
CHAPTER I

The Human-Pet Bond



Everything that lives, lives not alone nor for itself.

—William Blake

The human-pet bond is one that dates back to prehistoric times. Some early cave drawings depict dogs joining in the hunt, as well as many in the camp and around the fire, sharing the lives of our earliest ancestors. That initial bond was not an accident or rare occurrence, but rather a natural, deliberate interaction. It served both the basic needs of humans and these friendly cousins of the wolves. Humans and dogs benefited from mutual protection and companionship. In addition, this fortuitous union enhanced hunting success. Much later, dogs would be trained and specially bred for herding and many other practical purposes.

THE DOMESTICATION OF SOME ANIMALS

The first dogs were valued as friendly hunting adjuncts and reliable alarms, warning of intruders. Since human survival was a hand-to-mouth daily challenge, these semi-feral dogs were mostly left to fend for themselves, but were probably thrown bones and scraps of food (even as they are today in many undeveloped countries). Those who were the best companions and hunters were selectively bred, and in time this created the first breeds of true dogs—different from their



“Faithful and Constant Companions.”

*Photo by W. Sife. Courtesy of
Hartsdale Canine Cemetery, Inc.*



In memory of a precious cat.

*Photo by W. Sife. Courtesy of
Abbey Glen Pet Memorial Park*

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wolf ancestors. Much later, during biblical times, *pets* as we consider them now were still unheard of—aside from an occasionally favored livestock animal. Most likely, a family would take an adorable lamb or kid into the house and bring it up by hand, allowing the children to play with it. But in those unforgivingly hard times, this practice had to be temporary. Animals were raised for meat and milk, and even most of the favored ones eventually had to be slaughtered.

Times and people were much tougher then, and food was a family's first concern. Shelter, reproduction, and just staying alive were always primary, and anything else had much lower priority in each day's struggle for survival. This pet-keeping was still so temporary and occasional that there was not even a word to define it. The times were not yet ready for our present-day concept of a companion animal who did not first serve some other vital utility or purpose. Favored household animals had to be temporary indulgences—extravagances that generally did not fit into the normal long-term scheme of harsh, daily existence at that time.

We know almost nothing about the history of cats, until they were revered in ancient Egypt as quasi-religious figures. There they were sometimes killed and mummified as part of a rite we still do not fully understand. But cats were natural predators of mice and rats. They survived and increased, independently—especially well around farms and granaries, where they were welcomed and appreciated. They served a vital function in the growing agrarian development of mankind. The rats and mice they hunted were hated for devouring precious grain and other foods. This was particularly important during times of poor harvest, when there was a dangerously low supply for people to eat. Much later, in the Middle Ages, cats became even more valued when it was realized that rats and mice were the carriers of terrible diseases and epidemics.

A review of man's history shows that the actual concept and word "pet" first came into use in the Old Northern English and Scottish languages, at about 1000 A.D. It was used for any favored animal who was domesticated (or tamed) and treated with indulgence or fondness. Over the millennia this practice had gradually evolved and become much more common by that time. Our modern concept of a household pet was just developing. The coining of a new word was needed to help define it.

Nature has prescribed that very few animals have the personalities to be domesticated—and even fewer can be tamed. The first humans were hunter-gatherers. Eventually, when we began to emerge from the cave, we learned to take advantage of all the animals that could possibly be hunted, cultivated for food, or even scavenged.

For thousands of years, people captured and then selectively bred the many lines of livestock animals that have eventually become so familiar today. But as civilizations grew, dogs and cats—through their normal affectionate behavior—were firmly insinuating themselves into the homes and hearts of humans. Actually, the attraction was mutual and unavoidable. Since the social natures of cats and dogs are so different from most other animals, it was only natural that they adopted themselves into our lives. There is something deep within our human nature that loves this special relationship.

