

If Dogs Have a Heaven

By Kenneth Francis (May 2018)



Dog Lying in the Snow, Franz Marc, 1911

One morning, I was travelling to work by train, sitting in a packed carriage of passengers. Some were slouched on the seats and others standing in front of me. As usual, most of them were staring blankly into their hi-tech golden calves. However, when I stood up to leave at my stop, turning around to exit, the commuters behind where I was sitting were all smiling while looking down at the floor by the sliding doors. Some were pointing their camera phones downwards.

As the exit doors slid apart and beeped noisily, a hipster male commuter was squatting down stroking his border-collie's

puppy's head in order to calm the whimpering animal amid the din of the beeping doors. This seemed to endear and amuse the passengers. It struck me that, besides other furry cute creatures, a dog seems to bring out the best in us and put a smile on our faces. It certainly put a smile on my face as I left the train.

Then there are the *Lassie* movies and tales of hero dogs rescuing their owners. And who can ever forget Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, when Bill Sykes murders his lover, Nancy, and immediately loses command over his dog Bullseye, who abandons his brutal master and leads the police and townsfolk to the whereabouts of this violent Victorian thug? And two of TV's biggest hit programmes feature dogs: Channel Four's *SuperVet* and *The Dog Whisperer* (not to mention the numerous popular dog videos on YouTube). In the movie *The Misfits*, a dog who senses the slaughter of mustangs for dog food, whimpers and is distressed as the cowboy protagonists hunt for a stallion and four mares; while in the film, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, a wealthy family's birthday party turns into a nightmare and begins to crumble amidst an epic row, as Big Daddy (Burl Ives) despairs at a sea of lies and deceit inherent amongst his kin (the only creature to bring him a brief moment of comfort and a smile to his face is the family's bloodhound dog, which he cuddles as he walks out onto the mansion's porch).

From the porch on planet earth to outer space: Laika, the terrier-turned-cosmonaut, who was a stray dog on the streets of Moscow, became the first living being to orbit the Earth in 1957 (the first person to orbit earth was Yuri Gagarin in 1961). Sadly, she died less than two hours into her mission due to overheating and possibly stress.

During the Great Wars, one of the great stressbusters was also dogs, who kept the soldiers sane and safe. Throughout the trenches of the Western Front, dogs played an essential role during the bloody conflict. In 1918, Germany had employed 30,000 dogs, while France and England employed over 20,000; Belgian over 20,000 and Italy, 3,000. Many of these high-ranking dogs were decorated and revered as war heroes.

In modern times of conflict, military K-9 dogs have been known to mourn fallen Marines, lying on their masters' graveside, withdrawn and not eating for days or weeks. In 2011, in Rockford, Iowa, family and friends mourned the death of American Navy Seal hero, 35-year-old Jon T. Tumilson. What was remarkable about the funeral was when his Labrador dog, Hawkeye, also paid tribute by lying at the casket for the duration of the funeral, letting out a loud sigh.

In March of this year, the UK's *Daily Mail* published heart-breaking photos showing an incredibly loyal dog who turns up outside a hospital every day to wait for his owner, four months after he was killed. Journalist George Martin wrote: "The dog, who has no name, first arrived at the Santa Casa de Novo Horizonte hospital in Sao Paulo state, Brazil, in October. On that night he chased the ambulance carrying his stricken owner for miles until he finally got to the hospital doors. The animal belonged to a 59-year-old homeless man who was stabbed in a brutal street fight in Novo Horizonte and rushed to the hospital where he died—according to local media reports."

A similar story of loyalty is that of Hachiko, the Akita who always greeted his owner, University of Tokyo professor Hidesaburo Ueno, on his way home from work, at Shibuya

Station. But in 1925, Ueno passed away suddenly from a brain haemorrhage and never returned home. Despite this, Hachiko waited every day for his master for the next nine years.

In the US, funeral directors say dogs can lighten the tense atmosphere at a wake or funeral service. Whenever a dog joins a group of mourners, "the atmosphere changes," said Mark Krause, owner and president of Krause Funeral Home and Cremation Service in Milwaukee. In a funeral home, people are typically on edge, uncomfortable but everyone lights up; everyone has to greet the dog, he said.

