

The family dog

Why we treat our pets like royalty

By Michael Schaffer | March 29, 2009

BACK IN NOVEMBER 2007, Utah's Deseret News wrote up a five-year-old Shih Tzu whose wardrobe included a pink mohair sweater and a fur-trimmed parka. The same month, the Arizona Republic reported on the growing popularity of puppy Tupperware parties. And in South Carolina, the Greenville News highlighted an increasingly common sight on local sidewalks: pet strollers. Such conveyances might have proved popular at the six Dallas-area malls that announced preholiday "pet nights," where animals could sit for a picture with Santa.

Gilded-age indulgences that ended when recession officially arrived a month later? Hardly. According to the American Pet Products Association, the pet industry - which includes everything from old-fashioned kibble to new-age veterinary acupuncture - grew by \$2 billion in 2008. For 2009, the association predicts \$45 billion in sales. Fifteen years ago, that number was \$17 billion. "We're as recession-resistant as any industry I can think of," declares Bob Vetere, the association's president.

A century ago, the pioneering economist Thorstein Veblen lampooned the house pet as the ultimate emblem of conspicuous consumption, an "item of expense" with "no industrial purpose." Veblen's dim view isn't so out of place among today's cynics, either. Candidates for our era's canine Marie Antoinette might include Trouble, the beloved Maltese who was willed \$12 million by hotelier Leona Helmsley. From \$5,000 Swiss chalet doghouses to \$1,200 leashes inlaid with Swarovski crystal, critics have plenty of excesses to mock.

But for most of America's 69 million pet-owning households, the changing treatment of pets isn't a function of money. It's a reflection of a century's worth of deeper changes. The move from farm to city has meant many people no longer experience agriculture's sometimes harsh, utilitarian model of human-animal interaction. The evolution of the middle class means more people can afford an animal that doesn't have to work for its food - or become ours. Most of all, modern pet ownership has been transformed by our evolution in recent decades into a less connected, lonelier society. Four-legged companionship matters more than ever.

To scholars who study the human-animal bond as well as marketers who profit from it, those broad changes have given rise to the phenomenon of "humanization," the modern tendency to see domestic animals less as beasts than as junior members of the family. And right along with that evolutionary promotion comes a new set of perceived responsibilities on the part of owners. Bring on the pet-food nutritionists, veterinary dermatologists, and professional dog groomers: Yesteryear's consumer excess has become, in the favored phrase of pet-goods vendors, today's "fur baby."

Today's pet owners "view their pets as full-fledged members of the family, with regard to which they would no more take lightly any serious cutbacks on spending than they would for their kids," concluded a March market report from the consumer-research group Packaged Facts. A 2001 survey for the American Animal Hospital Association revealed that 83 percent of pet owners call themselves their animal's "mommy" or "daddy."

It's a phenomenon that should also matter to those of us who don't make a living operating doggie day spas. In an atomized era, the growing amount of time and money we collectively spend on pets is an indication of how much we thirst for community, leaning on animals for support once provided by other humans. And the specifics of how we treat those pets no longer just reflect what we think is appropriate for animals. From the popularity of pet antidepressants to the rise of pet-custody divorce settlements, the way people interact with their pets says a great deal about two-legged society.

Humans have always been suckers for that doggie in the window. Tales of pet keeping go back to ancient

times - and tales of pet largesse do, too. It wasn't always about potentates like Mary, Queen of Scots, whose velvet-clad lap dogs traveled everywhere with her, including to her own execution. Diaries featuring accounts of ordinary people's beloved dogs and cats can be found throughout American history.

But if love for pets is eternal, the terms of that relationship - who gets to have a pet, and how the animals are treated - are perpetually changing. And the most recent changes are driven by an expanded idea of family.

A study last year in the *Journal of Business Research* traced the changing depictions of animals in magazine advertisements. In the 1920s, the prototypical ad showed a stylish woman strolling outdoors with her dog. By midcentury, he was in front of the living room fireplace. By century's end the animal had relocated to the bedroom, curling next to a sick child as his mother administered aspirin. (Today, 47 percent of owners report sharing beds with their pets.)

A stroll through a pet cemetery helps highlight what that means. Where some older headstones might hail Spot as a loyal servant, modern tributes are more likely to remember the dog as "my baby." Of course, he's no longer so likely to be named Spot: Statistics from Veterinary Pet Insurance, the nation's oldest pet insurer, show that the most common names for policy holders include Max, Chloe, Bella, and Jake, which sounds more like the roster at an upscale kindergarten than the cast list from "101 Dalmatians." (The firm was established in 1982; earlier pet-name statistics aren't available.)

