

LOVING FAEDEN:
Psychoanalytic Reflections on the Relationship
Between a Therapist and Her Dog

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Dogs are everywhere. According to the most current statistics, there are 72 million owned dogs in the United States (American Veterinary Medical Association, 2007). A trip to the local bookstore reveals many shelves filled with books about dogs: personal stories, breed profiles, training manuals, books on the psychology of dogs, and books about the connection between humans and dogs. A column published by John Grogan in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* about the death of his dog Marley was met with such an outpouring of support that it led to a best-selling book and blockbuster movie (Grogan, 2005). Cesar Millan has a highly successful television show on dog training (Millan & Peltier, 2008). Clearly people have a special affinity for dogs, even as they often treat them cruelly or abandon them.

Not long ago I had my thirteen-year-old dog Faeden put to sleep. I have been curious about and loved dogs most of my life, but Faeden was the first dog I was responsible for and lived with for many years. I adopted him from a shelter in Long Island, New York, when he was about two. He was a golden retriever mix, a big fluffy dog with a calm and friendly temperament. Faeden was witness to many changes in my personal life, including a major move, divorce, remarriage, and graduate school in clinical psychology. As a psychoanalytic therapist, I naturally wonder about the underlying dynamics of people and relationships. As I grieve the loss of Faeden, I find myself asking two questions. What are the psychological factors that contribute to the strong bond between people and dogs? And how does having a dog influence a psychoanalytic therapist? This article is one step toward answering these ques-

tions. I have discovered that a better understanding of the relationship between a dog and his or her owner illuminates patterns of attachment, features of identity, and aspects of emotional functioning, which can lead to greater self-awareness in ourselves and a different way to connect with our patients. Furthermore, dogs can assist clinicians in many ways, both inside and outside the consulting room.¹

DOGS AND ATTACHMENT

Why do people become so attached to their dogs? So many psychoanalytic articles begin with Freud, and this one is no exception. As Sacks (2008) relates, Freud wrote about the relationship between him and his beloved dog Jofi, describing the intense affection he felt for her as a friendship free of the ambivalence that is present in human relationships. Dogs can offer unconditional love and acceptance. To look into a dog's eyes is to feel the purest form of love, uncomplicated and without any strings attached. Coming home to Faeden wagging his tail always struck me as the clearest display of joy that one could ever experience. As Marcus (2007) states, such a greeting is matched perhaps only by young children. Dogs also don't hold grudges. Many dogs offer to their owners the forgiveness people never have (Katz, 2003). One day I could lose my temper after Faeden stopped to sniff yet another tree in the freezing rain, yet he would just look at me, move on, and accept my irritation.

Dogs adapt to our needs to such an extent that they often appear to know what we need even before we do. For example, Faeden seemed tuned into my unconscious—at times he could be extremely affectionate and other times he would simply be with me but keep his distance. To me it felt as if he knew when I needed closeness and when I needed to be left alone. Surely some of my recollections are colored by nostalgia now, but it is a well-documented fact that dogs are expert at reading body language (Marshall Thomas, 2000). Grandin and Johnson (2009) compare dogs with autistic people in that they notice details, whereas most humans' perceptions are often determined by their expectations and by the need to organize sensory information. This aspect of

human brain functioning enhances our ability to make sense of the world, but it can also limit the attention we pay to seemingly insignificant details. Dogs depend on people for their survival and are very sensitive to small changes in facial expressions, tone of voice, posture, and so on. As Grandin and Johnson (2009) point out, animals in general rely on body language to communicate much more than humans, so it is no surprise that dog owners often feel understood and mirrored by their dogs.

Further evidence that dogs are uniquely suited to read people and respond to their unconscious and conscious needs comes from case studies of psychoanalytic therapists using their dogs in their consulting rooms. Sacks (2008) describes the interactions between five patients and her dog Sara, a Labrador retriever. With one patient Sara offered emotional support in times of distress by going over and putting her paw on him, but with another, who in Sacks's view needed to be left alone, Sara kept her distance. Sara's behavior also varied in terms of her obedience, so that with a woman lacking the ability to assert her needs, Sara required multiple commands. Glucksman (2005) relates his experience of using his dog Joe, also a Labrador Retriever, as cotherapist. In one case of a depressed and paranoid woman, Joe positioned himself in front of her feet "as though he were protecting her, forming a barrier between her and the outside world" (p. 616). Glucksman interprets this behavior as an example of Joe's ability to act as a soothing object to patients.