There are distinctively different kinds of temperaments in people. This is probably genetic in origin, and we can see a wide spectrum of types. There are evil people and social misfits of all sorts. Then there are the many who conform to the roles of society, but who have little love in them for others. They are not usually pet lovers. But the vast majority of people are basically good and loving. We have a normal need to give and receive love and to nurture. It seems that pets are our perfect adjuncts in life. History clearly shows us that as civilizations evolve, so does the role of household pet.

The transition to a pet-oriented society started when the focus was shifted from the favored domesticated farm animal to the tame but free-ranging dog or cat who lived with us, performing some service for the household. Cats are excellent mousers, and dogs are natural watchdogs and protectors—and loyal friends. This helped set the stage for our modern concept of family companion animals. We were only just beginning to discover the wonders of the human-pet bond.

When pockets of early civilizations first developed, wealthy men and leaders were the only people who could afford any luxuries. They enjoyed slaves, fine foods, clothes, jewels, and all the indulgences that most other people could only dream of. Dogs were selectively bred to serve specialized hunting functions or to display certain aesthetic appearances. Possessing these dogs became a matter of pride and vanity for their wealthy owners. At first, all cats were semi-feral—living in and around human dwelling places. But because of the inherent affectionate nature of humans, it was impossible for man and dog or

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cat to live under the same roof and not form a loving bond. It is as if our species were made for each other.

As civilizations advanced, the keeping of “pet” animals gradually became an established practice. The only exceptions to this today are found in extremely fundamental religious societies. It is interesting to note that even now these groups still do not have a vocabulary word for pet. Strict fundamentalists will not assimilate this relatively new practice into their lives because there were no biblical or other scriptural references to the modern-day concept of pets.

Gradually, pets became more commonly appreciated. Dogs were more utilized and kept for their companionship and loving, loyal natures. The history of our literature includes many references to beloved companion dogs. Even in Homer’s *Odyssey*, the ancient Greek hero Odysseus returns home after twenty years and is joyfully welcomed by his faithful old dog, Argus. There were no literary references to cats until considerably later. We still don’t know much about the special quasi-religious attitude and relationship the ancient Egyptians had for their felines. Only a few isolated mummified cats remain, and there is almost no hieroglyphic account for them.

By the middle of the eighteenth century, man’s relationship with animals had already broadened quite a bit. The more developed civilizations and cultures were starting to keep pet dogs and cats for amusement, entertainment, and companionship—and not just for survival or religious purposes, as before. It is almost shocking to realize that this was only about 250 years ago. Increasing numbers of people were discovering the very rich source of love that these companion animals provide. Ever since the first few individuals were able to afford the luxury of pleasure and bonding with a household animal, we have never been the same. Gradually over the centuries, the numbers of household pets began to increase. Sailors even started bringing home tamed monkeys and talking parrots from exotic places. But the rest of us were beginning to realize that there were special benefits to our unique loving companionship with dogs and cats.

PETS FILL OUR NEED TO LOVE AND NURTURE

Most of us have a deep, natural need to love and be loved. This relationship is pure and unpolluted by any outside influences or conditions. But there are so many pitfalls and dangers in the process that we have learned to be cautious—indeed, too cautious.

Anyone who has ever loved a pet—regardless of the species—has known the very special magic that they give us. Some animals have an amazing capacity for loving us. This capacity to love is so profound that most of us are convinced that if there is such a thing as a soul, then they must possess this, as well. Many find great comfort that there must be pets in heaven.

Our natural role as steward is part of our basic human need to give love and to nurture—and to receive it. This is well illustrated by the innate tendency that children have to lovingly care for and integrate with their dolls and toy animals. Even some adults still enjoy the pleasure of owning such playthings. The inherent love of soft, cuddly, and furry things can be seen in the instinctive response of the human baby to them. This is in our nature. Dolls and toy animals have always been made into fantasy pals, and treated with great personal affection and attachment. As we grow up, this loving human instinct is usually transferred to more traditional objects of endearment. But we never really outgrow our natural tendency for stroking the fur of animals. It offers a sense of personal reassurance and comfort to many people.

