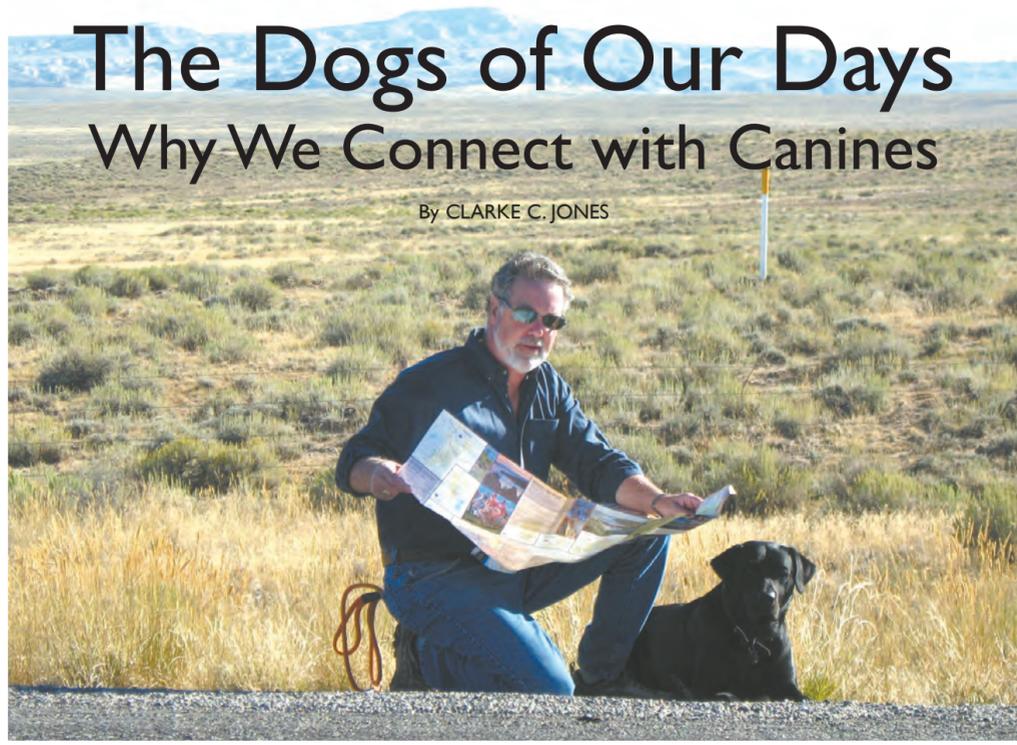


The Dogs of Our Days Why We Connect with Canines

By CLARKE C. JONES



Luke waits patiently while his human, Clarke Jones, tries to get them home from a pheasant-hunting trip to Montana. (Photo: T. Jones)

He awoke peering through a spidery gauze of tears and intoxication. His body ached from falling asleep in an uncomfortable position on an uncomfortable sofa. It was a night like every night since she had left. Small dinners followed by the numbing and—if he was lucky—the sleep-inducing effect of alcohol.

Dozing in the corner, his Lab pup, not quite a year old, twitched and moaned momentarily, dreaming whatever puppies dream. The March rain dribbled down the windows of his home, making it appear that even his old house felt the melancholy of her leaving.

Then it began, the slow and methodical mental rumble that would cause his body to quiver and tears to flow once again. As the depression took hold, his body trembled. He uttered to no one a soft, mournful whisper, “Not again...” and then gave into it.

He never heard the dog move, but felt its head rest on his chest and breathe a small sigh. It would not be the last time the two would share this kind of evening.

Quietly though, clarity crept in and from that moment on he knew there was something in his life besides self-pity. Something to come home to. Something that depended on him as a functioning human being. Something that would make him want to see the next day.

101 Reasons to Have a Dog

You never know what you will hear when you ask someone, “Why do you have a dog?”

Dogs chase away intruders and save children from burning buildings. They provide assistance to people with disabilities and comfort to those in nursing homes. And they’re good for your health.

For just one example, according to information compiled by Dr. Kevin Connelly for the Richmond SPCA, studies show that people with pets have lower cholesterol and triglyceride levels compared to people without pets, even when matched for weight, diet and smoking habits.

Most people don’t need heroics—or scientific studies—to realize dogs are vital to their lives.

Mrs. Virginia Justis, a retired school teacher in Chesterfield, has had a dog in her life for almost 50 years. She recently acquired a puppy to keep her 11-year-old dog company, she said, but “the pup was too rambunctious for the older dog, so I got an 8-year-old female to keep the puppy in line.”

When I asked her why a woman in her 80s would want three dogs, she replied, “They let me know when company is here, so they offer a bit of security, but mostly they are my children and offer constant companionship.”

Friend for Life

With dog ownership comes responsibility. That adorable little puppy will be with you for 10 to 15 years—not an acquisition to be taken lightly. People who have taken this four-legged investment seriously find that the return of love and affection given by a dog far outweighs any problems it may create.

Midlothian empty-nesters Alice and Reuben Waller said of their deerhound Cromwell, “He is always ready to go wherever you are going. We don’t look at a dog as a responsibility. It just wouldn’t be home without him.”

This may be one of the reasons retired individuals often insist on taking their dogs along when they travel. Hotel chains across the country recognize this new paradigm and market themselves as dog-friendly.