Dogs are often described as substitute children. They remain dependent and unchanged, unlike human children, who grow up (Beck & Katcher, 1983). Marcus (2007) describes his attachment to his dog Harry as partly motivated by the need to fill the void left by his grown children. He points out that many owners display similar attitudes toward their dogs and children. Some owners send their dogs to the best obedience class and board them at the most luxurious kennel. Others expect their dogs to follow them everywhere. Yet others train their dogs to be unfriendly and even vicious. Fearful people raise fearful dogs/children; dominant people battle their dogs/children for control; abusive people traumatize their dogs/children (Millan & Peltier, 2008). I am generalizing here, but dogs often do function as narcissistic ex-

tensions to such an extent that they sometimes even resemble their owners' appearance (Coren, 1998). Furthermore, dogs require owners to engage in care-taking behavior, which sometimes allows for the expression of human needs to be taken care of by another (Beck & Katcher, 1983).

Dogs can also serve the function of companionship. The dog is considered man's best friend because the dog is always by the owner's side. People may find it much easier to attach to a dog than to another human being because the dog will not leave (Marcus, 2007). To the extent that one's psychology is colored by fears of abandonment, the dog is a safer attachment figure. One study found that people judged their relationships with their pets to be more secure than those with other people (Beck & Madresh, 2008). For some of the years I had Faeden, I could be vulnerable with him in a way that I couldn't with another person. I see my relationship with him as one of the sustaining emotional factors that helped me navigate my divorce. Sable (1995) draws from Bowlby's theory and research findings to explain how dogs meet attachment needs, especially during times of loss. She suggests that dogs serve as enough of a secure base during vulnerable times so that people can go out into the world and connect with other people.² They reduce feelings of loneliness and give one a purpose in life, a reason to get up in the morning (Serpell, 1996). Of course, dogs are also great socializers—even at my most anti-social, I still enjoyed the chats with fellow dog owners Faeden and I would meet. Finally, dogs are easier to trust as they will never judge or betray the owner's secrets. This makes them perfect confidantes (Katz, 2003).

Dogs are ideal vehicles of projection and identification in that they can serve whatever function the owner desires. There is some controversy regarding the question of emotions in dogs because it is easy to anthropomorphize them, to attribute to them emotions that their owners may have dissociated or may wish for (Beck & Katcher, 1983). Glucksman (2005) describes how his patients would use Joe as an introject for desired qualities, as an object for transference displacement (so that the patient could express feelings toward the dog before the analyst), and as a vehicle for acting out their defenses (by taking over the control of the

dog, for example). Roth (2005) describes how his patients revealed their way of being in the world through their description of the relationship with their pets. My perception of Faeden as attentive, empathic, and emotionally present was probably as much influenced by my own psychology as it was by his actual behavior. Reflecting upon the question of what the dog means to its owner can offer important insights about one's personality.

A related question is how people choose their dogs. Dogs come in all shapes and sizes, varying a great deal in their temperament, energy level, degree of affection they need and provide, sociability, and so on (Coren, 1998). Dogs can be free, as from the local shelter, or cost thousands of dollars. For some the decision to get a dog is an impulsive one, while for others it requires months of research. People usually end up with dogs that satisfy some psychological need. Studies have found that the strength of the bond between owners and dogs is influenced by the interaction between the owners' personalities and dogs' temperament (e.g., Woodward & Bauer, 2007). I will probably always have golden retrievers because they are very friendly and affectionate, smart, and playful without being hyperactive. Their high sociability is a quality I often wish I had more of. When dogs go bad, it is often a reflection of a mismatch between owner and dog (Coren, 1998). One of the traits I never liked in Faeden is that he could be aggressive with other dogs. I do not like conflict and I idealize the role of mediator, of overcoming anger for the purpose of maintaining peace. Not Faeden. The dogs he did not like, he barked at and challenged to a fight. I tried to train him out of this behavior but failed, perhaps because a part of me enjoyed his ability to express feelings I often felt I could not.

The kind of training people give to their dogs is another way in which psychological needs become apparent. The dog park is a good place to observe these dynamics (Schaffer, 2009). On one end, there are people who demand perfect obedience from their dogs, while at the other there are people who barely supervise their dogs and do not intervene even when their dog is being a nuisance. Some people refuse to give even minimal training to their dogs because they perceive training to interfere with the dog's natural way of being and independence. But as Katz (2003)

points out, dogs must adapt to human environments. Unruly dogs are not happier—this is another example of how people project their own wishes onto their dogs. For those who train their dogs, there are different approaches, such as Cesar Milan's techniques based on asserting dominance or methods based on positive reinforcement only (Schaffer, 2009); one's choices also reflect human needs and wishes. Training can be more or less structured. I have a colleague who practices cognitive-behavioral therapy who greatly enjoys regular training sessions with her dog. My affinity for psychoanalytic therapy is evident even in my approach to my dogs—I do not have the patience for repetitive techniques, nor do I enjoy the authoritarian role. Instead, I spent countless hours observing Faeden so that I might understand what he was trying to communicate through particular behaviors. In a way, my dogs train me in the same way that my patients teach me about what they need.

