

## IS THERE REALLY A RAINBOW BRIDGE?

Most of us know the legend of the Rainbow Bridge which has become a source of comfort and sympathy to send when our relatives and friends lose a beloved pet. The question whether or not this is a factual or fictional place cannot be answered for certain one way or another, but believe it or not, the weight has shifted to the positive side among animal behaviorists, psychologists, and even theologians in the past fifteen or twenty years.

The gap between common sense and science sometimes has been enormous and baffling. One wonders why it took the scientists so long to recognize facts that animal lovers have always known. The empirical evidence for the moral, compassionate, reasoning, and faith behavior inherent in our dogs is overwhelming and undeniable.

My library is full of books with intriguing titles, such as, *The Intelligence of Dogs*, *The Hidden Life of Dogs*, *Animals in Translation*, *Pack of Two*, *Annals of the Dog-Human Relationship*, *Dog Is My Co-Pilot*, *Animals As Teachers and Healers*, *The Secret Language of Dogs*, and *Dog's Best Friend/Annals of the Dog-Human Relationship*. These authors have explored the deepest reaches of our companionship mainly with dogs, and everyone whose life has been enriched and blessed by dogs will agree with most of their conclusions.

For too long, we humans have assumed too singular a role, not only in creation itself, but on the moral order as well. No thanks go to Descartes (1596-1650), who gave the philosophical world a soul-less beast, the mechanical dog with no consciousness or intelligence. The consequences of this unenlightened attitude led to the assumption that animals felt no pain or suffering. Gruesome "scientific" experiments were carried on which were given no moral concern or consequences. The theological problem was that if dogs had intelligence or consciousness, then they would have a soul as well. If animals have souls, then they are eligible for an afterlife or heaven, and the Church was not able to absorb that reality.

Mark Bekoff, an innovative animal behaviorist is convinced that canines especially are endowed with a sense of right and wrong, empathy, compassion, humor, joy, grief, guilt, and even faith (in us). In short, Bekoff declares that, "Dogs are thinking animals. They seek the outcomes they want. They avoid the ones they don't. They solve problems. They have expectations. They have hopes."

In addition to the shift in scientific quarters, theologians are having second thoughts about the exclusiveness of human beings in the spiritual realm. The more the "hidden life of dogs" is studied, the more clear it becomes that dogs possess

some kind of special relationship with their Creator, a belief held in primitive societies for ages. Someone has said that it is no coincidence that God spelled backwards is Dog. One charming folk tale among the Kato Indians of California has God traversing his new creation filling it with all its familiar wonders. However, there is no mention of the dog. Why? Because God already had a dog who was accompanying him on his creation walk. Apparently, the Katos could not even imagine God going about without a dog by his side.

There is obviously a substantial and wondrous connection between us and our dogs. They are capable of loyalty, shared experiences, calculated play, serious responsibilities, and genuine camaraderie. To go even further, any long association with dogs convinces us that dogs can exercise reason, discern problems, figure out solutions, and communicate their intended action. Is this claiming too much for the household pet without being charged with anthropomorphizing? Not at all. It happens that dogs and humans share the same general nervous system structure, brain organization, and transmitter chemistry. We also share an evolutionary history notably manifested in much canine behavior that demonstrates our high level relationship. While not yet proven by strict scientists, (if it ever can be), we cannot claim conclusively that dogs possess consciousness, forethought, moral intelligence, and therefore, souls. However, these attributes *are* plain to us who live year after year with consecutive Scotties. Our dogs constantly exhibit behavior that we *understand* on an intelligent or emotional level. My Scotties have wants, likes and dislikes, expectations, hopes, fears, disappointments, and joys. They can express both grief and exultation appropriately. The data is compelling. Two necessary components, consciousness and intelligence, augmented by historic breed instincts, is altogether an impressive package which include having a sense of right and wrong. That surely opens to door to heaven.

I know a few people who try to silence their dogs as completely as they can, even using shock collars. Little do they suspect that the tendency to bark made the dog the most valuable animal on the planet to early humans. A barking dog is the perfect warning system even today, more efficient than fancy electric security systems, and that is the opinion of our neighborhood policemen. In the dangerous world of cave dwellers, the best barkers were no doubt the survivors in the camp. Those dogs who did not provide the watchdog service well, may have been eaten rather than bred for domestication. Scottish Terriers rank in the top three breeds for well-functioning watchdog duty, and my two Scotties prove that pudding. Barking is a vital feature bred into these dogs, and while instinct may incite barking, the household Scottie soon learns to hold his fire or limit his barking to his own territory. In other words, intelligent discernment enters his decisions, and he rarely does random or nuisance noise. Early human beings gave the dog spiritual powers by which both angels and devils were detected. A barking dog

was therefore not to be silenced in case a human life was in danger from an evil spirit.

Our dogs are so much more than anatomy and instinct. We have come a long way from Descartes' biological bag of reflexes that feels no pain, but dog behavior remains inscrutable to a large extent. Few behaviorists are denying that they have a moral sense, individual personality, trust (have faith), and feel a variety of "human" emotions. We share much genetic heritage with dogs, leading Mark Bekoff to believe that what we share extends into the spiritual realm. "If we have souls, our animals have souls. If we have free choice, they have it. If we can't know this for sure, let's give them the benefit of the doubt." (from a *Denver Post* interview). We still wonder why dogs are so devoted to the human race, why they seem to delight in our company even if it is not ideal, and accord us with limitless affection and fidelity.

We have come to the crux of the matter: the question of personality. That we give our dogs the very characteristic of *personality* is telling. There is no other way to describe the distinctive temperaments and styles of activity each dog even of the same breed exhibits. They are all as different as our own children are. And if this is personality, the dogs surely have souls that warrant entry into the Creator's abode at the end of their earthly lives. How dare we humans claim exclusivity when not only legend, lore, and spiritual intuition say otherwise? The biblical promise also includes animals in a life after death. In Genesis 9:9-10, the Creator makes a covenant with the animals as well as with Noah after the Flood, saying, "Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and *with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you...*" That is inclusive, and now we use the Rainbow Bridge as a symbol of the original sign God set in the clouds.

The first Bible verse most of us learned in Sunday School because it was short and to the point was, "God is love." Love is love, a divine dispensation from wherever it comes. One of the requirements for a healthy emotional life is reciprocal love. We have a basic need to love and be loved. Dogs can fill that need nearly as well as human beings, some would say, just as well. We should neither fantasize nor romanticize our relationship with our dogs. Their function is not simply to fill some need of ours.

Consider the endowments of dogs: they have instincts and heightened senses, hear voices and see things we do not, intuit climates of emotion, exercise inscrutable wisdom, and obey inaudible commands. They have a sanctified innocence, and inherent dignity of their own, and are capable of self-sacrificing love and loyalty rarely found among human beings. They do not consistently abuse, ravage, and kill their own species. They are not an inferior sub-species, but as Henry Beston has noted, (animals) "are other nations... caught with ourselves in the net of life and time, fellow prisoners of the splendor and travail of the

earth.” (*The Outermost House*). To believe that there can be no animals in heaven is untenable for the critical reason that love is what makes life itself tenable.

Our dogs bring an incomparable enrichment to our lives with their honesty, fidelity, forgiveness, and unconditional love. But more than that, they introduce us to another dimension that is qualitatively different from life with people and human codes of conduct. They deepen our sense of connectedness with all of the mysteries of the universe.

I can imagine that Heaven is in good paws, and the line-up at Rainbow Bridge is a sight to behold.

