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Features

The Rise of Dog Identity Politics

Dogs are increasingly rootless souls, country bumpkins in city apartments. But is a vegan pup still an animal?

- By [John Homans](#)
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If Stella is aware of the forces sweeping her world, she shows no sign. My dog is on the floor in front of the couch, ignoring the kittens we adopted recently, partly to entertain her while we're at work. Her big brown soulful eyes are tilted up at me in constant implicit question.

Stella is an elegant creature, with a high-gloss black coat and the runway model's trick of looking simultaneously gorgeous and ridiculous. She is not, as a friend says, an intellectual, though I hasten to add, as any parent would, that she's of above-average intelligence, having learned the basic commands in the space of a week. Not that, as an excitable animal in seemingly perpetual puppyhood, she always follows them. While highly vocal, with a booming baritone bark and a complex secret language of whines and growls, she's not notably articulate. There's usually a thought-bubble hovering over her, sometimes describing an unambiguous desire *Want chicken!* but often containing murkier information. The closed captioning doesn't really work very well. Is she depressed? Angry at us for taking her back from the country? Jealous of the fact that the cats get to climb on the furniture? She's staring at me, waiting for me to figure it out.

The author's dog, Stella (who does eat meat).

(Photo: Jill Greenberg)

Stella is mostly a Labrador certainly in her goofball ways but her splotchy purple tongue, curling scimitar tail, and brownish undercoat suggest Chow blood, and sometimes I think there's a hint

of Staffordshire terrier (the dread pit bull) in her face. She's a mutt, though that's a word that's used much less now than it used to be. Stella is also the nexus of several imaginative vectors. She was a birthday present and little sister for our son, Charles; an echo of my childhood dog, also a Lab and mother of many mutt puppies who happily slept outside and hardly knew a leash; and a signifier of my occasional aspiration

for a country life. From my point of view, she lives in a haze of nostalgia.

Stella gets enough time in the country to want more, and sometimes, despite the walks and runs and trips to the Tompkins Square dog run, I feel that she's just passing time till she gets back there. Guilt, along with plastic bags of dog poop, is pretty much a constant in an urban canine-human relationship. Is this any kind of life for a dog? It is a vicarious, low-level existential crisis—what does she need, what is she?—that her imploring eyes seem designed to produce.

The dog's eyes were designed to induce human concern, of course. A dog's attentiveness to humans is one of the central differences between a dog and a wolf, probably the determinative one. Dogs look at people, says James Serpell, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania. You can boil it down to something as simple as gaze patterns. With a hand-bred wolf, there are issues getting their attention. Whereas a dog is constantly monitoring the owner for clues on how to behave and what to do. A dog develops attachments to specific humans, in ways that wolves won't. Whereas a wolf will try to solve a difficult problem itself (they are, apparently, brilliant at unlocking gates), a dog will quickly give up and look to its human to figure things out.

Serpell, a soft-spoken, sandy-haired Britisher in blue jeans, works in a slightly rickety Victorian on the outskirts of the UPenn campus in Philadelphia. He's head of the Center for the Interaction of Animals and Society, which is underfunded in the current economic climate. The center has looked into how it might tap the Leona Helmsley fortune but without luck so far. Serpell's current work involves guide dogs. A small percentage of trained seeing-eye dogs lose their motivation to work after a year or so. They develop a kind of learned helplessness, Serpell says. He's trying to understand whether it's some breakdown in the interaction between dog and owner or something intrinsic in the dogs themselves.

If learned helplessness sounds like an urban condition, it may be because the dog is more and more an urban species. Even in the suburbs, the dog's unleashed, unfenced, carefree outdoor life is largely at an end. The dogs are in the house, even in the bed. (The doghouse is now mostly for husbands.) There are no rules to this evolving, increasingly intimate arrangement, and it can give rise to a kind of canine identity crisis. Outside of its country context, the dog plays an ever more human role. Which can make things very confusing. We've seen a linear explosion in pet populations in Western countries over the past 40 years, Serpell tells me, and notes a correlation with the depressing statistics in Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone*. People are living more isolated lives, are having fewer children, their marriages aren't lasting. All these things sort of break down a social network and happen to exactly coincide with the growth in pet populations. I think that what's happening is simply that we're allowing animals to fill the gap in our lives.

