

Beauty and the Beast: Do You Really Know Your Patient's Family?

An Indianapolis woman Thursday credited her pet Rottweiler for pulling her from her van moments before the vehicle burst into flames. . . . [Her] six-year old dog suffered burns on the pads of [its] paws. Smoke prevented [the woman] from finding some pieces of her disassembled wheelchair, and she became disoriented. . . . [The dog] grabbed [her] and pulled her out of the door of her van. [She] fell to the ground, and the 104-lb dog pulled her away, dragging her into a drainage ditch about 20 feet away.

—Cincinnati Enquirer
December 13, 1991

This crumpled clipping from a Cincinnati newspaper was silently handed to me by Mary, a chronically mentally ill patient on whom I was asked to consult when she was admitted to the medical intensive care unit after a near fatal overdose. Her dog had died, no one understood how she felt, and she could see no reason to go on. She had placed the news clipping in her shirt pocket because it reminded her of her relationship with her pet, and represented a kind of suicide note "to whom it may concern."

Although many of us actually were concerned, it was difficult for us, trained in scientific inquiry, immersed in a culture that draws a sharp distinction between the value of human life and of animal life, to appreciate the depth of pain Mary was experiencing.

Fortunately, Mary recovered. During her later treatment, she explained to me that she believed her dog, like all animals, had an immortal soul. That is why she arranged to bury her dog in a local pet cemetery, which provided a chapel service and graveside prayer. She showed me the cemetery's brochure, which was decorated with a sketch of animals wearing halos, because they were in heaven.

As I worked with Mary, I discovered that a concept which many of my colleagues take for granted, the subordinate place of animals in relation to human beings, was not shared by her. As I researched the topic, I realized that our culture's belief in a human/animal dichotomy has its roots in early religious dogma and ancient political struggles.¹⁻³

For example, one way in which converts to the developing monotheistic hierarchical religions of Judaism and Christianity separated themselves from some believers in polytheism and animal worshippers was by insisting that one God had dominion over man, and that humans had dominion over animals.¹ Only humans were

created in the image and likeness of God. Derived from these beliefs were the opinions of St Thomas Aquinas, who argued that it did not matter how man treated animals because God had subjugated all things to man's power; and of Pope Pius IX, who refused in the 1800s to sanction a branch of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in Rome on the grounds that doing so would imply that man had duties toward animals.

Very early Christian clerics had voiced particular disdain for cats because cats were often pets of women who had rejected early Christianity and clung to the female-dominated religious practices of herbalism.⁴ Of special interest to medical practitioners is that the resultant ritual slaughter of millions of cats (and, of course, their owners) indirectly contributed to the deaths of one third of the people of Europe in the 1300s from a plague of rats that carried the bubonic plague.

Today, our culture struggles anew with evolving ethical concepts about the relative value of animal vs human life. Unaware of most of these larger issues, my more fortunate but indigent patients, surrounded by supportive friends and relatives, find that their companion animals are a help to them. The animals are their "children" and take the places of those who have left home or were never born. For a homosexual couple, their animals constitute a sense of family. For a chronically ill woman, they are the jesters who help her maintain her sense of humor.⁵ A guide dog is a powerful ally who accepts my blind patient as he is, thus enhancing his assertiveness and risk-taking abilities, and raising his self-esteem.

For my more emotionally vulnerable patients such as Mary, acceptance by an animal companion becomes an entry point on the road to a relationship with a human being.⁶ In fact, patients such as Mary who have experienced severe emotional deprivation or neglect during development sometimes find that an animal becomes the *only* source for experiencing the total warmth and security that more fortunate people experienced from their parents during infancy.

Although Mary appeared at first to us to be parenting her dog, actually the dog had been parenting Mary. Mary hated herself and had never really been unconditionally loved by anyone before. She experienced a bond with her dog that was greater than her love for any human being, including her own children. Rather than

minimize the importance of Mary's relationship with her animal companion, I recognized her newfound capacity for an intimate relationship as a foundation upon which she later built a bridge to other creatures in the universe—her doctors.

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