The need to nurture is part of our innate makeup. It has helped to ensure the preservation of our species. In evolutionary terms, this is an essential instinct that grew as a result of our drive for survival. It is a basic part of our very nature, and it naturally carries over to our beloved companion animals. Pets are the perfect solution for our need to nurture and love when we are not too involved in the rearing of our own babies. And later, the pet animal becomes a unique companion for the young child, as well as the harried parent. It would seem as if nature had put certain animals on this earth to share their lives with us. Pets have become a basic part of our social evolution. A natural and symbiotic relationship has developed, greatly benefiting our mutual emotional and survival needs. Without pets our lives would be far less enjoyable and productive—and a lot lonelier.

The pleasures and benefits derived from keeping a companion animal are complex and many. They give us innocent dependence, companionship, and pure love—and are totally accepting and never judgmental. The unique emotional bonding between the pet and the owner strengthens for each. The result is a wonderful coupling that gives us added stability, purpose, and a sense of personal enrichment that defies description. People who do not have companion animals have no idea what they are missing.

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Each of us is capable of wonders. When we reach deep down into our very being, we can come up with some amazing things. And our beloved pets help us to achieve this.

The bond we develop with pets is as wonderful and rewarding as it is fascinating and practical. It is an active reaching out and sharing of life with another living being, who happens not to be human. This relationship offers us a chance to share and express our pure selves, without needing to defend our actions or feelings. Companion animals, as we have come to call them, give us our greatest opportunities to express love, without ever having to worry about being judged or rejected. They give us back a devotion that is unmatched by any other relationship, in a very private bond. Pets provide us with an oasis of unqualified love and acceptance in an otherwise demanding and critical world. Their obedience and respect give us an increased sense of self-worth that adds new meaning to our lives. In return, we assimilate them into positions of great personal value. Our bonds with them can be very profound and deep.

People can open up completely to pets, and receive an inner sense of joy and strength from them. It has often been noted that pets can be truer friends than others of our own species. They are never critical, and therefore allow us to blossom emotionally in ways that would not be possible with fellow humans, who tend to be competitive and judgmental. We make our companion animals our secret sharers, often with greater intimacy and trust than that which is often given to the people who are closest to us. Our bonds with beloved pets are in many ways stronger, purer, and far more intimate than with others of our own species. We feel loved and completely secure in sharing our secret souls with them. How often can this be safely done—even with a spouse? So when a dear pet's life ends, it really is very understandable and normal for us to grieve and suffer a unique bereavement. And then we have to learn how to cope with the physical breaking of that kinship. But the deeply personal, spiritual aspects of that bond remain unbroken, and stay with us.

Some pets are so innocent and transparent in their needs and feelings that we get to know and trust them better than most humans. And they feel the same about us. We touch and caress them freely and speak to them adoringly. And they respond with love and so many different kinds of reassurances that we crave and need.

TOUCHING AND PETTING

The physical act of fondling and cuddling is fundamental to our psychosocial stability and health. Unfortunately, our Western society still has leftover Victorian mores about people openly touching and caressing each other. This powerful primal need is satisfied in part by the loving, sensual contact we have with our pets. Petting and stroking is powerful medicine for us, contributing to our emotional (as well as physical) security and health. That is especially marvelous because it energizes a mutually beneficial response. The pet loves and benefits from it—and we ourselves are gratified and soothed, as well.

The pleasure of petting a companion animal has been proven to be of significant medical and psychological benefit to us: Blood pressure is reduced, heartbeat is improved, resistance to disease is heightened, and tension is eased—among other tangible benefits. As mentioned, this relationship has a dimension that transcends even the ties between people, as wonderful as they can be.

In this modern day of violence, superficiality, estrangement, and loneliness, the bond with a beloved pet can be a stabilizing and even sustaining force in our lives. But unfortunately, there are still many who would disparage this. That is something we have to learn to deal with and not allow to upset us. The bond is an important part of us, and it helps define who we actually are.