[Next: How dogs can be an all-around stress reducer.](#)



There is a long and fascinating thread of research about the health benefits of dogs. It turns out that the dog is a kind of wonder drug, an all-around stress reducer. Pet owners recover at a substantially faster rate from heart problems than do non-dog owners. There are other kinds of benefits, too. A child raised with a pet is more empathetic than one who isn't. The dog—no secret here—is an excellent wingman. A 2008 study found that a man with a dog had a much better chance of getting a woman's phone number than one without. And the dog can even tell you whether or not you're a good person. A 1999 study found that people who strongly dislike dogs score significantly higher on the measure of anal character and



(Photo: Jill Greenberg)

lower on the empathy scale of the California Psychological Inventory, indicating that people who liked dogs have less difficulty relating to people.

Serpell is most excited about new studies on oxytocin and dog ownership. Oxytocin is the most important social-bonding hormone, present notably between mother and child but also in just about any interaction involving pair bonding, social affiliation, and trust. More specifically, it's involved with the gaze between infants and mothers. Researchers at Azabu University in Japan found last year that the dog's gaze at its owner increases the owner's oxytocin level.

No one believes, in his conscious mind, that the dog is a person. But that may not matter. The oxytocin study, while providing the key to understanding the myriad health benefits of dog ownership, also makes scientifically clear what's obvious anecdotally: The dog is an honorary human, accorded many of the same considerations. It can be a surrogate child, brother in arms, solace of otherwise lonely urban lives. Serpell's central insight is that these kinds of social functions are at the center of the relationship of dogs and people. Selection of dogs for the performance of specific working tasks is certainly an important part of their evolution, he says. But the fundamental work of dogs that has been in the background throughout has been providing people with companionship or social support.

As the relationship developed, specific canine qualities—the dog's gaze, its unending adolescence, its uncanny responsiveness to human cues—evolved, a process that Serpell calls anthropomorphic selection. What was created was not, precisely, a human child, but it certainly was able to push some of the same buttons. According to one study, 84 percent of dog owners consider their animals akin to children—not a surprise, given all the baby talk. The British evolutionary psychologist John Archer has written, in critiquing Serpell's work, that the dog's ability to suck up human caregiving that could be going to human children while providing no evolutionary advantage makes them a social parasite. But possibly the stress-reduction effects, more than theoretical camp-guarding and hunting benefits, may have earned the dog's keep. And anyway, are you calling my dog a parasite?

The social-bonding brain chemistry leads to special treatment of many different kinds. These obsessive canine diet and training regimens are precise analogs of the little dictatorships that parents enforce over their children. One of the dogs in our circle gets fed raw chicken, which is currently the most fashionable canine diet; uncooked, the bones don't splinter. Another gets cooked chicken—often of a quality that would make a fine sandwich.

We are permissive parents. Stella gets dog food but also as many leftovers as she manages to beg. Strictly speaking, she's not allowed to eat chicken bones off the street, but there's a particularly good hunting ground on lower First Avenue where she often gets walked, and if she manages to snatch one, I'm much less inclined to stick my hand down her throat than I used to be. I know this is wrong.

These differences resemble nothing so much as the fierce little tempests over, say, Ferberizing, or co-sleeping, or bedtimes, though of course there's another dimension. Along with the concern for the dog's welfare, there also can be a kind of concern that maybe this relationship with the dog has gone a little far. It's a minor vice, like watching too much television, the kind of not-that-there's-anything-wrong-with-that workaday weirdnesses that are part of the modern urban experience. In the big city, you can do whatever you want.

When the dog was in the yard, it was easier to give the dog any old thing, treat the dog any old way. The

dog could find a dead animal, or bury a bone, or chase a squirrel, do its dog things. In the apartment, Stella will dig fiercely at the carpet, making no progress, though at some point we will have to get a new carpet. The apartment is a far from perfect place for the dog. Still, they're camp followers of our microtribes, the only beings that fully understand the customs. And unlike children, they'll never reject them.

