book *Coming to Our Senses*.) We have poor reception to the Otherworld, but the signal can be improved by having a pet. Domesticated animals help one to retain a connection, however frayed, with the spontaneous, sensory,

side of animal life. They help reconnect the alienated ape to the garden within, and with a regimen of daily walks, the garden without.

At the close of Homer's *Odyssey*, Odysseus returns home after many years of adventures, and discovers that only his dog Argos still recognizes him. Writing of this long awaited reunion, anthropologist Loren Eiseley writes, "The magic that gleams an instant between Argos and Odysseus is both the recognition of diversity and the need for affection across the illusions of form. It is nature's cry to homeless, far-wandering, insatiable man: 'Do not forget your brethren, nor the green wood from which you sprang. To do so is to invite disaster.'"

Scientists are quick to caution us about the intellectual error of anthropomorphism, the habit of projecting human qualities on to animals. But for their part, hard-core rationalists are often blind to the possibilities of "intersubjectivity," the sharing of subjective states by two or more beings. This is not limited to people and their pets, however. Every time you open an email about a crow taking care of a kitten, a deer cuddling with a koala, or a dog and elephant that are inseparable buddies, you're witnessing one of nature's most playful routines, which momentarily undercuts the "illusion of form" through a spontaneous display of affection. And why not? When mammals aren't hungry or fearful, most of them have nothing better to do than cuddle, carouse and connect with whatever is around. We do it ourselves, every time we bend down to pat a strange dog.

Intersubjectivity is a powerful thing. In his 1969 essay *The Innocent Fox*, Eiseley recalls sitting against an upturned boat on the beach when he saw "two small projecting ears lit by the morning sun... I crept on my knees around the prow and crouched beside him. It was a small fox pup from a den under the timbers who looked up at me. The ears moved at every sound, drank in a gull's cry and the far hom of a ship. They crinkled, I began to realize, only with curiosity; they had not learned to fear. The creature was very young. He was alone in a dread universe. God knows what had become of his brothers and sisters. His parent must not have been home from hunting.

"It was not a time for human dignity," the author decided. "Gravely I arranged my forepaws while the puppy whimpered with ill-concealed excitement. I drew the breath of a fox's den into my nostrils. On impulse, I picked up clumsily a white bone and shook it in my teeth that had not entirely forgotten their original purpose. Round and round we tumbled for one ecstatic moment . . ."

Some of the most important moments in life can't be translated into scientific language. Eiseley closes his encounter with the baby fox with this observation: "It is the most meaningful act I shall ever accomplish, but, as Thoreau once remarked of some peculiar errand of his own, there is no use reporting it to the Royal Society." Kurt Vonnegut, who had some familiarity with rolling around with furry creatures, would have nodded in agreement.

Sometimes, it takes an animal to tear us open, and rip apart the mental categories that preserve our cherished notions of separation. The extraordinary 2004 film *Peaceable Kingdom* testifies to the buried trauma of farm workers that became involved in the killing of animals as children. Killing and butchering farm animals was a "discipline like anything else," notes farmer Harold Brown, possible only because you "keep a certain amount of discipline emotionally... I didn't break through that conditioning

until I came to Farm Sanctuary.”

After listening to a talk at Farm Sanctuary, an American animal protection organization, Brown decided to “adopt” a cow. Why, his wife asked, did he want to adopt the biggest most expensive farm animal of all? He wasn’t sure, but he had made his decision, signing up for a cow named Snickers and its foal Rosie. A year afterwards, Brown returned to Farm Sanctuary.

“That’s when it happened. All the cows were up in the barn and Snickers was in a far corner. It’s been about year since she’s seen me. So I walked about halfway to her and I looked at her and I said, “Snickers” and put out my arms... She ran over to me, as much as a cow can run and puts her head right in my chest. She just thumps me right in the chest with her forehead. She just stands there leaning against me, and I wrapped my arms around her neck.”