Sometimes these expressions and reflections of our very private selves are allowed to run out of proportion to what is safe or wise. There are many pet lovers who forsake some or much of their interhuman relationships in favor of the powerful sense of love and security their pets give them. There is potential danger, here. We can tend to insulate ourselves with our pets from the rest of the world's pains and insensitivity. It is too easy to build a safe emotional cocoon around us and the beloved pet, isolating us from the pain and unpleasantness that surrounds us. Most of us do this, though—in varying degrees.

But as comfortable and secure as it feels at the time, it can prove unhealthy in the long run. There are many people who live lives of quiet desperation and who become overly dependent on a pet for supportiveness in stressful social situations. Frequently, when there is a strong conflict between two family members, one of them will turn to the pet for comfort and love and for the sense of emotional security that is needed. This dependent relationship becomes very personal

and secret. With time, it grows in magnitude and can even distort things, if it is not resolved.

LEARNING TO BE RESPONSIBLE TO OURSELVES

It is a wonderful experience to love and care for a pet. However, we must love ourselves as well, in order to survive and continue to lead productive lives. It is important not to lose awareness of our being an important part of the larger social structure around us. Aside from civic responsibility, we have a basic duty to ourselves—to change, grow, and prosper, and find our place within the community of humans. Lonely people who despair of finding love and being needed easily turn to pets for this. That is all well and good, but it should not become an escape or substitute, or offer an emotional buffer that isolates them from human companionship. With the inevitable death of the pet, this personal oasis evaporates. We too easily set ourselves up to be very vulnerable to the stark loneliness, grief, and bereavement that come when we lose a beloved pet.

Man is basically an emotional animal, and we need to be able to love and feel important to keep our balance and stability. The special challenges of living in an increasingly fast-paced, impersonal society compound our personal problems. Our private needs must be filled, regardless of how we do it. We have to find an outlet or substitute to serve this—and we normally seek it in another person, a pet, a hobby, or even our work. But too often, we do not have someone very dear to love or fully trust, and we are driven elsewhere to satisfy this insufficiency as best we can. There are also those who excessively immerse themselves in their work or hobbies, to sublimate a similar basic need for ego reinforcement, or to keep from feeling lonely. A large percentage of today's city dwellers is composed of people living alone and too isolated—and overly dependent on their beloved companion animals. Despite the natural tendency for denial, they are setting themselves up for disaster when the pet dies. There is a danger here for forming pathological attachments to pets without a healthy balance of human contact to offset this.

Insecurity often drives even the best of us, and some may feel that the only real love and respect they can get is from a pet. Forced by low self-esteem or personal vulnerability, there are many people who tend to become overly dependent on this sure relationship, within an otherwise

uncaring, ever-threatening society. Personal happiness is often measured by the safe life and uncompromised bond we share with pets. Unfortunately, when these intimate companions die, that security is breached. The profound shock of being bereft in this manner can seem unbearable. We are catapulted into a state of shock that cannot easily be compared to anything else.

It is important to realize that we all carry “emotional baggage” with us, all the time. Because of the painful psychological nature of this, it has long ago been suppressed deep in our subconscious minds. We are no longer actively aware of it, but it is still there, buried in our emotional substructure. Excessive bereavement is almost always caused by these unconscious repressed memories and feelings. Since they are still in our subconscious we are not cognizant of them—or we may even angrily try to deny their existence. Much of the excessive pain we experience is set off by the death, but it comes from so deep within us that we feel sure it is only a part of the bereavement. This triggers an avalanche of long-suppressed pain, and it all comes down on us at this most personally vulnerable and confusing time. Trained professional therapists are needed at this time. We have to be able to recall and separate the different painful experiences in order to heal from them.

To a great many people their love for and from companion animals becomes the saving grace in their lives. Anyone who has ever bonded with a dear pet can easily understand this. Certainly, there is nothing wrong with adoring a faithful companion animal, despite what some bitter, self-proclaimed critics would say about that. People who are not pet lovers cannot really understand this special relationship. Pets give absolute love to their masters, regardless of how disapproved of or ignored they may be by the rest of the world. The lowliest and most downtrodden person is always lord and master (or lady) to an adoring pet. The unique bond that is established becomes a wonderfully empowering and enriching experience. This has always been understood by the privileged few. But there are many who can never understand our bereavement, and would even try to belittle it. That is actually their loss. Yet we are still vulnerable to their insensitivity and criticisms.