[Next: Why it's hard to remember that the dog is the dog.](#)



(Photo: Jill Greenberg)

The dog is also associated with human damage, people who are lonely, people with trust issues, misanthropes (Hitler was a dog lover), people with lots of money who think, possibly accurately, that that's the only reason people could love them. Helmsley's little dog Trouble, the richest dog in the world, in her Florida redoubt, with her bodyguards, is the obvious example here. The only charitable cause specifically mentioned in Helmsley's will her fortune has been estimated at \$5 billion at the low end was to provide for the care of dogs. The document is testament to a moral impoverishment of mythic dimensions the last bird the queen flipped at the little people. She outsourced the work of distributing the money to her trustees, who have so far not seen fit to bestow very much of it on canine causes.

As in Helmsley's case, a dog can be a last refuge for lost people. But everyone knows people for whom a dog is a chosen escape. In Caroline Knapp's remarkably honest book *Pack of Two*, she writes about her dog as a salve to her damage, more satisfactory than any person in giving her the kind of unqualified love she craves. She's open about her inner wounds she'd written a previous, moving memoir about her alcoholism and her dog, besides being a dog, is a tool for addressing such problems. There's a kind of therapeutic solipsism at work in this type of relationship, needs met and unmet.

The dog fits perfectly into this sort of calculus because its needs are so simple and of course, it doesn't know you're a narcissist. Ultimately, Knapp breaks up with a boyfriend about whom she'd always been ambivalent partly over issues surrounding her dog, which of course she is permitted to do, and she's a lovely writer, and no doubt the boy had many, many drawbacks, but really? Are those really the right human priorities?

It can be hard to remember, when the dog is in the house, staring at you with those eyes, that the dog is the dog. The phenomenon has lately reached a critical mass, partly because of cultural changes and partly because surprise it makes people money. Nowadays, there's a vast industry, trainers and books and TV shows, devoted to addressing this interspecies neurotic interchange. There's a great deal of dispute, however, about what the dog is. A trainer like Cesar Millan, the self-mythologized Dog Whisperer, has created an elaborate fantasy of the dog as pack animal, a creature that wants to know who's boss. His message is that the owner ought to act like the alpha dog of his imaginings: Be the pack leader. Though Millan is clearly a gifted communicator, in many mediums, ethologists like Patricia McConnell find this a simplistic view, and the dog is a very long way from the wolf pack.

And there's an even bigger industry trying to confuse the issue, because a dog that's partly a person gets a better and more expensive brand of dog food than one that isn't. In New York, there are dog bakeries, and haberdashers, and luxury kennels, everything that the marketing mind can dream up, a vast and ever-growing junkyard full of kitsch, with names (paw-tisserie, etc.) that are more annoying than the

products themselves, if that's even possible. Again, there's nothing wrong with buying your dog all this stuff—it's nothing more dire than a game of dress-up—though it's probably prudent to ask whom you're buying it for. Your dog doesn't care if it's wearing a funny hat, or traveling in a sequined dog purse—no one loses anything but their dignity. Treating your dog as a person is nothing more or less than an aesthetic error—one that is becoming ever more common. Dressed up, doted on as much as any infant, the dog has never had it so good. And the personhood of the dog—this chemical confusion in the brain—is a large part of what is driving the politics of dog.

Stella is what is known now as a rescue dog—definitely the most fashionable breed in downtown Manhattan nowadays. She may well have been on death row in some fetid cage in Tennessee. But our moral heroism is not of the highest order, by a long shot. She's not a middle-aged pit bull with a mean streak, or a retired greyhound, or a dog whose elderly owner had died, or any of the hard-luck stories that become SPCA statistics if not for the intervention of some saintly person. She was a beautiful 12-week-old puppy at the North Shore Animal League America, the largest no-kill animal shelter in the world and one of the only places around where you can reliably find a puppy that's not a pit bull. In fact, our decision was hastened because another family was eyeing her. She's a rescue dog that anyone—except maybe one of those anal compulsives—would have rescued.