The relationship between owner and dog is defined by two other characteristics that further promote attachment. First, dogs witness and participate in both the daily routine of life and major events (Katz, 2003). A responsible dog owner's life becomes anchored in the schedule of walks and feedings. Walking one's dog is especially relevant to the attachment that forms. No matter what else is going on in any particular day, the dog and the owner walk together. On an average day when all was well, Faeden and I walked. On the morning before I graduated with my doctorate, Faeden and I walked. On the afternoon after my first husband moved out, Faeden and I walked. On the night after returning from getting married a second time, Faeden and I walked. The walk becomes a constant in one's life that provides security and comfort in bad times and a chance to reflect on one's good fortune in good times. Some days the walk was a somber affair as I would be sad and Faeden would walk quietly besides me. Other days we would be happy together, playing fetch games and hide and seek. This shared experience of every aspect of life is perhaps matched only by the bond between a mother and her infant (Beck & Katcher, 1983), an illustration of how mutual affective regulation is the basis for attachment (Wallin, 2007). The dog serves as witness to both trivial and significant events and to varied mental states in the same way that the good-enough mother that Winnicott (1965) writes about does so.

Finally, the attachment between people and dogs forms as a result of physical intimacy. Petting a dog feels good; studies have shown that it is an effective means of reducing stress (Barker, Knisely, McCain, & Best, 2005), can contribute to improved mental health (Parshall, 2003), and even aid in recovery from cancer (Johnson, Meadows, Haubner, & Sevedge, 2003) as well as lower mortality rates for heart disease patients (Beck & Katcher, 1983). Touching a dog may induce a reverie state akin to meditation (Beck & Katcher, 1983). Dogs are often trained as therapy dogs that go into hospitals and nursing homes because the physical touch is so powerful (Lipton, 2001). An interesting psychological question is why some people prefer fluffy, cuddly dogs while others like the short-haired breeds. For people who grew up with dogs, this choice may be influenced by those experiences. But I suspect there is something else going on, perhaps related to the kind of touch people like or the need for regression. I can only speak for myself—I like fluffy dogs because the feeling is reminiscent of holding soft stuffed animals. I believe there is something quite powerful in this feeling that allows me to access a child self-state. The fact that I like big dogs is further evidence that I may be tapping into a younger self, so that I can feel smaller as I have my arms around a dog. Glucksman (2005) describes how his dog functioned as a transitional object for his patients in therapy, and I surmise many dogs serve this function for their owners.

In summary, the attachment that forms between owners and their dogs is multidetermined. Dogs are strong attachment figures because they satisfy needs for unconditional love and acceptance without the threat of abandonment; they adapt to conscious and unconscious features of one's psychological make-up through their perception of body language and through their function as vehicles of projection and identification; they serve as witness to the highs and lows of human life; they can be treated as substitute children or companions; and they offer the opportunity for physical intimacy.

DOGS AND THERAPISTS

In the previous section, I explored the underlying psychological dynamics that are activated by the relationship between owners

and dogs. Given the multiple aspects of a person's relational world that become enacted in the attachment between human and dog, talking to patients about their dogs can be a fruitful area of exploration. In my experience, many people are surprised that I take such an interest in a topic that they may regard as less important than their human problems. Despite the popularity of dogs, many people feel some embarrassment about the importance they attribute to their dogs (Katz, 2003). Furthermore, the attachment between people and their dogs is still viewed by many as a replacement for attachment to people, despite the overwhelming evidence that most dog owners are not lacking in human relationships (Serpell, 1996). Sometimes I worry that my own intense connection with dogs introduces an unwanted and unnecessary element to the therapy. But I have often found that patients are less guarded when discussing their dogs. Long before they are willing to share information about their family dynamics, they will readily talk about the role of the dog. More often than not, these conversations provide me with important clues about their attachment needs and the ways in which these have or have not been met. Asking about dogs is a kind of projective technique in that people reveal aspects of their selves both through the content of their responses and in the way in which they approach the question. I do not push, of course, just as I do not insist on any other topic of conversation, but I do ask. Sometimes patients talk about their dogs spontaneously, and then it is just a matter of paying attention. I work mostly with college students, many of whom are away from home. They talk about missing their dog. For some, the visits home are more about seeing the dog than their family, which is always meaningful in some way.