From funeral home visits to pet cemeteries worldwide, which are a growing phenomena: the Royal Family in the UK have their own burial patch for the Queen's dogs. For nearly 60 years, after the death of every one of her corgis, a dedicated patch on the royal estate, Sandringham, is made available by the head gardener to receive the remains of her devoted companions. Queen Victoria buried her first collie (Noble) there in 1887. (other royal dogs include Labradors, cocker spaniels, crossbreed dorgis and gundogs). But it's not just Royals who parade their dogs for the public to see in the popular Press photographs. Almost all of the American presidents throughout history had dogs, as they greeted guests on the Whitehouse Lawn.



Also, in fine art, dogs often symbolize faith and loyalty, personifying fidelity. A good example of this is the small dog in the portrait of a married couple in Jan Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Wedding* (1434). I used to have a framed print of this masterpiece hanging in my hallway many years ago, unaware of the dog-fidelity symbolism.

Even in the world of popular music, the 1960s rock group, Three Dog Night, got their name after a band vocalist's girlfriend suggested the name after reading a magazine feature on indigenous Australians. The feature explained that on cold nights the natives would customarily sleep in a hole in the ground while embracing a feral dog, usually a dingo. On colder nights they would sleep with two dogs and, and if the night was freezing, it was a "three dog night".

One of the best-selling songs of all time is *Hound Dog*, sung by Elvis. it's hard to imagine a song about a goldfish, cat, pet mouse or almost any other domestic creature topping the charts. But there are dozens of songs about dogs. When Elvis sung about another dog, *Old Shep* (the first song he ever sung, at the age of 10, in a public performance concert at the Mississippi-Alabama Fair and Dairy Show) the poignant, final

lyrics (after the dog dies) read: *"If dogs have a heaven, there's one thing I know, old Shep has a very good home"*.

Whether or not dogs (or any animal) go to Heaven when they die remains a mystery. In *The Problem of Pain*, C.S. Lewis said God is the centre of the universe and man the subordinate centre of terrestrial nature: the beasts are not co-ordinate with man, "but subordinate to him, and their destiny is through and through related to his. And the derivative immortality suggested for them is not a mere amend or compensation: It is part and parcel of the new heaven and new earth, organically related to the whole suffering process of the world's fall and redemption." And the late Rev Billy Graham said: "I think God will have prepared everything for our perfect happiness. If it takes my dog being there (in Heaven), I believe he'll be there."

Author of *Treasure Island*, Robert Louis Stevenson, said: "You think dogs will not be in heaven? I tell you, they will be there long before any of us."

What is it about these loveable, goofy creatures that touches the hearts of those who own them? The bonds dog owners have with these furry companions are unique. Some dog owners love their canine pets even more than their children.

Theodore Dalrymple, who worked as a psychiatrist and doctor in UK's toughest prisons, once said to me he often encountered an inmate, who was a father, enquiring about the welfare of his dog (before his children) as soon as his partner/spouse visited him in jail. Dr Dalrymple also said inmates reacted

violently to any prisoner jailed for cruelty to a dog. This is because dogs have a deep effect on our emotions. Writing in the *Salisbury Review* in September 2015, Dr Dalrymple recalled another dog situation, where there was no better way to break the ice with strangers. While out walking down a Parisian avenue one day with his wife, he met a man with a lively Jack Russell terrier. Dr Dalrymple said when he and his wife saw the man coming towards them with his dog, it was jumping up at a stick held out by its master, grabbing it between its teeth so firmly that it could be whirled round. It growled playfully, and it was obvious that it wanted to play until either it or its master was exhausted.

“We stopped to talk about the dog,” said Dr Dalrymple. “Nobody who walks a dog is too busy to chat about it, and the difficulty is not in starting, but in ending such conversations: for there is no more sincere form of flattery, imitation perhaps excepted, than admiring a man’s dog. And, of course, everyone can listen to flattery for hours.”

Dr Dalrymple and his wife asked the man all the usual questions about the dog: age, for example, and whether the owner had had it from a puppy. “But every dog is individual and has its own character. It is then that the conversation grows more serious. ‘*C’est un chien-professeur,*’ said the proud master—a teacher-dog.”

