
SOUL OF A DOG

Reflections on the Spirits of the Animals of Bedlam Farm



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VILLARD  NEW YORK

Chapter One

DOGS AND SOULS

If I have any beliefs about immortality, it is that
certain dogs I have known will go to heaven,
and very, very few persons.

—JAMES THURBER

UNTIL RECENTLY, I'D NEVER SPENT MUCH TIME WITH ARISTOTLE, one of the world's pioneer thinkers. When I finally sat down with him, I found his essays tough going but rewarding; his ideas came as something of a jolt.

Like many of the early philosophers and scholars, Aristotle took a hard, clear line when it came to animals and souls. He exalted the rational being that a human had the potential to become. There was nothing like it, he wrote. A human could develop morality and responsibility. Since animals aren't widely believed to possess those traits (not even in our contemporary animal-worshipping culture, although that's changing), he argued that humans had a higher status, that

human values and attributes—including the soul—couldn't and shouldn't be attributed to animals.

What made humans distinct from other living things, Aristotle believed, was that very ability to reason about ethics, to be held morally accountable for their decisions. Our ability to perceive what was right, and to struggle to do right rather than wrong, was our most distinguishing characteristic.

Animals (and children) weren't able to determine right from wrong, Aristotle believed, and thus existed on a different plane. One could no more attribute human consciousness to animals than to trees.

Religious scholars, sorting out questions of faith and the afterlife, carried these arguments further and codified them. In the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas established Aristotle's ideas as part of Christian doctrine, which states clearly that animals, lacking reason, don't have immortal souls. Animals couldn't read the Bible, accept God, or worry about heaven and hell. Therefore, they bore no responsibility for their choices. They were beasts, under our control, subordinate.

Mainstream Christianity, writes contemporary theologian Andrew Linzey (who believes that animals *do* have souls) remains "firmly humanocentric."

Maybe so, but in the United States at least, the faithful are creating their own animal theology. Society's broader view of animals has shifted radically. Scientists' investigations suggest more intelligence and consciousness among animals than Aristotle or Aquinas could have perceived. Animals, particularly dogs and cats, are moving toward the center of our emotional lives. It sometimes seems that our love, even adoration, of animals is approaching the dimensions of religion itself.

A number of studies in recent years have indicated that

the occasional border collie, elephant, or chimpanzee shows signs of self-awareness, some ability to see itself as an individual apart from the others of its species, though most researchers are candid about this work being far from conclusive.

Meanwhile, liberal theologians like Linzey, animal-rights activists like philosopher Peter Singer, and many millions of pet owners and lovers profoundly attached to their animals are reshaping the way we view other species, and are developing their own theologies.

I've been asking dog and cat lovers for years if they believed their animals had souls. By now I've met few dog owners who would consider their companions thoughtless, subordinate beasts, incapable of reason or self-awareness. Quite the opposite—I meet people all the time who tell me in considerable detail what their dogs and cats are thinking, feeling, and planning, and who find the very idea that their companion animals might be barred from heaven heretical.

Anthropomorphizing isn't merely a trend in our culture but an epidemic. Some animals who have not learned to live with and love humans (raccoons, for example) do not seem to be benefiting from this new consciousness. But dogs and cats, who've lived among us for thousands of years and have us figured out, are on a roll.

Though I know better, I attribute human emotions to dogs myself, all the time. It's almost impossible not to anthropomorphize, if you love and live with animals.

Consider the way that Rose, who usually spends the night in distant corners of the farmhouse—I rarely know where—occasionally comes to wake me, hopping up onto my bed to look at me or, if necessary, lick my face or ear.

At first, I shooed her away, annoyed at having my sleep in-

errupted. But I came to realize that this behavior meant something was amiss. Rose moves around at night, looking out the windows, keeping an ear and eye on things. When something isn't right, she knows it.

It might be a fox or coyote on the prowl, or a broken fence, or a sick animal crying out. Once, a goat had escaped from its enclosure and was wandering around the driveway. Once, a rabid raccoon was trying to get into the barn. Another time, the donkeys had nosed open the gate and were heading for the road.

What is Rose doing when she wakes me in the night? Does she intend to warn me of danger, or is she just reacting to her finely honed working instincts? And how would I know the difference?