Much more could be said about the insights gained through a conversation regarding dogs (see Roth, 2005, for examples of patients in psychoanalysis talking about their pets). Dogs can also be useful cotherapists as facilitators of a holding environment, therapeutic alliance, catalyst for change, and transference-countertransference expressions (Levinson, 1984; Marcus, 2007; Sacks, 2008). One study documented the improvement in chronic mentally ill patients when dogs were introduced on the inpatient unit (Corson, Corson, Gwynne, & Arnold, 1977). Beyond the usefulness of dogs as a topic and collaborator in therapy, living with

dogs can also enhance one's clinical skills. First of all, dogs remind therapists about the importance of being present and offer the opportunity to practice mindfulness. Psychoanalytic clinicians have written about the benefits of being in the moment in many ways. Wallin (2007) describes the mindful self as rooted in the here and now, open and aware of both body and mind; he draws parallels to Freud's technique of evenly hovering attention and Bion's advice to approach the patient without memory, desire, or understanding. Such an attitude is extremely difficult to maintain by humans, as our minds are filled with thoughts and feelings, as well as thoughts and feelings about our thoughts and feelings! A dog, by virtue of being a less complicated being, with simple needs and emotions, lives in the moment. A dog does not worry, reminisce about the past, plan for the future, and so on. A dog is fully present no matter what he or she is doing at any moment. I have found that watching dogs is a wonderful way to cultivate this attitude. I see it as a form of meditation. Picture a dog on a warm spring day, laying in the shade of a big tree, on top of a hill. He is alert but not excited, relaxed, simply watching the leaves blowing in the wind, listening to the sound of the birds, turning his head now and then to notice some movement in the surrounding areas. Sitting with a dog doing this is not only extremely relaxing, but it is also an opportunity to take in the world at that moment. Thus being with Faeden not only helped me relieve stress (an invaluable function for any therapist), but also taught me how to just be.

Dog play provides other useful lessons about the therapeutic process: first, because it is play, which is often a goal of psychotherapy (Winnicott, 1965). The ability to adopt an as-if stance toward the world in order to access the parts of the self that often invigorate people is limited in many of our patients. In play, dogs display behaviors that satisfy basic needs for affection, aggression, and exploration. Dogs will chase one another and wrestle together, alternating between positions of submission and dominance. They also play with people—they fetch balls and engage in tug-of-war and hide-and-seek games. These are substitute activities for their original purpose, for example, as hunters. A well-adjusted dog can always differentiate between play and the real thing in the same way that people who can play meet their needs without

having to revert to destructive behaviors. Finally, traumatized dogs often do not play; dog trainers actually use play as a rehabilitation technique. It took several years before Faeden would play, no doubt as a result of his background (he was abused and abandoned twice before he came into my life). But when he did, it was a wonderful sight to behold, and I felt the same joy as when I am with a patient who rediscovers the ability to play.

Second, dog play is a useful illustration of the process of therapy, which has sometimes been referred to as a dance (Wallin, 2007). Therapists and patients take turns leading and following, expressing both their individual personalities and creating a unique interaction. Dogs too have favorite ways of playing, but no two dogs play exactly the same. Furthermore, when dogs get too riled up their aggression may briefly get the better of them. One may nip too hard, and then there is a loud yelp or a cautionary growl. Some dogs walk away at this point, but others seem to be able to repair this rupture in play: They may lower their heads in submission, be more tentative, or display the play bow (leaning forward on the front paws with their back raised) as if to reassert their benign intentions. The parallel to therapy is not difficult to see. Both patients and therapists get caught up in high emotions and at times act out, but these moments are overcome, provided they can work together to restore the therapeutic relationship.

A final lesson that dogs teach therapists is about the value of nonverbal communication. As I stated earlier, dogs excel at reading and communicating through body language. One phenomenon that becomes very clear to anyone who lives with dogs is that words are not necessary to communicate and in fact, may distract from the interaction. Young children know this, but adults, especially highly verbal ones like therapists, often forget. In therapy, it is important to remember this so that, for example, a therapist might simply sit with the sobbing patient, allowing herself to resonate with whatever feeling is expressed, without feeling compelled to prematurely add words to the experience. In another situation, a therapist might remind himself that the patient's way of being in the room conveys even more information than what the patient is saying. Incidentally, I found that dogs are great vehicles for developing better observation abilities, so that the more I have learned to look for subtle changes in body language in my dogs,

the more I notice these things in people. As with mindfulness, dogs allow therapists to hone necessary clinical skills.

