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BONNIE LOWRY

"Chipper is a very good listener," Colleen Lowry says of her pet cockatiel.

Far left: Dogs rescued by Friendicoes in New Delhi affectionately greet the shelter founder, Geeta Seshamani.

Humans' Best Friends

By LAURINDA KEYS LONG

"A dog can show you more honest affection with a flick of his tail than a man can gather through a lifetime of handshakes."

—Gene Hill, American author

When Colleen Lowry drives up to her Culver City, California, home after work each day, she is greeted by an excited whistle from her pet cockatiel, Chipper, responding to the sound of her car. "This is just as welcoming to me as the wagging of a dog's tail," she says.

Chipper sits on the arm of her chair, watching TV with her, mimicking birds he sees on the screen. "If I read the newspaper, he helps out by playfully tearing the edges," she says. "Sometimes he'll spontaneously burst into song, delighting me with his serenade."

But Chipper's most endearing quality, says his best friend, is that he is a very good listener. "He stares attentively at my face

for as long as I wish to talk without losing concentration and with seemingly endless interest until I am finished speaking," says Lowry. And Chipper can communicate, too. "Most notably, he cries 'treat, treat, treat' when I go to the kitchen cabinet for his seed treats. Or, when I ask if he is sleepy, he responds 'sleep, sleep, sleep.' A few friends who have witnessed Chipper's amazing speech say his 'words' sound coincidentally like 'tweet, tweet, tweet,' but they're wrong," says Lowry, only half joking.

Chipper came into her life at just the right time, when she needed a fellow warm-blooded creature to care for, and to listen. "After my divorce, with my children grown, I had been sad and a bit lonely living alone, until the day my daughter showed up with a small vented box from a local pet store. I opened the lid



Top: Carol Fox with Slocum, who went on a six-month sailing adventure with her husband.

Above: Animal friend Maneka Gandhi with one of the 15 rescued dogs in her New Delhi garden.

and there inside was this little frightened bird face peering up at me. It was love at first sight.”

Love. It’s a word that people with pets use naturally. But it makes those who have never bonded with an animal feel a little queasy. Many pet owners talk about and treat the animals in their lives like children. They “adopt” them, name them, hand-feed them, “potty-train” them, carry them, hold them on their laps, and make sure they don’t go out in the street alone. Humans risk their lives to save their own or other people’s pets, even in the midst of disaster. One example is former First Lady Dolley Madison, who gathered up presidential papers, a historic painting, and her pet parrot when she fled the White House just ahead of British troops who burned the building in 1814. And there have been many cases of cats, dogs and birds saving their owners from harm. When either the pet or the human dies, the surviving friend mourns.

“I think the truth is that our cats serve as surrogate children for us,” says Steve Fox, a writer and media consultant in Ventura, California. “Our cats—this is our third set, always two or three at a time so they will have their own buddies—are a primary consideration in most things we do. For example, we wouldn’t take a vacation of longer than a couple of weeks, because they would be too lonely.”

Fox and his wife, Carol, a teacher and artist, have two carpet-covered climbing structures in their living room, “dozens of cat toys, an electric-heated bed for them to sleep in, cardboard scratching devices, blankets they like. They sleep with us in our bed at night and get up when we do,” says Fox. Then he is interrupted by one of the cats, Capone, who stands up and touches Fox with a paw. “He’s signaling that he thinks it’s time for me to quit working and come watch some TV while he settles in my lap,” says Fox. “They like their routines.”

Fox broke the routine for two of his Siamese cats when he took them on a six-month sailing trip to Mexico several years ago. “Once when I was in a storm and feeling scared, I went below to get a coil of rope and when I tried to pull it out from a locker, it pulled back. I couldn’t figure out what was happening and I jerked on the coil and out it came, with Scupper holding on,” says Fox. “He wanted to play! He didn’t care if there was a storm. It made me laugh and eased the anxiety I was feeling.”

“Scupper and his brother, Slocum, are buried in our backyard and Slocum has a little faux marble headstone,” says Fox, expressing concern that SPAN readers “by now will think we are really crazy. We recently lost a tabby cat that Carol had had for 20 years and we had her cremated and got her ashes back in a little wooden box.”

Says Mrs. Fox: “When you look into a cat’s eyes, you see what heaven is like. A cat’s love has no conditions and your love for your cat has no ‘ifs.’”

This human-animal bond goes back into the mist of time. The very first humans named and talked to animals, according to the Bible’s account of Adam and Eve. Anthropologists and zoologists trace the dog’s presence at man’s ancient campfire sites. Yet, throughout the ages, this bond has often been broken, usually by man, through cruelty, neglect or indifference. While many Americans and Indians love animals and share the joy of companionship with pets, there are others who will sooner stone

a dog as look at it, run over a cat without bothering to slow the car down, work a donkey to death or torture an animal for “fun.”

Geeta Seshamani, co-founder of the Friendicoes shelter and hospital in New Delhi, says more people are gaining an understanding of animals, through the work of organizations like hers and TV channels such as Animal Planet and Discovery. “Some people believe animals are dirty or impure; they don’t understand why the dog is barking or sitting at their gate, so they attack it. We also have to educate people against the superstitions they have about cats. These intelligent, loving animals come in with gouged-out eyes, burns and broken backs.”