This humanization has meant that the same concerns that animate modern child care play out in the pet marketplace as well. Over the past two decades, says Vetere, the biggest jump in spending has been from baby-boomer empty-nesters who have transferred their nurturing energy from children to animals.

Take pet food, where an explosion in health-oriented lines promising organic ingredients or human-grade meat plays to the same anxieties about nutrition and corporate agriculture that shape our food markets. Or training, a fast-growing field riven between a top-down approach that emphasizes the pet's subordinate place and one that sees positive reinforcement, not punishment, as the best way to teach. Sound familiar?

The intensified pet bond - and the quasi-human relationship at its core - also helps explain the rise in the number of petcentric legal practices (advocates want to make it easier to sue for loss of companionship, heretofore limited to wrongful human deaths) and the fiercely competitive universe of pricey toys promising mental enrichment to dogs, cats, even fish. And it's especially apparent in the transformation of veterinary medicine, whose roster of board certified specialties has nearly doubled since 1980. Cats that might once have been quietly euthanized are now offered \$12,500 kidney transplants - paid for by insurers, credit card debt, and, when that fails, online veterinary charities that let animal lovers fund procedures for pet owners in need. "I feel he is my child," wrote the owner of a pup named Buddy on the In Memory of Magic site. The owner needed help paying vet bills after the Boston terrier was hit by a car.

All sorts of scientific and consumer developments help explain how advanced veterinary interventions came to seem normal. But the pet industry, the major beneficiary of humanization - 56 percent of dog owners bought their pets Christmas presents - has actively cultivated the idea that pets are family. When the manufacturer of Advantix flea-and-tick solution calls its website petparents.com, or when promos for a major pet-pharmaceutical competitor proclaim that the firm is "Taking good care of the canine member of the family," the effect is to make older pet-care attitudes seem insufficient, even heartless.

Ultimately, the impulse toward pet humanization is all about us. According to James Serpell, director of the University of Pennsylvania's Center for the Interaction of Animals and Society, it was in the 1960s that the pet population began to grow faster than the human one. Had this boom simply been a reflection of postwar prosperity, you might have expected it to show up a decade or so earlier. Instead, Serpell posits that the upturn was a reflection of the massive social changes that first took hold then.

"Social networks fragmented over 40 years - there's more living alone, more divorce, more childless people, fewer people living in close geographic range of their families, and less community involvement," Serpell says. "As we lose social support, as our relations become fragmented, we are using dogs to fill the gap."

Research suggests that a lonelier society may be more willing to see human qualities in pets. In a 2007 article, University of Chicago professor Nicholas Epley and three colleagues determined that subjects who were less socially connected were more likely to attribute human emotional characteristics to dogs.

And while it's a stretch to assume a greyhound is capable of sympathy, the bond has wonderful effects. Studies going back to the 1970s showed that heart-attack patients given pets recovered faster than those without pets. A 1979 study of Swedish dog owners found that four in five of them agreed with the statement "the dog makes friends for me." That would come as no surprise to the 750,000 members of Dogster, a social networking website that uses the same logic - aided by the magic of the Internet - for the 21st century.

The dog in the mohair sweater, it turns out, is less a symptom of a gilded age than a reflection of a lonelier one.

Which is why the best way to see the expanding boundaries of our pet culture is to look at pet death. In most American cities today, you can find a pet-loss bereavement group where mourners commiserate. I spent two months sitting in on the Tuesday night sessions of one such group, where a procession of heartbroken members in an unused examination room of a veterinary hospital spoke of the loneliness and devastation of their loss. People took turns telling stories about their pets, showing off pictures, and describing the wrenching feeling of survivors' guilt. One woman, injured in the car crash that killed her dog, wondered whether she hadn't failed him by not getting him to the animal hospital sooner.

One recurring theme was the feeling that the rest of society didn't understand. Had a human family member died, bosses might have offered time off and co-workers might have taken up a collection.

Of course, the bereaved all acknowledged that they'd long known that the animal's death would eventually come. It's one place where the idea of humanization starts to break down: No one expects to outlive one's literal children. Indeed, since well before the modern reworking of pet care, many parents have thought of a pet's death as a kid-gloves way to teach children about "real" loss. But as pet ownership has become so emotionally important, the definition of "real" has changed right along with it.

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