

Huge ego of pet dog halts tears

PERHAPS the ultimate "feel good" friend is a dog.

Birds simply chirp, eat and poop. Fish are silent, eat and poop. Small mammals such as hamsters and guinea pigs seem uneasily similar to their not-so-distant cousins, rats. If given their druthers, these prisoners would simply fly out of their cages into the wilderness.

Not so with dogs. A good dog is virtually joined at the hip with its owners. The sense of devotion, closeness and emotional connection between the dog owner and his beloved pet almost creates a co-dependency.

When longtime companion pets die, the mourning is deep and soulful, representing not only the death of a friend, but also a clear marker in the progression of the owner's life into an older state of being, closer to his or her own death.

With our only household pet, a dog named Tiga, the experience was the antithesis of this. Reared for the first five years of her life by another family, she was never really ours. Unlike the dog in "Marley and Me," the huge selling book and multigazillion dollar movie hit, Tiga was as self-centered as any mammal that has ever walked on Earth.

Tiga's main purpose in life was eating human food and getting her butt rubbed. If Tiga was in your presence and someone opened the refrigerator, she would immediately leave to get closer to a potential feeding. Although we never fed her from the table or from the refrigerator, Tiga would "better deal" any human interaction for human food. Bowls of expensive, organic dog food would lay untouched for hours while she waited for us to cave and give her some of what we were eating.



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Tiga rejected many behaviors dogs find central to their lives. If a ball or a stick were thrown for her, Tiga would look at it with disdain and stay exactly where she was. Although we had spent a small fortune putting a huge Invisible Fence around our property, when she went out she would do her business exactly where we would walk, turn around and start whining at the door to come back inside.

In short, it really was all about her, 24/7.

Thus, at her passing last summer after seven years in our care, there was no sense of life transition, merely relief. None of us felt any animosity toward Tiga, but her ability to completely ignore us except when being fed and having her butt rubbed was astonishing.

In the end, the passing of any animal has sad aspects. When we got the word that Tiga had debilitating cancer in her skull and the vet recommended (after suctioning several thousand dollars out of us) that it was best to let Tiga not wake up from her sedative-induced sleep, there was a sense that we had done our best.

Clearly, she never went unfed or unrubbed. As the never-ending whining could be met with acquiescing positive reinforcement, we, like all pet owners, were responsible for the traits we found distasteful in the animal given to our care.

In truth, it is not the lack of love that I felt toward Tiga that disturbs me. It's the fact that I wanted to love her so much that I responded to her whining and thus perpetuated the habits that made her so completely annoying.

Perhaps, the inherent narcissism in seeing yourself in a dog is what allows movies like "Marley and Me" to have such rapt audiences. We want to understand what gives us happiness, and in the case of dogs, that means humanization of a pet.

Given Tiga's inherent egomania, maybe I saw a faint shadow of myself.

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