Animals generally *do* react out of instinct, genetics, environment, and experience, if you accept what vets and behaviorists tell us. We want our dogs to love us madly because we're wonderful, but most of us who spend a lot of time around dogs come to understand that they love us because we feed them—and that's one of the reasons we do.

They certainly have strong spirits, emotions, perhaps imaginations—the truth is, we still really don't know a lot about what's going on inside those furry heads—but an ethical self seems a human trait. Humans possess the ability to use narrative, language, and self-consciousness to reason, to struggle with right and wrong and make good decisions, to ponder questions of a spiritual nature. These are not things dogs can do.

I've never seen a dog, cow, or chicken resolve to be a better dog, cow, or chicken and work on improving itself. Domesticated animals seem to live the opposite way, following instincts and training, accepting their roles.

Aristotle wasn't calling animals inferior to us. He was saying they were different, not comparable, and that we ought not diminish people *or* animals by assuming they have the same qualities, capacities, and emotional constructs we do. The human conscience is unique in all biological life, and there is no evidence, beyond our tendency to romanticize other species, that such an extraordinary trait exists in the animal world. The fact that that's become a somewhat controversial notion is remarkable.

Aristotle's philosophical and theological heirs, Augustine and Aquinas, did believe, for different reasons, that humans were inherently superior to animals. If anybody in Aquinas's time had claimed that dogs were just like children, he would have been shunned.

Our values have changed. Rationality was an almost sacred trait to thinkers like Aristotle, whose culture had emerged from darker, more primitive times when little was understood about the natural or scientific world.

Rationality was the groundwork for learning, morality, even democracy. To Aristotle, it formed the core of what it meant to be a human being, and the human soul was uniquely precious. Animals weren't idealized or personified; they were valued as workers—or food.

Aquinas, also enormously influential in shaping notions about animals and souls, further theorized that since animals lacked all reason and self-consciousness, humans couldn't be cruel to them. They existed, were created, for our benefit and had no awareness of their condition beyond instinct. The reason to treat animals well, Aquinas argued, was primarily to foster compassion toward other humans.

It's important to remember the context of those much harsher times, marked by starvation, war, disease, suffering,

and superstition. Pets existed, even then. Dogs were used for protection and companionship, and cats prized as rodent sentries, but other animals were on the periphery of our families and emotional lives, not so central. They were rarely seen as childlike or as possessing human-style emotion.

The number of domestic dogs in this country has exploded in the last generation, from roughly 15 million in 1960 to more than 75 million today, according to the Humane Society of the United States. Figures for cats, rodents, birds, reptiles, and fish are less reliable. In the past, owning a dog was simpler. They were rarely purchased, often ate human food, and were not generally walked, cleaned up after, or permitted to sleep in our beds. They didn't have human names, and expensive health care for them was almost unheard of. Bites were common, leashes rare, gourmet snacks and play groups unimaginable.

There was little discussion of animals and souls, or much expectation of them joining us in the afterlife.

Certainly they weren't as emotionally engaged with their human owners. Dogs sometimes provided companionship, but more often assisted with hunting, herding, and guarding.

Largely beasts of burden, animals were useful—vital—for pulling carts and plows, for hauling and transporting and fighting, for providing wool and meat and soap. Few people in Aquinas's time had the resources to feed companion animals or spend money on their health care. The notion that they might have human-style thoughts, motives, or reasoning was centuries away.

Now and then, pushing a cart through the aisles at a pet superstore, I like to imagine Aristotle or Aquinas at the mall with me, gawking at the overwhelming variety of toys, beds,

collars, scoopers, shampoos and deodorizers, exotic foods and snacks. I suspect both men would be horrified.

What would I say to them if, after shopping, we had a chance to sit on the front porch of my farmhouse, enjoying that comparatively new invention—the rocking chair—and talk about animals?

Having lived with pets for decades, I might point out that my dogs and other animals learn all the time. They adapt and react to one another, to me, to members of other species. They change routines, get acclimated to people and noises, track the movement of anything that might be food. They're not so dumb. Yet I don't see them as much like me. I don't see a capacity to make moral decisions, change their lives, promote freedom, justice, or other human values. The animals on my farm don't have free will; they're dependent on me for almost everything they need to survive.