Today, a darling companion animal is considered a normal part of one's immediate family. In the case of a person who lives alone with a pet, the mutual bonding can become a complex and even more intimate

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relationship. However, death is the one thing we cannot really protect a pet from, and it is the one subject in life that we least understand. It scares most of us to extremes of avoidance. In Western society, we almost never contemplate or discuss it, and are continually attempting to disregard the unavoidable. But when death inevitably catches up with our pets, we are almost always shocked and unprepared. Compounding our grief, we are also often filled with irrational feelings of guilt or even anger because we couldn't delay or prevent its death.

Our culture contributes to avoidance in dealing with the discussion, philosophy, and ultimate reality of death. The subject is considered so disagreeable that many people feel it is impolite to even mention the word. They choose to use euphemisms instead. Death is perceived to be bad, the ultimate enemy—much too frightening and upsetting to confront directly. So we only allude to it indirectly, when we are finally forced to face it. Many people are very glad to leave the details to the professional thanatologists and clergy, and relieve themselves of fearful and unknown responsibilities and reactions. Unfortunately, this avoidance still leaves us very vulnerable.

In many ways, a pet can be very similar to a beloved and totally dependent child who never grows up. In such a relationship, our sense of bonding and responsibility becomes very complicated. One's secret self is intimately involved and is safely established in the relationship with the pet. In this modern world of fear and rushing about, and perceiving things through sound bites and superficialities, it is very natural and understandable that many people feel safer confiding their most sensitive feelings only to an adoring companion animal. It will never fail our love and trust—except to die.

When sensitive individuals lose a pet, their bereavement is frequently very different than for the loss of a human. It may at first seem remarkable, but many normal people can grieve more for a dear pet than for a close relative or friend—or sometimes even a spouse. Mourning for a pet is usually not comparable to any other kind of bereavement. We share a large part of our lives with pets, including some very private feelings which we would never allow ourselves to trust or communicate to another person. The relationship we develop with a pet defines the quality and style of our lives. We engender this, and ultimately become products of our creation. We love them as pets, as surrogate children, or as replacements for other people. We can

dote on them, squandering our precious energies, resources, and time, or we can treat them as joyful companions in our own trek through life. That is our individual choice.

As we see, the bond between humans and pets has evolved dramatically, from biblical through modern times. Today, they are only rarely used as working animals, as in herding, sledding, or hunting. Now, a desire for the special company of a pet is all the justification we need. The most important function that animal companionship now serves is an emotional/psychological one. The pet's presence is comforting and full of love, restoring and reinforcing the ego, strength, and self-image of its master. Thus, our evolving human-pet bond has become a modern phenomenon—in an increasingly mechanical and dangerous world.

ACCEPTING THE LOSS

The human-pet bond is growing pervasive and strong in recent times, and we have come to a changing point in human behavior and awareness of the effects this has on us. Pet bereavement and its related concerns are emerging as a new, powerful social phenomenon of our Western culture. The fast growth and visibility of vast pet-related industries is also causing a new public awareness of this once little-understood and secret bond.

The sharing between people and pets offers many private and precious moments together. They are as unique as they are intensely personal and gratifying. Such mutual love is its own greatest justification for us. We find joy in our pets, as well as ourselves. Children have their security blankets; we have our pets.

We get much love and delight from them in life, and we grieve deeply for them when they die. Because of the unique enhancement they provide in our lives, they become a treasured part of us, forever. When a pet's life ends, more dies than just a beloved companion animal. Since we subliminally make them into living symbols of our own innocence and purest feelings, it can feel as if a treasured secret part of each of us also dies. But this can be reborn as we slowly pick up our shattered emotional pieces and move on. At this point in our healing, it is often natural to feel a need for a spiritual reunion with the pet. It is in our nature to want to believe that our souls will meet again—

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and in a better way when we eventually follow them. This feeling stays with us for the rest of our lives, as a living tribute to the pet.