[Next: What should a dog's rights be?](#)



(Photo: Jill Greenberg)

Dogs used to be a part of the farmyard ethic. The lucky ones got to grow up, and got all the love, and the others were dispatched with as little sense of tragedy as possible, though the suppression of empathy isn't easy work. Seamus Heaney's bitter coming-of-age poem, "The Early Purges," gets at this sense: "And now, when shrill pups are prodded to drown / I just shrug, 'Bloody pups'. It makes sense: / 'Prevention of cruelty' talk cuts ice in town / Where they consider death unnatural / But on well-run farms pests have to be kept down."

But we, or most of us, are a long way from the farm these days. What, though, should a dog's rights be? Not to suffer is the basic one on which pretty much everyone is in agreement, and where dogs are concerned, the last four decades are mostly a story of enormous progress. Canine suffering has been criminalized across the board. The vivisection cases that gave PETA its powerful boost a couple of decades ago are rarer now, partly because dogs are less desirable as research subjects. In many labs, they've been replaced with a breed of South American pig that is as docile and controllable as a dog, and shares more, anatomically—skin, heart valves, etc.—with people. A much better arrangement, except for the pig.

As often happens, the success in moving toward some of the movement's most basic goals has only increased the doctrinal conflict among various groups. They're empathy enemies, at each other's throats like so many packs of wolves. The rescue people don't agree with the animal-welfare people, and both can't stand the animal-rights people, as traditional dog regimes like the American Kennel Club try to hold on to their privileged positions. It's a struggle for the Future of Dog—a little like Russia in 1917, with weakened conservatives and radicals of many stripes, all trying desperately to invent a future.

Famously, the touchstone of the animal-rights movement is Peter Singer's 1975 book *Animal Liberation*. The book's title seems evocative of some future peaceable kingdom, as if suddenly all the cattle and sheep and pigs and rats are going to be set free from their jails, wandering the streets like cows in India, grazing happily where they please, forever free from harm. On reflection, this doesn't seem likely. But if the animals are liberated, where will they go? Well, the strongest possibility seems to be that they'll go to the country to that same happy farm where parents have always told children unwanted animals go. The guiding idea of Singer's book, and of the animal-rights movement in general, is to lessen animal suffering—that's an animal's overriding interest, according to Singer. And one way of lessening canine suffering is to lessen the number of dogs. Ingrid Newkirk, PETA's leader, seems to dream of a world in which pets have been abolished, and she is a particularly reviled figure among many dog people. Although PETA's mission statement includes language suggesting that each animal life is intrinsically valuable, the organization's actions describe a more nuanced picture. PETA kills a surprising number of the animals it takes in. In the decade beginning with 1998, PETA euthanized 17,000 animals—85 percent of those it rescued.

Dog-rescue people oppose PETA and its ilk bitterly. They see numbers like this and think mass murder. Nathan Winograd, the leading no-kill advocate, is a particularly fierce critic of Newkirk's. His aim is to reform the shelter system, and he points to successes in San Francisco; Tompkins County, New York; and Nevada as evidence that it's possible to increase adoption rates, to find a home for every healthy pet. At bottom, he's accusing Newkirk of the same kind of fecklessness and waste and lack of responsibility that she sees in, say, factory farming. He's also, essentially, an optimist, believing that people are capable of being responsible for their animals.

Regarding human nature, Newkirk is a pessimist. In her view, we've botched this whole dominion thing, creating an Island of Dr. Moreau of animal horrors. So the best thing to do is to end our agency over animals, to disengage, build a wall around nature and stay on our side. The dog, in particular, is polluted by human influence. The animal-rights movement can seem as much about keeping humans free of guilt as keeping animals free of suffering, which is another kind of solipsism. (The rules are different on the philosophic frontier: For Singer, and for Newkirk, bestiality is not, in all circumstances, prohibited. If it isn't exploitation and abuse, it may not be wrong, she has said.)

But Newkirk is certainly correct that pets complicate the animal-rights picture. If you want to disentangle humans from their carnivorous legacy, the dog's leash is going to get caught in the knot. The dog world is as red in tooth and claw as ever—but the red is mostly in the same industrial slaughterhouses where we get our meat. The vast dog-food industry is based on meat by-products, that alarming euphemism. Of course, Winograd and a growing number of no-kill people have found a way to square this circle: vegan dogs.