Brown struggles to keep his composure as he tells the rest of the story. “She kind of opened me up to that part of me that had been closed off... because after she thumped me in the chest, it was like she hit me right in the heart. And I knew right then that’s exactly what I had shut off ever since I was a kid. I had this image in my head. The image was of a big light switch, and that light switch had been off and when she bumped me in the chest and just stayed there, I realized that I had developed the capacity as a kid to either turn it on or off. I could turn it on for my dog. I could turn it on for people, in my circle of compassion. And now I realized why I had to adopt a cow. How providence or whatever would have Snickers be the lesson giver... that’s when my life turned around, big time.”

We comfort ourselves in our schizoid treatment of animals by making a binary distinction of food and not-food. Yet, today, the world of domesticated animals mirrors the world of domesticated humans. Multimillion-dollar condos tower above the heaps of human refuse in our city streets, just as pet boutiques, pet hotel packages and doggie daycares coexist with factory farms, laboratory cages and puppy mills. We’ve created a heaven and hell for domesticated animals that reflects the human divides of privilege and privation.

A rethink of our relationship with other living things is ecologically vital, as long as it isn’t limited to white liberal guilt about our pet’s eco-pawprints. Very few of us will seriously entertain the notion of eating pets, but that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t be thinking about how much factory-farmed meat and rendered animal remains goes into Prince’s dish. We don’t need any more New Age vision questers trying to crowbar their ways into the Otherworld through chanting and drumming. We need everyday people understanding which energy flows are sustainable in our overstressed biosphere, and which are not.

A recent UBC study found that 36 percent of the world’s total fisheries’ catch each year is ground up into fish meal and oil to feed chicken, pigs and other farm animals. “Meanwhile, 25 percent of infants in Peru, which produces half of the world’s fish meal using anchovies, are malnourished,” said UBC fisheries researcher and study co-author Daniel Pauly. Lead author Jennifer Jacquet added, “Global fisheries consume 13 billion gallons of fuel each year just to catch and land fish. That’s more gas than 22 million cars would use.”

There are more creatures trapped in the black sites of the factory farming megabiz than there are human beings alive on Earth. For billions of cattle, pigs and chickens raised to live miserable, foreshortened lives under brutal

conditions, this planet is a global concentration camp. And we are emptying the oceans to keep it going. It's obvious there is a direct connection between this karmic blight and our ecological state of affairs, if only in the form of factory farm runoff, razed rainforests, nitrate-poisoned coastal areas and our depleted oceans, to say nothing of the bio-backlash from antibiotics, bone meal, growth hormones and genetic engineering.

Yet there are signs that we are awakening to our dysfunctional relationship with other living beings. Last month in Parliament, federal MPs voted unanimously in favour of a private member's bill for a Universal Declaration on Animal Welfare. "The motion calls on Canada to support development of animal-welfare declarations at all relevant international organizations and forums," notes a report in *The Province*.

"The declaration will be a key to improved animal-welfare legislation worldwide and a step closer to ending animal cruelty globally," said MP Michelle Simson.

Canada did not spearhead this move; it's simply becoming part of an international moment that includes all 27 members of the European Union, as well as Tanzania, the Seychelles, Bahrain, Australia, New Zealand, India, the Philippines and Thailand. Though legally nonbinding, the initiative represents a major shift in thinking. It aims to link the entire animal-welfare movement under one strategic goal: "global recognition that animals are capable of feeling pain and suffering, and that they deserve protection."

"Life is no way to treat an animal," said Kurt Vonnegut in one of his last interviews. "It hurts too much." Alas, we're all part of it for as long as we're standing. The best we can do is to find something that somehow ennobles the sorry business of eating other creatures to survive. How about striving to reduce the suffering of all beings, and to find some middle ground in our relationship with them between the polar extremes of ritual worship and mass slaughter? That seems to me to be a noble undertaking.

Being a pet owner puts one in the same paradoxical position of being a parent – being responsible for another life, even though that extra life draws resources from life itself. It's one of the universe's more serious games, called 'One More Mouth to Feed.' If we're going to survive as a species, we have to learn to play this game better and smarter, with all living creatures.

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