We don't have an equal relationship. To me, that signifies a great responsibility to treat them well. I can take care of myself, but they need me to take care of them. As much as anything, that reality shapes our relationship and underscores the differences between us.

Aristotle's were among the first known words on the subject of animals and souls, and even though our views of animals have changed—deepening, even hardening—the line Aristotle drew stands up pretty well, I would have to acknowledge to him. Not surprisingly, I find his logic difficult to change.

But to many people, dogs are perfect, loving, unassailable creatures. They can do no wrong, even if—Aristotle had a point—they can do no right either, at least not consciously.

RELIGION IS NO LONGER CLEAR about animals and their souls; science is even more muddled. Scientists and behaviorists are increasingly intrigued by animal intelligence and cognitive process, and studies increasingly suggest that our dogs and cats are smarter, deeper, and more spiritual than we have previously imagined. Yet these studies are oddly inconclusive, and I often get the sense that we are being told what we wish to hear, perhaps want to believe. Animals have alien minds, and no serious behaviorist believes they think the way we do.

If you are convinced that your spaniel has a soul, perhaps he does.

There is something very personal about this question of animals and souls, perhaps an issue to be determined by the particular mix of emotion, chemistry, spirituality, and experience that defines our individual experiences with our animals. I have acquired a lot of that experience, and a lot of ideas about this question of souls, more than I would ever have guessed, and I'd like to share those stories, my own experience.

I'm in a good position to contemplate the question. My own soul, my spiritual life, is by now quite enmeshed with the souls of dogs—and of donkeys and several large bovines as well. I live on a 110-acre farm with an impressive roster of animals—three dogs, two steers and a cow, four donkeys, three goats, a rooster and a small tribe of hens, two barn cats, twenty-eight Tunis sheep, plus countless wrens, barn swallows, and chickadees, hawks and bats, chipmunks, moles, mice, raccoons, bobcats and coyotes, foxes and deer.

I'm not sure I'll ever know where the spirit of a dog begins and mine leaves off. I think the souls of dogs and of humans often interact; they couple, shaping and changing one another at times and in ways that aren't always visible or per-

ceptible. That can be an extraordinary, and efficacious, encounter.

Dogs have surely changed my life, more than once. My first border collie, Orson, led me to life on this farm. Rose makes my life here possible. Izzy, my other border collie, came out of absolutely nowhere and eventually brought me to work as a hospice volunteer, one of the most moving and spiritual experiences of my life. Lenore, an irresistible black Labrador, helped me learn how to feel and express love at a time when I needed it.

My other animals also shape my life and spirit, almost daily, though less distinctly. Communing with donkeys, who, like dogs, have a time-honored history and—it seems to me—a rich understanding of humans, is grounding, soothing. Hanging out with Elvis, my enormous Brown Swiss steer, has affected my own humanity, and introduced me to the spirits and lives of animals I previously paid little attention to.

The irresistible goats spark my humor and test my patience. Barn cats have more than once led me to ponder the question of good and evil. Even my grumpy old rooster, Winston, has taught me much about fidelity, bravery, and responsibility.

I SUPPOSE of all my dogs, past and present, Rose may be the simplest to describe in terms of spirit. Rose is about devotion to work, about service; she possesses the kind of independent spirit that helps a human live his chosen life. That's no small thing.

Lenore, who joined us as a squirming puppy, is about love; she demonstrates a fierce determination to show and receive affection.

And Izzy, well, he's permitted me to grow not only as a writer, but as a photographer, and, most important, as a human being. Izzy has changed my life, even as Rose helps define and support it.

I think the question of dogs and souls can best be approached for my purposes not by scientists, pastors, or Ph.D.s, but through the animals themselves, through stories about Rose and her remarkable work on my farm, through the shenanigans of Lenore, who has become best friends with one of my rams, through Izzy, who seems to see deep into the human psyche. Researchers are amassing evidence about what animals can think, sense, and do, but so are the rest of us.

ONE BOILING, sticky July day, Izzy and I drove to a nursing home far out in farm country. It was a one-story brick-and-mortar building, neglected outside and grim inside. Most of its residents suffered from deepening dementia, and many of them were crying or shouting out as we walked inside to visit hospice patients.