[Next: Why the the animal-rescue movement is an offshoot of former civil-rights struggles.](#)

In the animal-rescue world, each individual animal is sacred, each dog deserves its sunny day, and euthanasia, while perhaps safe and legal, should be extremely rare. These people are believers in the Universal Rights of Dog, extrapolated from the near-human status of their own pets. In another way, the animal-rescue movement is an offshoot of the civil-rights struggles of the sixties, a final frontier for universalist ideals. Animal rescue is also one of the opportunities of ordinary Americans for real heroism—and more and more, they've taken it. The dog's innocence amplifies empathy, because there's no ethical static, no human otherness to contend with. It's less complicated to love a pet than a person. The risk and conflict and cloak-and-dagger swagger that some of these missions entail can give lives a life-in-wartime meaning they otherwise wouldn't have. There's selflessness here, but just as in wartime, there's also addiction, the oxytocin mixing with adrenaline.

Some of the most vivid images in the aftermath of Katrina were of dogs on roofs, in the water awaiting rescue or struggling to survive. After the catastrophe, Barack Obama spoke of an empathy deficit, but there was no deficit when it came to the animals. An army of animal rescuers descended on the city, and their work is legend in the animal-rescue community. But among some locals, their intervention was further proof, if more was needed, that not enough value had been placed on human residents.

The rescuers have done their work remarkably well. Twenty-five years ago, some 12 million dogs and cats were euthanized, according to the ASPCA. Now the figure is between 3 and 4 million, about half of them dogs. Partly thanks to public education about rescuing dogs, a much lower percentage of dogs taken into the shelter system are eventually euthanized. And both because of the effectiveness of spay-neuter programs and the fact that dogs seldom are permitted to run loose, there are many fewer adoptable dogs. In many places on the East Coast, the demand for rescue dogs exceeds the supply which means that, one way or another, the red states are supplying more and more of our dogs. A flood of dog refugees like Stella are coming from points south and west and places like Puerto Rico, where there are more-traditional dog cultures.

What the blue states are exporting to the red states is, often, ideology. It's the same town-country conflict Seamus Heaney wrote about, on a gigantic scale. Newkirk, along with Wayne Pacelle of the Humane Society of the United States, advocates strict, mandatory spay-neuter laws across the country, along with much stricter regulation of breeding. Pacelle is the silky pony of the animal-rights world, a Yale graduate who looks tremendous in a suit. The Humane Society of the United States is blessed with a great name, and partly because of its well-publicized raids on puppy mills, it has a massive fund-raising footprint and \$125 million to spend, which can buy a good number of small-state lobbyists (the HSUS too has been trying to get its share of the Helmsley fortune). But Pacelle drives many dog people nuts because they see him as an enemy of traditional dog cultures, possibly an animal-rights ally of PETA masquerading as a friend of the dog: a wolf in sheep's clothing. The biggest problem with HSUS, says Janeen McMurtrie, a Minnesota dog trainer who has a widely read blog called Smartdog's Weblog, is that they hide their goals so well. I have clients who are avid dove hunters and they've given them money.

Here, too, there is a sense that the ground is shifting, that the World of Dog may be on the verge of irrevocable change. The spay-neuter laws that Pacelle and Newkirk advocate, while no doubt reducing the numbers of dogs that have to be put down every year, have the potential to change the dog itself. The thing about mandatory spay-neuter, says James Serpell, is that those who are most willing to have their dogs spayed or neutered tend to be responsible people. And often, their dogs also happen to be nice animals in temperament. So what you're doing essentially is taking those dogs out of the breeding population. McMurtrie echoes Serpell's concern. It's hasn't gotten widespread enough yet, she says. But if it did, it could be catastrophic.

