

INTRODUCTION

BENJY, THE DOG WHO COULDN'T STOP LOVING

Long before any other animal or plant was domesticated, we began our domestication of the wolf into the dog. This is well-known, and began sometime between 130,000 years ago, when humans first became *Homo sapiens*—“wise people”—and 15,000 years ago. What is less often considered is that this domestication may well have been a two-way street—a mutual and profound transformation for both species. Wolves were created into something new by humans, but as this unfolded, humans were changed in kind. This is, evidence suggests, the first and perhaps the only instance of what some are calling mutual domestication.

Could it be that dogs made us fully human? Without the wolf, would we have become a different species? I think it is very likely. We have been so intimately tied to dogs for so many thousands of years that we have come to resemble one another in crucial ways that are simply inapplicable to any other two species on earth, now or in the past. As a result, we are also the only two species who readily become friendly with other species. Dogs

{ xv }

INTRODUCTION

make friends across the species barrier, and so do we. Yes, it is true that some other animals do this as well from time to time. But dogs and humans do it as a default, reliably and consistently. There is hardly a human on earth who has not at some point in his or her life felt close to an animal from a different species—and not just a dog. And almost every dog has at some point felt friendly feelings not just for us or for other dogs, but for other animals as well. If you stop to think about it, this is no small achievement. It must be more than mere coincidence that of all the species on earth, only humans and dogs have attained it.

IN THE MARK Twain Papers at the University of California's Bancroft Library, there is a copy of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, with Mark Twain's penciled annotations. He marked a passage about the emotions of dogs: "In the agony of death a dog has been known to caress his master, and every one has heard of the dog suffering under vivisection, who licked the hand of the operator; this man . . . unless he had a heart of stone, must have felt remorse to the last hour of his life." Mark Twain was particularly touched when he read the autobiography *The Life of Frances Power Cobbe*, about England's leading antivivisectionist, who died in 1904. Cobbe writes about a visit from her old friend, John Bright. Bright told her about a very poor woman, severely disabled, who was confined to her bed while her husband sought day labor. A neighbor sometimes brought her food. She was entirely helpless, but she had one comfort: a beautiful collie who lay by her side and licked her crippled hands and fingers.

One summer he came to the cottage, and the hapless cripple lay on her palette still, but the dog did not come out to

INTRODUCTION

him as usual, and his first question to the woman was: "Where is your collie?" The answer was that her husband had drowned the dog to save the expense of feeding it. Bright's voice broke when he came to the end of this story, and we said very little more to each other that dinner.

These are only stories, but they are true stories, and there are thousands of them, recounted over and over by people who love dogs, precisely because of this ability to love without seeking reward. It strikes humans as almost uncanny. It's easy to speculate that dogs evolved to love us like this because their survival depended upon it. But what did that evolutionary process do to us?

This is a book about dogs that questions what makes our relationships with them—and theirs with us—unique, and asks what these relationships have meant to us. Much has already been said on the subject in countless books and articles that pour out every year. Yet only recently have academics engaged in serious study of dog and human coevolution. Moreover, our intimacy with dogs is so profound that in certain respects we take it for granted. You have to step back to consider the full implications of the fact that it is quite unprecedented in the history of any species on our planet, over the last several millions of years, for such intimacy to have arisen. Our relationship with dogs predates all other domesticated species by tens of thousands of years. Dogs and humans coevolved for a significant portion of the total lifespan of our respective species. In crucial ways, dogs helped make us human.

Is it possible that humans owe our ability to empathize, and perhaps even love selflessly, to our long association with dogs? This may sound sentimental, but it is such only if it is not true. If it is true, it provides a clue to one of the most important

INTRODUCTION

questions about human nature ever asked. Where does our ability, our desire, our need to love come from?

There are times in life when we feel we are exactly where we want to be at that moment, and they often have to do with love. The moment seems frozen: not one that will be followed by another or will ever end. For me, that moment comes at around 6:30 nearly every morning, when both boys come to visit my wife, Leila, and me in bed for a morning cuddle. Within seconds, a dog named Benjy follows. It's a lovefest. Wherever he is sleeping in the house, once he hears Manu and Ilan coming into our bedroom, Benjy comes along, too. He jumps up on the bed and begins a morning dance of recognition. He kisses all of us over and over and then rolls over onto his back and makes funny faces and strange guttural sounds of joy. He reaches his paws out to each one of us, so that four of us are holding his paws. (Sometimes one or two or even all three of our cats join us—but I must admit that they are a bit embarrassed by the sentimentality of it all, and usually leave in a huff before it gets too lovey-dovey.) Benjy smiles. He laughs. He is in ecstasy. So are we. It is contagious. There is no need to interpret what he feels, for we feel it too. It is unbridled love and happiness, sufficient for that moment. Whatever follows in the day for him or for us, those few moments every morning provide a reminder of what pure happiness can feel like, and how it seems like a moment in time that never really ends. We are so used to the cliché of dogs living in the moment, but in that morning moment we are, all five of us, living in it. It feels entirely natural, but it is also, when you come to think of it, something of a mystery. Benjy the dog, or Benjy the wolf, and four humans, all engaged in an identical bonding activity that plays itself out over and over in thousands of households, and probably has for thousands of years. What,

{ xviii }

INTRODUCTION

exactly, is going on here? What is this strange relationship we have with dogs, yet not with any other animal?