Pet lovers all talk so knowingly about the bond because we have such a deep emotional involvement with it. Animals who become our companions quickly turn into our best friends and confidants—constant supporters and even spiritual comrades. Therefore, we are really all committed experts on this subject.

The bond really is a very complex psychological relationship—and a challenge to define. The first word associations that may come to mind are *attachment, union, kinship, link, relationship, connection, commitment, loyalty, alliance, covenant*. Although many of these make good sense, they still really don't completely say what the bond is. That is because we are trying to define love, and that is so difficult. Perhaps it is not even possible. So instead of struggling with a definition, which has to be limited, at best, let's examine what the bond is, in terms of its affects on us, emotionally and psychologically.

But before we can do that, we first have to take note of the kinds of bonding relationships people have with their pets. There are three basic classifications: *weakly bonded, moderately bonded, and profoundly bonded*.

To some, the bond is not much more than a responsibility for physical care, such as food, hygiene, etc. For various personal reasons these people tolerate having pets around, but they do not really love them. Unfortunately, this is a commitment that is often breached. We see sad evidence of this all the time. These pet owners are weakly bonded—at best.

To others, a pet is a loving, pleasing *thing* to have around the house. It is a source of amusement and pleasure—but in too many cases the animal remains an “it” in the owner's mind. However, in this second category of owners there are still many who do love their pets. But that is a limited affection, and it primarily serves only their needs and more immediate satisfactions. When a pet dies in one of these families, there is sadness and maybe even some heartache, but that passes very quickly. These pet owners are moderately bonded.

And that leaves the last category of pet owners. Readers of this book are probably profoundly bonded. It seems characteristic that when we first meet our future companion animal we all react emotionally. Our earliest responses are spontaneous and loving—and nurturing.

None of us can be impassive to an adorable kitten or puppy (or any other baby animal). We experience a heartwarming sense of affection. And of course, that is enhanced by our rapidly growing deep interest and desire to provide the best possible care for this foundling.

Small pets are cute and endearing, and we can lovingly cuddle and hold them as we would a baby. Although our larger pets would certainly like this as well, it is not so practical. So we learn to admire their strength, character, and dedicated roles as our ever-vigilant and loyal protectors. What wonderful friends and outlets our pets are for us, regardless of their size or age!

In the cases of adopting older animals, we react protectively, wanting to take them in and lavish on them the love and care that is so abundant in our hearts—and which they need so desperately. In addition to being attractive pets, they are living personalities whom we learn to recognize and adore. We also appreciate their innocence and “I am who I am” straightforwardness—without any hint of self consciousness or doubt.

Since their ability to “speak” with us is so limited, we fine-tune our sensitivities to such a degree that we feel certain that we know almost everything about them—including their needs and emotions. When they try to tell us something, we feel so good figuring it out (or frustrated, when it is not understood). Psychologists are only just beginning to acknowledge the comforting, reassuring response in us that is actuated when we speak to pets. It is akin to the positive feedback that mothers experience when they sing and talk to their babies. And who among us has never felt the novel joy of interspecies communication and love? This aspect of the bond is something wonderful and special—and only we can really appreciate it.

It also must be acknowledged and understood that we bond more strongly with some pets than with others. This is normal. Even our children affect us this way. We love them all, but they hold different and special places in our hearts. Each is individual, and so distinctive, and we respond to them all in varying ways. That should not be something to invent guilt about later.

For a brief objective look at your own bonding, pay attention for just a few minutes to how you verbalize to your pet. That will tell you volumes that you may not have even considered previously. In many

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ways they are our non-human children. We don't speak to adult people with the same nuances. Then assess your own feelings during those intimate times when your pet looks you directly in the eyes, long and lovingly. Even without any verbal communication, this can feel intensely spiritual. We all sense something extraordinary and moving at such moments.