The *ancien régime* is also having its troubles. On an October weekend, the American Kennel Club held a Meet the Breeds event at the Javits Center. There were some 160 breeds represented, along with booths for every conceivable dog accessory and dietary regimen: organic behavior aids, chewable dog toothpaste. The idea is to connect breeds with their ancestral homelands. Behind the Cavalier King Charles spaniels is an oversize photograph of a castle surrounded by woods. The borzois lounge on pillows in a tented area, long and elegant but probably not the brightest bulbs, like the czars who bred them. A man in a tartan kilt holding a shepherd's crook stands with a small pack of Shetland sheepdogs, alert, confident creatures, like little collies. The dogs don't herd sheep so much anymore, the man tells me, though sometimes they're used to herd geese on golf courses.

[Next: The abundance of pure-breed horror stories.](#)

At the Javits Center, the canine past is a fantasy of upper-class country life, akin in some ways to the nostalgic penumbra that exists around my own dog. The antic shapes of many of these dogs correspond to some specific Victorian-era task. Ratters, herders, wolfhounds, guard dogs—a Swiss Army knife of countryside work. But the dogs don't do the work they supposedly did in the past. They've drifted, following the vagaries of fashion rather than usefulness. The AKC's breed rules are strictly visual—an aristocratic ethic, as if what was outside corresponded to what was inside.

There are an abundance of pure-breed horror stories. Bulldogs have terrible breathing problems (I heard one make the characteristic throat-clearing grunt as he was being led around the hall), and most have to be born by Caesarean. Several breeds—the German shepherd, for instance—are prone to crippling hip dysplasia, partly the result of a stylistic preference for a lowriding profile. Breeders say few AKC shepherds are suitable for police work. The Cane Corso has a head as big and square as a good-size TV. The dignity of a dog beneath its madcap form is the elemental canine joke, seemingly an unspoken dog-breeding tenet. Once the unshakable empire of the dog world, the AKC has been shrinking over the past couple of decades, partly because of competing registrations and partly because this Victorian fantasy—these working dogs that haven't worked in decades—seems increasingly distant from the modern world.

There are still dogs in the world that work, and their owners are the ones who have the most contempt for the AKC's dog dreamworld. Working-dog people tend to describe their own dogs in terms of sometimes heroic anecdotes, supernatural feats of tracking, an intuitive comprehension of human aims. I talked to a sheep farmer at the farmer's market who described an incident where one of her Border Collies listened to a conversation she was having with one of her employees on a walkie-talkie, discerned instantly where the flock had escaped, and ran half a mile to cut them off.

But in the city, where can all those remarkable energies go? Here the dog is a bumpkin, pursuing its questionable aims (chicken bones, butt-sniffing) with earnest zeal. Who is Marley, of *Marley & Me*, but Jethro from *The Beverly Hillbillies*, cheerfully blundering through life, not realizing his country ways don't make sense. But outdoors, it's a different matter. Off the leash, finding the high ground to survey the landscape, paw cocked, or blasting through deep snow in a way people (or too many dogs, for that matter) can't manage, Stella is profound.

Working-dog people also look with contempt on the pampered lives of city dogs. There's no suffering, sure—but what else is there? No sheep to herd or birds to hunt or sleds to pull. Nothing to manifest the excellence of their character. In an ethic based on avoidance of suffering, nobility (which used to be a rather important concept in the dog world) isn't possible. On the other hand, these people can seem like Civil War reenactors, clinging to a relationship to nature that makes less and less sense. The dog wants to take us back—but for the most part, there's not a way to get there.

In a footnote to one of his poems about the deaths of his dogs, John Updike wrote, “Sometimes it seems the whole purpose of pets is to bring death into the house,” a sensationally cruel observation because there's truth in it. The dog's mortality is never far from an owner's mind—it's the central flaw in this best-friend business. No one is ready for their dog to go. And the dog doesn't know where it's going—the dog joke turned into a tragedy.

At the Animal Medical Center, on East 62nd Street at the river, these issues often come to a head. Susan Phillips Cohen, the director of counseling at the center, helps people make sense of this bad bargain. A small, cheerful, white-haired woman (she's a cat person, actually), Cohen goes person to person in the hospital's waiting room, gauging the emotional distress of the pet owners who come in. “We don't consider old age a disease here,” she says. “We wanted to be the place that didn't say, ‘It's a 10-year-old dog, there's nothing we can do.’”