Laws are also changing. After the Hurricane Katrina flooding, when many Americans refused to evacuate without their pets and other animals were left to suffer, government officials and lawmakers agree that future disaster planning must include better care for animals, as well as humans.

There are differences over what to do about the millions of cats and dogs that are abandoned each year, or born to strays. Laws in the United States require that strays be picked up and held for a certain amount of time to see if their owners claim them or they can be adopted. If not, they are euthanized. Only 10 percent of pet dogs, and 18 percent of pet cats in America come from shelters, says the Humane Society of the United States. Although there is no central data reporting agency, the society estimates that six to eight million dogs and cats go to shelters each year and half are euthanized. Why? The prevailing U.S. view is that there is not enough room to give them a good life in the shelters, they will suffer more on the streets, and can become a danger to humans. The catch-treat-release approach of many Indian animal shelters, whereby strays are vaccinated, sterilized and put back outside where they were found, is being used in a

limited way in America now, particularly in the case of feral cats, but it is controversial.

This is the major difference between the U.S. and Indian approach, says animal rights activist and Member of Parliament Maneka Gandhi. “We don’t kill them. We look after them the best we can. Why shouldn’t the cities belong to all, so that we can see birds, stray animals, cows and monkeys. It makes our lives richer.” She has 15 dogs at her New Delhi home, all of them someone’s pet, thrown into the street when they became too sick, too big or too old.

In America, pets are regarded as property and owners are required by state, county or city laws to vaccinate, care for them and ensure they do not harm others. It is a crime, punished by fines or jail time, to mistreat an animal, even one’s own. In New Delhi, it is a crime, punishable by jail, to harm or kill one, says Gandhi.

The majority of dogs in U.S. shelters were once pets, bought as puppies, then tossed aside. It’s the same in India, says Seshamani at Friendicoes, where almost every morning, a pet dog suffering from malnutrition or disease or injury has been left outside the shelter’s doors during the night. “People get pets, then decide they can’t afford the time or money to keep them,” she says, cuddling an affectionate dog who was dumped, in a sack, at nine months old. Others are brought in by goodhearted people who find them after they have been hit by a car, poisoned or beaten.

Kallu, an intelligent, black dog that appears to be part border collie, is one of these. When he was a month-old pup, Manju Sachdeva, a dog-lover who feeds strays in her neighborhood, found him injured in the street. She nursed, fed and raised him in her home for six months, had him sterilized and then let him back out. She had three other dogs



JOHN BAZEMORE © AP/WIDEWORLD



M. LAKSHMAN © AP/WIDEWORLD

Far left: Jonathan Harvey carries his dog, Cuddles, through floodwaters in Gulfport, Mississippi, after Hurricane Katrina in August 2005.

Left: Vanaja, 14, carries her pet cat to a tent dwelling near Chennai, Tamil Nadu, after fleeing her coastal home in fear of another tsunami in March 2005.



Ruth Max with Titch and his "mail-order bride," Chinju, on a Netherlands beach.

and no more room. But Kallu stayed outside her house, and brought his friends. They followed her when she moved to another home. One night, neighbors told her a mob had attacked Kallu with sticks and a butcher's cleaver, injuring him badly. "I went out in a three-wheeler searching for him until 4 a.m.," she says. She left word with a neighbor he liked to visit, and sure enough, Kallu showed up. "I brought him on my lap in the three-wheeler to Friendicoes and they saved him," says Sachdeva. It's too dangerous for Kallu to come back to her neighborhood, so she visits him at the shelter. He places his head in her lap and cries when she leaves. "I am looking for another home with more room and by God's grace I will take him with me and I

For more information:

Friendicoes

www.friendicoesseca.org

People for Animals

www.peopleforanimalsindia.org

The Humane Society of the United States

<http://www.hsus.org>

Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals

www.spca.com

will not leave him," she says.

For all those pet lovers accused of treating their animals like children, Art and Ruth Max may have taken this to the ultimate level. While living in New Delhi from 1990 to 2000, they arranged a "mail order bride" for their Jack Russell terrier, Titch, and, of course, she came from his "native place."

Titch was born in Ireland, and imported to Sweden, where the Maxes adopted him from a friend, shortly after their marriage. "Titch went everywhere with us, swimming, sailing, skiing, fishing. Dinner invitations were addressed to Art, myself and Titch," says Mrs. Max.

When they moved to New Delhi, where Max was chief of South Asia services for The Associated Press, Titch joined the couple for their first month's stay in a five-star hotel. "Every morning I would receive a call from housekeeping to ask, 'And what would Titch like for his meals today?' Shortly after, there would be a knock on our door and his meals would be carried in by a room service waiter on a silver platter!" says Mrs. Max, a Kolkata-born freelance writer and entrepreneur now living in the Netherlands.

One day, a friend visited them in India, with Titch's mail-order puppy-bride, Chinju, in an airplane carry-on bag. Titch was enamored at first sight. But the dogs' loyalties became divided "as they spent more time with Dorji, our Tibetan housekeeper," says Mrs. Max. "They would sit for hours on *mudahs* in the kitchen, staring doggedly as Dorji prepared our meals, of which they took an ample share. Dorji had joined us soon after we arrived in 1990. She quickly became convinced that she and Titch had been linked in a previous life."