I once drove all the way to Montana just so my dog could hunt wild pheasants. Now he never really expressed any desire to spend five days in a car just to get out and hunt on a hot dry September afternoon, but for some reason I thought it important that he have the experience.

It didn’t dawn on me until halfway back from the trip that it was the dog who was humoring me. He has seen the ups-and-downs of my life and is more than willing to help carry my baggage, even across the country.

Social Similarities

So what is it that draws us to dogs? One reason could be the social nature of dogs themselves. It is an animal, like humans, that generally thrives in an

ordered group atmosphere.

In her book “For the Love of a Dog,” Dr. Patricia McConnell explains several similar traits of a dog and a human: “Dogs evolved from one of the world’s most social species and naturally seek companionship. Dogs will live alone if they have to...but will always choose the company of others. Although dogs cling to any kind of social relationship, they don’t treat humans as any port in a storm. They seem to be attracted to us as we are to them.”

As a social pack animal, dogs can experience separation anxiety. When you return home, your dog probably greets you excitedly, delighted that the “pack” is once again united.

The nature of a dog to greet you like a long-lost friend upon your return from a two-week vacation or a 20-minute trip to the grocery store subtly enhances your bond to it. Who wouldn’t feel attached to someone so happy to see you?

As controversial as it may sound, we recognize that animals do have emotions. We know dogs experience fear, joy or anxiety, and express it in their own ways. At times, a dog’s expression even seems to mirror our own. This similarity to us also tightens our bond to them.

McConnell elaborates: “The faces of dogs are like living, breathing, fur-covered emotions, with none of the masking and censoring made possible by the rational vortex of mature adult humans. The expressiveness of dogs gives them a direct line to the primitive and powerful emotional centers of our brains and connects us in way that nothing else ever could.”

A Member of the Family

If you’ve ever carried on a conversation with your dog—and surely you have—you know how the dog will sit patiently with an ear cocked one way, and then the other, looking as if he is trying to comprehend the words.

If we could get our children, spouses or significant others to do that when we try to communicate with them, how much better would human relationships be?

Likewise, we often wonder what our dogs are thinking during the course of our day, and some of us wish they could tell us what is on their minds. The fact that dogs do not, as our human counterparts are so apt to do, may also be a reason we are so closely tied to our dogs.

All of this may explain why, even in depressing economic times, we hesitate to skimp on our pet’s “quality of life” by purchasing a lesser-quality food or reduced health care, no more than we would for any other member of our family.

Kenneth Cunningham of Stuarts Draft, who lives with Labrador retrievers, says, “I could not see my life without them any more than I could breathe without air.”

Listening Skills

Dogs have been in my life since I was a child. I learned I could always confide in them after my father and I shared a number of one-armed dances while he whaled away at my bare legs with a forsythia switch for some misdeed I allegedly committed.

Rusty, our family’s mixed-breed mutt, was always willing to slink off with me and listen patiently as I relayed the injustices of childhood. I learned, way back then, that dogs listen not just with their ears—they also listen with their eyes.

Whether you are 5-plus or 50-plus, letting a dog in your life is letting love in your life—a love that enriches you in good times and perhaps sustains you in troubled times. Be it a registered show champion or a Heinz 57, you will find when you examine a dog’s heart, they are all purebreds. 🐾

Clarke C. Jones is a freelance writer who spends his spare time hunting up good stories with his black Lab, Luke. You can contact Clarke or Luke at www.clarkecjones.com.



Reuben and Alice Waller share their Midlothian home with Cromwell—or perhaps it’s the other way around. (Photo: L. Barnes)

A Pet a Day Did you know...

- Interacting with an animal reduces the cardiovascular indicators of stress.
- The use of prescription drugs and the overall cost of caring for patients dropped in nursing homes where companion animals became part of the therapy.

Learn more about the connection between pets and health at richmondspca.org/adopt. Also, learn about the SPCA programs Paws for Health, Pets on Wheels and Seniors for Seniors by clicking Programs > Companionship Programs.

The “Perfect Pet”

Martha Dula’s mother and two of her aunts each lived alone in separate houses on the same street. Their cat kept all of them company.

“That cat was at home in all three houses,” said Dula. “It knew when one of them was dying, and he never left her bedside.”

Dula is a firm believer in the idea that animals contribute to the health and welfare of people, particularly older persons who live alone. She’s the instigating force behind the Richmond SPCA’s Seniors for Seniors cat adoption program.

Seniors for Seniors allows people living in pet-friendly retirement communities to adopt cats that are 5 years or older for a reduced fee. SPCA staff assist potential owners in finding a good match, then the cat visits the human’s home for a 30-day trial period. Adoptive owners received a free starter kit of supplies and food.

Dula thinks mature cats are perfect pets for older people because they don’t require walks or extensive care, they aren’t rambunctious or aggressive, and their personalities are known.

Because older cats don’t get adopted as quickly as kittens, some may stay for years at the Richmond SPCA, a no-kill facility. Dula explained that when people adopt older cats, space is freed up for more cats in need.

Dula is a pet owner herself, of course. She has a dog to take walks with, she said, but it’s her cats Padraic and Abdula Dula that really nourish her.

“Both of my parents suffered from undiagnosed depression. I have the ‘depression gene,’” she said. “You can’t be lonely and depressed when there’s a cat around. They’ll hang out with you, they’ll curl up in your lap. They really want to be in the room with you.” —Angela Lehman-Rios

