

## What My Uncle Knew

My uncle died of prostate cancer a few months ago. I don't think that bothered him too much. He loved dogs. He had them his entire life. I think leaving them bothered him a lot. When he was very ill at the end, and the family wanted to put him in the hospital, he was unwilling because he was concerned about who would take care of the dogs. To me, for a long time, his attachment to dogs seemed like some kind of "crazy love." I also thought his dogs were crazy. I guess dogs do reflect the personalities of their owners, as the belief goes.

I myself have never been much of a dog lover or a pet lover, generally. I have nothing against animals, mind you. I like them a lot in zoos and in nature documentaries. Picturesque and in the distance. I think it is great to have them on the planet. Indeed, I want all animal-rights types to know that I fully endorse the idea of animals having all the rights that they are morally and sensibly entitled to have. If it is decided that they are as good as people, and that someone who would wantonly kill an animal should go to prison for as long as if they had killed a person, that's all right with me, too, although it would definitely put the kibosh on my meat eating. I have read Nazi mystic Savitri Devi's *Impeachment of Man*, which bristles against the idea of a human-centered society, and thought, well, even crackpot people with iniquitous ideas can, on occasion, be right about something. There can never be too many animal species in the world for my taste. Let them all go forth and multiply in all their glorious fecundity! But I have little desire to live with them in a house, my house or anybody else's.

Of course, as I largely interact socially with middle class, professional people, I often go to houses that are virtual menageries: birds in cages (and sometimes not), fish in bowls and tanks, hamsters and lizards, rabbits and toads, slinking cats with stinking litter that smells and looks like vomit, and frisky, slobbering, hair-shedding dogs that jump all over you when you enter a house. And when you go to people's homes with pets, you're not supposed to mind them jumping over you, messing and smelling up your clothes, making you sneeze, snapping at you, or wanting to share your food. You're supposed to be fascinated in the house tours when you find out the children's rooms are stuffed with every domesticated animal at scale, except chickens, calves, and Shetland ponies. You're supposed to be enraptured by this, gush about how wonderful the pets are, pat animals on the head, give them food, let them crawl all over you, talk about their care and feeding. To say that you don't like pets, that you are opposed to the idea of having animals running around a house, that for you the meaning of progress is not living with animals as your ancestors had to, is tantamount, among most of the people I know, to saying you harbor desires to murder your mother or you think communism is a good idea. In fact, I think they would be more understanding if you wanted to murder your mother or if you liked communism. After all, you might have a good reason. Maybe your mother abused you as a kid, and after all, like Christianity, communism is an idea that really has never been tried. People just think it has been because they are bunch of folks running around calling themselves communists, like there are lots more people running around calling themselves Christians. Maybe you're one of those people who haven't been fooled by that. But there can be no good reason to dislike pets. You are simply a crank of the worst

sort; something between a concentration-camp guard and Ebenezer Scrooge before he became a bleeding-heart liberal after three ghosts gave him the willies and read the riot act to him about how crusty conservatives go lonely off to hell unless they buy friends through charity. So, of course, I never tell my neighbors or my friends that I feel a little uncomfortable around animals in the house. I want people to come to my funeral. Pretending to love other people's pets is my act of charity.

I remember the dogs most of all, the pet to which I have been most exposed. My mother, a widow for the entire time I spent living with her, once bought me and my sisters a dog when we were little. I think I was maybe five or six, my oldest sister was nine, and my other sister was seven or eight. It was a German shepherd puppy that she named Shep, simply enough. She thought the dog would be a nice companion for us and also guard the house. (Working class people always thought about dogs as guards for the house. My neighborhood was filled with Rottweilers, pit bulls, Dobermans, and German shepherds. Some of them were truly kept in a half-crazed state, as I painfully learned from my days as a delivery boy for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, when people let their dogs loose at six in the morning for their dawn constitutionals. Few people had dogs purely for aesthetics, and a lot of people sure didn't walk them on a leash.) My mom seemed to like the dog, which made her, in our family, a minority of one. She was definitely the only one who could control him. Shep was a very frisky, jumpy, barky dog who was always running around snapping at you. He didn't snap in any bad way. He wanted to play. He was, what you might call, spirited. He scared the living daylights out of me and my sisters. I thought he was possessed by seven devils. One day, my mom went to the corner store to get some milk and bread and left us alone with Shep for a grand total of twenty minutes. When she returned, the three of us kids were standing on the kitchen table screaming as if we were being torn to pieces, and Shep was on the floor barking and jumping up at us. "Get down from there. You're acting foolish. He's not going to hurt you," she said. But we didn't. My mom got rid of Shep that night. So ended my life with dogs until some many years later.