I began to ask these questions when my family adopted the latest in a long line of four-footed companions: Benjy, a failed guide dog. Benjy obeyed only four commands: Leave it, down, sit, stay. He didn't love walks. He seemed a bit dim. His favorite activity was for somebody to give him a rubber Kong (a hollow tube made of hard rubber) filled with treats and let him work on it for the next half hour. But when he is done and obviously ready for a refill, if told to "Bring the Kong," Benjy looks perplexed and utterly lost. The average guide dog must learn some 70–80 commands, so it is no wonder that Benjy failed, even though his "handlers" dearly wanted him to succeed.

But there is one area where Benjy excels: He cannot stop loving. He loves all dogs, all humans, all cats, all rats, and all birds. He loves them all equally and intensely. He has yet to meet a species he is not fond of. He is not extraordinary: He is a lab, after all. He was socialized before we adopted him. He was never hit or yelled at as far as I know. He has never been in a fight with another dog, although my three cats sometimes slap him in the face just for the sheer pleasure of it, and he always looks completely mystified. He is a big (80-pound), strong dog with huge teeth and an awesome jaw, but I have never seen him lose his temper, get angry or even testy. At most, if pushed (as when I tell him he has to come up the hill—we live on the beach, and the path leading up to the street is steep and long), he will put on his sad face and begin a glacial walk up the hill. It is the same look he gets when I tell him there is no more food for the night: resignation and the dim hope that a mistake has been made.

Wherever I go during the day, Benjy goes too. When I do my errands in town, he comes along, perfectly happy to wait for

INTRODUCTION

me outside the bookstore or the post office or the bank. But over the last few months, he has taken to finding his way to the interiors of these destinations, because he knows he's clearly welcome there. People like to see him. This is in part because he's got love written all over him. But it's also partly because he has a peculiar habit: He acts as if he has met many people before, even when he hasn't; that they are close friends, even when they aren't; that he spends time with them often, even when he doesn't. I must confess that I encourage this. I often say, "Benjy, look who's here!" He responds by frantically turning his head in every direction searching for the person he knows. Whoever happens to fall into his line of sight at that moment becomes the designated long-lost friend, and he rushes over. He looks up at the person with adoration, his whole body quivering with the excitement of seeing him or her "again." The funny thing is that he has never seen the person before in his life, nor has the person ever seen him. Yet both parties welcome this subterfuge. They both know it is false. That is, false only to a point, because it is also true: Benjy is delighted to see whoever it is, even if for the first time. And the person is rarely displeased to see a large dog with such obvious friendly intentions. If the person is a child, well, then the greeting is even more effusive and the parents feel that the child has been privileged to experience dog love in its purest form. I make it up; Benjy makes it up; yet the feelings are genuine. It is as if in seeing *any* human being, Benjy is seeing our entire species. Every person stands in for his most intimate pack. Benjy has succeeded in making the entire human species into his personal pack. In this pack there are no alpha or omega dogs or people, only pure equality, the egalitarianism of pure affection.

{ x x }

INTRODUCTION

I DON'T TAKE any credit for Benjy's easygoing nature. Unlike a child, where parents can take a certain pride if their kid is friendly and gentle with other kids, Benjy didn't inherit or learn to love from me. I just got lucky. But whatever the source, Benjy's got it—the love bug, the love gene, the love need. Of course, breed and temperament are part of it. Much as we might like to believe that every dog has the potential to be as loving as Benjy, it would appear not to be true. As media stories of dog attacks remind us, they are sometimes seen as predatory wolves in a dog's clothing. Some dogs are aggressive from a very early age. Benjy was the opposite from puppyhood, and has remained gentle beyond most other dogs I have known.

The other day he was in his favorite spot—at school with the second-graders surrounding him and jumping all over him—when the teacher worried that should one of the children inadvertently hurt him, Benjy might snap. “Oh no,” I explained. “Never. Benjy would never snap at any living creature, of that you can be certain.” I have wondered and wondered about the source of Benjy's extraordinary gentleness. It feels like a gift. Everybody benefits from it. If Benjy recognizes somebody, he rushes up to that person and showers him or her with affection. He licks and his tail goes wild and he has a look of pure happiness on his face. Smile is not the right word; he is laughing with delight. But this behavior does not make Benjy an exception, for he is the poster child for the rule that dogs have a special capacity to love. He may be exceptional in the sheer intensity of his feelings, but in this he is merely a showcase of how and why dogs became a human's best friend.

{ x x i }