The dog owner told Dr Dalrymple that he was a teacher and worked with children ‘in difficulty’ (disobedient and delinquent kids). Some five years ago, he took the dog to school with him and the animal had a profound, positive effect on the children. Dr Dalrymple said: “Why did the dog have such an effect? It certainly wasn’t because it was fierce, like a

pit-bull; quite the reverse. I think it is probably because the dog displayed and evoked affection, an affection that could be expressed on the human side without fear of disappointment or appearing weak and vulnerable in the eyes of peers.'

"Growing up, as most of them probably did, in a loveless environment in which all relations are those of power and conflict, to be resolved by strength and ruthlessness, the untroubled relationship with a dog gave them what many a teenage mother has said she sought in a baby: someone to love and someone to be loved by. A dog supplies what is missing in a loveless world."

There is good reason to suspect dogs would be more sensitive to human emotion than other species, according Deborah Custance, co-author of *Animal Cognition*. She told *Discovery News* that we have domesticated dogs over a long period of time. We have selectively bred them to act as our companions. "Thus, dogs that responded sensitively to our emotional cues may have been the individuals that we would be more likely to keep as pets and breed from."

It's difficult to know of any other animal besides a dog that seems to show a sense of shame when the owner arrives home to a trashed house. Notice how the dog almost tip-toes slowly around the chewed couch, while his face shows traces of 'shame', even if we don't scold them but pet them instead.

Research also shows that petting dogs can lower anxiety and decrease blood pressure. A Japanese study found that simply

looking at a dog can increase levels of oxytocin, a chemical released by the pituitary gland that's associated with human bonding and affection.

"We humans use eye gaze for affiliative communications, and are very much sensitive to eye contact," study co-author Takefumi Kikusui, a professor of veterinary medicine at the Companion Animal Research Lab at Azabu University in Japan, said in an email. "Therefore, the dogs who can use eye gaze to the owner efficiently would have more benefits from humans." But even if eye gaze is absent for the human, that still wouldn't deter the great benefits Dogs for the Blind give to our disabled community, including other roles they perform like herding, hunting, policework and security.

Dogs have also been known to be accurate at detecting certain cancers by smelling breath or urine samples. Research published in 2011 in the journal *Gut*, showed a Labrador trained in cancer scent detection correctly identified 91% of breath samples and 97% of stool samples from patients with colon cancer. It seems having a dog as a pet has many advantages.

Growing up as a young boy, our house was never dogless. Some of our dogs often yawned in flawless union with family members and would prick up their ears and stare at the door an hour or minutes before one of us arrived home from work or shopping. In his book, *Dogs That Know When Their Owners Are Coming Home*, biologist Rupert Sheldrake claims such uncanny behaviour is due to dogs (and cats) social/morphic fields in action. In his book, *Travels With Charley*, author John Steinbeck writes about his pet poodle, Charley, who he says is a mind-reading dog. "There have been many trips in his lifetime, and often he has

to be left at home. He knows we are going long before the suitcase has come out, and he paces and worries and whines and goes into a state of mild hysteria.”

Whether dogs have a genetic predisposition to occasionally read our minds in some abstract way is impossible to know for sure. But they certainly possess a bond with humans that very few animals can surpass. Maybe it’s because they have been living with us for so long. In Illinois, a trio of dogs buried at two ancient human sites in the region lived around 10,000 years ago, making them the oldest known domesticated canines in the Americas. Radiocarbon dating of the dogs’ bones showed they were 1,500 years older than thought.

With age in mind, the real tragedy is that these wonderfully faithful creatures die too young. Owners are lucky to get an average of 12- to 14 years’ companionship from their dogs. But if dogs have a heaven, there’s one thing for sure: it won’t be a WiFi code inside the Pearly Gates they’ll be worried about—but the redemption and reunification with their beloved owners.

Kenneth Francis is a Contributing Editor at *New English Review*. For the past 20 years, he has worked as an editor in various publications, as well as a university lecturer in journalism. He also holds an MA in Theology and is the author of [The Little Book of God, Mind, Cosmos and Truth](#) (St Pauls Publishing).

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