When my daughters were about the age of ten and twelve, they conspired with my wife to get a dog while I was out of town. They knew if I was around, they could never get it. I think they wanted one because, well, everyone else in the neighborhood had one and they seemed to be such fun! We got a sort of used dog. He had been somebody's pet but was turned loose and recovered by a rescue shelter. He was a golden retriever, a rather hefty-sized one, around seven years old. His name was Einstein. I hated Einstein from the moment I saw him. I didn't want a pet. I am allergic to dog hair. For the seven years we had Einstein, no shot, spray, or pill did me any good, as the house just had balls of dog hair flowing around. I also knew the children would soon lose interest in the duties of taking care of the dog. So, who wound up walking him in the wet and the cold? Who wound up taking him to the vet? Who wound up cleaning up his piles of steaming poop and watery vomit when he ate things he shouldn't, like chocolate cake?

Einstein seemed older than his years at first. I thought he was lethargic and mute. He never barked for the first three weeks we had him. I gleefully thought his death was imminent. But the old boy had a lot more life in him than I had imagined in those early

months. He jumped out of windows, snatched food from the tables, ignored commands that he was given, jumped into every mud puddle he saw, ran madly to fetch things but never brought them back, and barked with the best of them. He knew tricks but performed them poorly, had the courage of a particularly accomplished coward (every time we met an aggressive dog on a walk, he would jump behind me), would go off with anyone who was nice to him or gave him food. (This lack of loyalty to us particularly galled my wife.) But he was very gentle, kind, uncomplaining, and would curl up to you in a thunder storm. In spite of myself, I sometimes found him a comfort when I was alone in the house. And so it went for seven years.

One day Einstein broke his leash where we had tied him to the back porch and got into something. He became very sick. We took him the vet in the morning but he did not seem very hopeful. I was shocked by the idea that Einstein was, in fact, seriously ill. The doctor said the treatment to save him would be expensive and success was not guaranteed. I always thought that when this moment came for Einstein I would simply say, "Well, put him to sleep." I was surprised to hear myself say, "Do whatever it takes to save him."

When I got home from work that evening, I asked my wife how Einstein was doing and she told me he had died. I was never so stunned by a piece of news in all my life. I simply collapsed at the kitchen table and began to cry, I mean, sobbing uncontrollably, saying over and over, "My poor dog! My poor dog!" I was so wracked by grief that it took me weeks to recover. It occurred to me that there were few things that I had loved as much in this life as I loved that dog, that stubborn, silly, burdensome, seemingly ungrateful dog. Perhaps until I had Einstein I was really ignorant about what love really was. That song title was right, about me anyway: You don't know what love is.

I spoke to my uncle months before he died and he told me I should get another dog. Einstein has been dead for about six years now. My uncle's death has led to think about possibly doing just that. I thought my uncle sometimes was a silly, stubborn man but I guess he knew more than I ever will about some things. He knew prostate cancer for years and I know it, too, having had a bout of it five years ago. I hope it doesn't kill me in some form or fashion but it might. After thinking about Einstein again, I finally realized why my uncle didn't want to leave his dogs at the end. And somewhere, wherever he is, he's nodding at me, saying, "Now, you know how I feel."

Gerald Early  
2/13/2006