In summary, dogs can be useful topics of conversation in therapy and have been found to have therapeutic value inside the consulting room. Dogs also teach therapists about the value of being present in the moment, of playing, repairing ruptures, and communicating nonverbally. One might argue that I am guilty of imposing a frame of mind onto behaviors that could have multiple meanings—a sort of clinical anthropomorphizing. But therapy is all about making sense of complex phenomena by applying various understandings of human nature and the therapeutic process. I believe that thinking of dogs in this way provides clinicians with yet another way to conceptualize clinical interactions. Finally, if nothing else, dogs are natural companions to therapists by virtue of their inherent abilities to soothe—at the end of a day filled with difficult sessions, Faeden welcomed me home, sometimes listened to me ramble on, and always provided me with a comforting presence.

CONCLUSION

As I reflect on my relationship with Faeden, I cannot escape my psychoanalytic worldview that shapes my perceptions of every aspect of my life. As a result, the many ways in which Faeden satisfied my needs become apparent. It is probably this aspect of a human–dog relationship more than any other that accounts for the intense grief that accompanies the loss of a beloved dog. But it is important to remember that dogs are separate beings, with needs of their own. Katz (2003) writes about “the new work of dogs,” referring to the many ways in which dogs are used at present to help their humans. He reminds us that there are limitations to what dogs can provide and relates stories of great human selfishness. It is because dogs are so adaptable that humans can see whatever they want to see in their dogs. Greater self-awareness insulates people against a sense of entitlement about their thoughts and feelings. Dogs do give us a lot, but they should not be used to the extent that they are expected to give us everything and discarded when they fail us (Beck & Katcher, 1983).

Finally, dogs should not be expected to be immortal. They

have short life spans, so anyone who wants to live with dogs must be prepared for their dogs' death. An owner is likely to be faced with the decision to euthanize his or her dog, a decision that activates intense emotions such as helplessness, guilt, aggression, and so on. However, prolonging a dog's life beyond any reasonable quality of life is a reflection of some people's inability to see the dog as a distinct being, with different needs. Unable to tolerate the impending loss, they rationalize their decision to subject their dogs to painful procedures as an expression of how much they love them. Loving a dog, however, requires the owner to put aside his or her own needs and let go when the time comes. So, as I watched Faeden struggle more and more to get up and walk due to severe arthritis, knowing too that he had only months left to live due to cancer, I made the final appointment for him to be put down. I felt like a murderer but knew that it was my duty to work through my feelings—he had been such a source of emotional support for me, but in that moment I couldn't ask anything else from him. Instead, my husband and I took him for a walk in the snow and cooked him a big steak the night before, then held him as he died the next day in the vet's office. As I continue to mourn him, I realize that even his death teaches me things about attachment, letting go, and grief. Such lessons help me grow as a human and as a therapist.

One final note. Approximately two years before Faeden died, we acquired a golden retriever puppy whom we named Priscilla. It is striking how different my relationship with her is. Faeden was my friend, whereas Priscilla is our child. Faeden was calm, dignified, affectionate but not demanding, loyal and devoted. Priscilla is playful, silly, and determined to make friends and be pet by every single person she encounters. Faeden was aggressive with many other dogs, whereas Priscilla is extremely submissive and endears herself to all other canines. These differences in temperament are obvious, but I wonder to what extent they reflect a shift in my state of mind, a change in what I need from my dog. Some things don't change though: I have become very attached to her and I find her to be an effective teacher of mindfulness, play, and nonverbal communication. Regarding the latter, I want to close with a quote from Katz (2003). He interviewed hundreds of peo-

ple about their relationship with their dogs, including Rob, a lawyer who had great difficulty verbalizing his feelings and connecting with other people, even family members. Katz repeatedly asked Rob to explain his attachment to his dog until finally one day he answered: “You know why I love this dog? Because he never asks me questions like that” (p. 102). As a psychoanalytic therapist, asking questions, of myself and others, is a way of being. In fact, this entire article is an attempt to answer questions and I have argued several times that it is the lack of questioning that limits our understanding of ourselves, our patients, our dogs. But perhaps Rob is also right—like any other type of love, the love between owners and their dogs cannot be fully understood.

NOTES

1. I am a cat owner as well, and it is important to note that the relationship between people and cats is similar in many ways to human–dog relationships. However, I believe there are enough differences that a separate paper would be required. (See Noonan, 2008, for one such paper.)
2. A recent study using Ainsworth’s Strange Situation has shown that owners also function as a secure base for their dogs (Palmer & Custance, 2008).

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