And for obvious reasons, very early on we start referring to the pet as *he* or *she*—and never *it*. The beloved and devoted animal becomes integrated as a fundamental member of the family. Indeed, some people don't like the term “pet owner” and will not even refer to any companion animal as a “pet.”

Because of their complete dependency on us for every physical need, we develop a heightened sense of responsibility—committing ourselves to a personal determination that nothing will ever be overlooked. The pet responds to this, just as a baby would—naturally and with complete innocence and loving trust. Being responsive humans, we automatically react by developing an enhanced sense of commitment. Bonds like this grow even stronger with time. Actually, that kind of dedication creates ever-growing intimacy and emotional dependency in us. It is a prime factor in understanding this amazing rapport that has become such a basic part of who we are.

Each companion animal has a unique personality, and is full of innocent love and needs. Naturally, that brings out an overwhelming nurturing response in us, which never stops growing in our hearts. It is actually very much like having a new baby. Not only does this individual life and character thrive and develop—so does our relationship. This kind of love grows, and is ever-joyous and rewarding. And the bond becomes an essential part of us. Our everyday lives become completely involved and constructed around this unique union and dedication.

But this baby-like kinship is different, in that a pet does not grow up and leave us, as a child would. Companion animals are always dependent and constant, while still embodying total love and dedication to us. And who can be immune to that? It melts our hearts to be loved so absolutely, and without any judgmentalism. Even our closest human associates cannot be that innocent, pure, and dedicated.

This is only a brief account of the bond. It becomes a living and potent give-and-take emotional entity, with dynamics that shape and completely change our lives—during and even after the dear animal's

life. It is a relationship that combines the elements of intimacy, love, companionship, spirituality, caregiving, and childlike dependency. And it is as profound as it is unique. Interestingly, the more we do for others the more needed we feel. And as that develops we become even more strongly bonded.

Many people are lonely and need to have pets to be their friends and companions. They are especially vulnerable, and it is too easy for them to be criticized for their personal problems and circumstances. But whatever their motivation—age, infirmity, loneliness, a sense of social inferiority—it makes no difference. The relationship with their companion animals is more than just beneficial or therapeutic. It is pure love. The pets don't judge them—and nobody else has any right to. The bond is essential medicine for all of us, regardless of our reasons or needs. Our human urgency for love and nurture is ideally satisfied by our intimacy with companion animals. The bond we form enriches us in unique and important ways. It consummates the relationship with a sense of security and love that is unlike anything else.

But death is so upsetting and confusing. How can we look for answers when we can't even comprehend the basic questions? All life is a kind of metaphor. But there is so much potential learning and growth to be gleaned from it. Each of us plays a role in this, with our beloved pets—not ever really understanding the larger picture.

So when a dear pet's life ends, it really is very understandable and normal for us to grieve and suffer a unique sense of bereavement. We have to learn how to cope with the *physical* breaking of the bond. After the initial stages of mourning, we come to realize that the deeply personal spiritual aspects of the bond still remain unbroken. And because of this we begin to understand that each pet's spirit is wonderful and symbolic to us. We learn more about love and ourselves, from coming to appreciate this. That is one of the many gifts that they leave us to discover. And with our longer lives we continue to evolve—enriched by the wonderful bond that lives on in us, forever.

SERVICE DOGS

Service dogs play a doubly important role in the lives of people with disabilities. In addition to being adored and respected pets, they physically help the owners perform. These wonderful animals give vital

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assistance and services that allow their owners to function again. What an amazing relationship this is! The bond here is especially profound. The owner's self-image and sense of identity is intimately involved with the dog. This is very different than with other pets. Sadly, when a service dog dies or becomes disabled itself, the owner must quickly replace it. There is no real time for mourning—and the grief here is exceptionally profound. Too few people understand this. The loss of a service pet goes far beyond the loss of a beloved pet. Unfortunately, there are still too few agencies or counselors available to provide knowing and compassionate therapy at such a terrible time.