The Animal Medical Center is right on hospital row by design. They wanted it to be on equal footing, says Robert Liberman, the chairman of the board, whom I ran into in the lobby. He tells me about studies undertaken in collaboration with Sloan-Kettering. On a plaque in the lobby, there's an A-list of donors—Fanjuls, Kissingers—but pride of place goes to the Vincent Astor Foundation. (The neglect of Mrs. Astor's own dogs in her senility was one of the drivers of the case that led to the conviction of her son for taking advantage of her condition. Though one can't help but wonder whether, if some of the love the dogs received had been diverted to Tony, things wouldn't have gotten quite so out of hand.) Liberman has so far failed to extract any of the vast Helmsley bequest. It has not been easy, he says.

[Next: "The nurturing they feel they owe, is the same as for a family member."](#)

Upstairs, in the rehabilitation center, there's a working animal, a yellow Lab, being treated by two young technicians. The dog, maybe 9, has nerve damage from an infection in her back. One of the women has a pair of electrodes pressed to the dog's haunch, stimulating the muscles. The other is massaging its chest—Reiki, she says. They're all lying on a heap on a mat, and the dog seems as happy as a dog can be. Across the room, a black Lab named Radar with a mysterious muscle condition has just finished a workout on a treadmill in a water tank. Outside, their owners wait on a bench.

It really is family, says Cohen. It's not exactly that they think they're human, but the choices they're going to make, the protection they're going to give, the nurturing they feel they owe, is the same as for a family member.

What Cohen tries to do is clarify the issues in people's minds, which is not easy, given the confused place of the dog in many urban people's lives. It brings up all their stuff. They realize at this moment how many of their eggs they've put in this basket, she says. *How did I get here? Why didn't I have children? I hate my job.* Because you had someone to come home to who appreciated you just the way you are.

The hospital's position is to be as accurate and honest as we can be about what we can do, she says. The impossible calculus of dog years and human dollars is left up to you—and the possibility is always there that you could max out your credit cards over a weekend and still walk home with a bag of ashes. A friend recently took a 10-year-old dog with bleeding in its intestines to the NYC Veterinary Specialists, an animal hospital on 55th Street. The doctors told him that removing the tumor they'd discovered would give the dog a 90 percent chance of survival. And thus they were trapped in a cascade of escalating medical decisions—five days and several procedures later, the dog was euthanized. The bill was over \$14,000. They're heartsick over the loss of the dog, of course, and the money too—and furious at the hospital. But at what point, once you start, can you turn back with your dog? One lesson: A hospital that makes money on procedures may not be the best one to tell you when it's time to pull the plug.

The Animal Medical Center, too, takes your credit-card number in advance, possibly because, in the aftermath of a dog's death, questions of its worth arise: *What was it? Why did I love it so much?*

All our stuff, indeed. On our way downstairs, we passed a room where I'd had a previous dog euthanized. It's actually, if such a thing exists, a fabulous place to have a dog put down, at least for the human—the dog, no doubt, would rather stay at home. There's a view out over the dark swirling waters of the East River and, on the other side, a sward of green, dog paradise.

Scout was a West Highland terrier, Angela's dog when we met, an exuberant, somewhat cantankerous creature, beloved companion of our New York youth, unwitting enabler of our prolonged adolescence. He was 14 and tired when we had to bring him there, after a tumor and a torn ligament and a winter of rather

expensive medical wrestling with a stubborn breathing problem, all this along with taking care of our young son, who'd displaced him in his princely status, poor thing. I put a rubberized smock over my lap one is never quite free of a dog's elimination needs and told him about his happy afterlife on that lawn across the water, which I didn't believe a word of and he at any rate couldn't understand that same human gurgling he'd heard his whole life. The vet gave him an injection to put him to sleep, another to stop his heart. And that was Scout, whoever he was.

Before we took him in, a vet asked, with wide caring eyes, "Is there anything else you want to do?" We did, of course the hospital's high-tech armamentarium, its MRIs and minimally invasive techniques, a hospital they'd be happy to have in Darfur but we didn't.

How much is your dog worth to you? It's a hard question to answer.

Right, Stella?

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