Every nursing home is different. Some are quiet, almost serene; others, like this one, are difficult places to be, filled with troubled patients, and severely challenged staffs.

Edith was nearly ninety, and no one had been able to speak to or communicate with her for months. She was angry and confused, repeatedly pushing her wheelchair in one direction, then another. If you got too close, the nurses cautioned, she might lash out, turn her wheelchair away, complain loudly that she had something to do, or simply shout, "Get away!" Even the hospice workers, always so attentive and persistent, had nearly given up on getting through to her.

I approached Edith in the hallway, calling her name. She

ignored me, refused to look at Izzy, backed her wheelchair into the wall, and then abruptly wheeled around and almost ran over Izzy's paw. He backed up just in time, and so did I.

I consulted the hospice social worker, then a nurse. We all shook our heads, uncertain that we could do much. Izzy, meanwhile, approached from one side of the chair, which caused Edith to yell at him, and then from the rear. "Get out, get away," she shouted at him and at all of us.

I was about to do just that when Edith happened to lower her hand by the side of her wheelchair. Izzy, seeing his chance, darted forward and slid his head under her palm, fixing his eyes on hers.

Edith froze. She stared back down at Izzy, meeting his gaze, appearing to actually see him for the first time. She took his head in both her hands, and she smiled a bit, for what was probably just seconds. To those of us watching, though, it seemed a much longer time. It was stunning to see, the perceptible bond Izzy was making with this woman whose soul had appeared to be buried, perhaps lost for good, a spirit no human had been able to reach in recent memory.

The nurse started to weep; the hospice social worker, who'd seen so much, was already wiping her eyes. Izzy's spirit was so focused, generous, and loving that the hallway seemed to almost glow, to fill with light. Edith stroked him with a tenderness that, given her earlier agitation, was breathtaking.

Flash forward a few weeks to a very different location: I had to buy a new truck and I drove to Glens Falls and parked outside the Toyota dealership. Izzy, off-leash, hopped out of the car, walked beside me onto the sales floor, and lay down under a salesman's desk.

After a few minutes of chitchat and paperwork, I got up,

shook hands, and turned to go see my new pickup. That's when one of the salesmen called out, "Hey, there's a dog under the desk over there."

It was true; I had forgotten that he'd come in with me. That happens now and again. I once took Izzy into my doctor's office. He lay on the examining table while I sat in a chair, and when we were done with the exam and the conversation, he trotted out through the waiting room with me and into the car. It seemed so natural for him to be there, he was so at ease, that the doctors and nurses hardly bothered to comment on his presence. He was simply where it seemed he ought to be: with me.

This, then, may be Izzy's soul, the part of his spirit that fits so easily and completely into my life that it's sometimes hardly noticeable or worth mentioning, and that can enter other people's existences, too, and bring joy just by his presence.

As for Lenore, whose soul seems to involve a determination to bestow on and receive affection from any and all sources, she has crossed all boundaries. She gives and demands love from me, her trainer and feeder and—I admit—bedmate. But also from any human who crosses her path, intimate or stranger. And from the other dogs, even Rose, who thinks playing and romping a silly distraction from what really matters: sheep. Lenore, we'll see, even evokes affection from other species.

I think the stories of these dogs, and of the other animals on my farm, will speak for themselves. People can reach their own conclusions.

Besides, I'm surely not in Aristotle's league. I'm a storyteller, and, having lived with several excellent dogs on this farm, I have stories to tell. I want to explore that mysterious,

powerful space where animal and human link and affect one another. Perhaps these stories will help people reach some clarity of their own about the spirits, souls, and meanings of dogs and other animals in their lives.

No dog has affected my life more than Rose, or done more to make my life possible each day. No dog has brought me more joy than Lenore. No dog has introduced me to deep human relationships, or woven himself more thoroughly into my life, than Izzy has.

Every dog is unique, and so is our relationship with him or her. We each know our dog in a different way, in the context of how we live or work with them, what they mean to us, how our own lives have shaped our perceptions of them. If no two dogs are exactly alike, neither is there a universal relationship with them.

One of the wonders of the human-dog experience, often lost in generalizations from gurus and “experts,” is that each relationship is one of *individual* experience and meaning.