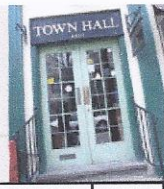




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Mt. Airyite: Should a pet dog meet your needs, or vice-versa?

by KAREN REED HADALSKI

While lazing on the beach, with only seagulls and sandpipers as company, I let my imagination play. If I could experience life in another form, which would I choose? The gull would definitely be one of my choices. Equally at home on land, sea or in the sky, this bird has a life span of 20 or more years, dines on fresh fish and spends each day soaring above the trees, floating on calm ocean currents and sunbathing on the beach. Not bad.

Or maybe I'd like to experience life as a giant tortoise. Their ancient faces always appear to be smiling and possess a Buddha-like quality of inner-peace. They move through life with quietude, dignity, serenity and best of all, when the world is too much with them, they simply morph into a boulder and curl up inside to rest and think things over.

I've always thought a kangaroo's life must be fun, probably because jumping on pogo sticks and enjoying the tummy-tickle that comes along with this activity was one of my own favorite childhood pastimes. "Roos" are playful and seem to really enjoy physical contact and interaction. And, what a way to bring offspring into the world! When they are so tiny, the new-born "joeys" somehow make their way to their mother's pouch, where she then gets to observe their growth and watch over them for six months. And, wow, to experience life as a dolphin! That would be truly awesome.....

My reverie was interrupted at this point by a young Labrador Retriever who ran up to me to say "hi." As his owner yelled at him to "stay!" and attempted to curb his natural enthusiasm and curiosity, I realized that I would never choose to experience a dog's life.

No matter how pampered and indulged a canine companion might appear to be, the fact remains that at eight weeks or so the pup is ripped from his mother, the companionship of his playmate siblings and the only environment he has known, to be sent off with a total stranger of another species.

Overnight, he is expected to acclimate to the strange sights, sounds, smells and food of his new home and to forget his birth family. He is given the job of learning and conforming to the rules and expectations of his new "owner," upon whom he is now dependent for his very survival. Social by nature, he is now forced to spend long hours alone, often in a crate, with no companionship, sensory stimulation or exercise.

He must learn to relieve himself not when his bladder is uncomfortably full, but when his human has the time to take him out; to teeth on plastic or rubber instead of wood; to repress the natural and healthy impulse to explore every nook and cranny of his environment; and to shove down his instinct to bark when excited and cry when lonely.

Unfortunately, most of us choose our pets based on their looks, how cuddly and playful they are as pups, as status symbols, or their perceived potential to become our protector, baby, best friend or child's playmate. Little forethought is given to the characteristics of the breed — characteristics and propensities which have been genetically bred into our dog for thousands of generations. For instance, Terriers were bred to kill rodents and vermin by going to ground for them. So, if you are smitten by the cuddly appearance of a West Highland White Terrier and take one home hoping to turn him into a lap dog, you must be willing to accept that, while he will probably enjoy your hugs and cuddles, he will also bark, go after small animals and dig up your yard. That's who he is.

If you can't resist the beautiful blue eyes of a Siberian Husky, don't forget that he was bred to be a sled dog for the nomadic people of northeast Asia and later became an intrinsic part of life in the Arctic. He is part of the "working group" of dogs, and it is natural for him to run miles at a time on a regular basis, and to live in cold climates. Therefore, if you live in Chestnut Hill and adopt one of these beautiful dogs, you must be prepared to shelter and



If you were forced to experience life as an animal, would you choose to be a pampered pup?

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protect him from the heat and humidity and not expect much activity until the weather cools down. Then, let him run! And, if possible, give him a "job."

If you are attracted to Collies, Australian Shepherds or Old English Sheepdogs, remember that these have all been bred to be herders. While they make intelligent and devoted partners, they are (sometimes stubbornly) independent thinkers, require regular physical and mental exercise, might "herd" by nipping at your heels and barking, and need copious amounts of grooming to keep the knots, briars and critters out of their coats.

As humans, we value "self-actualization" — the recognition, development and expression of our unique talents, propensities and gifts — above almost everything else in life. Yet, when we take a dog into our family, we immediately work to repress, train and shame their natural instincts and personalities out of them. We dress them in costumes, tie ribbons in their hair and parade them around on fancy leashes. The common goal of puppy schools and more advanced behavior modification training is to alter the dog's inherent disposition, make him obedient and compliant and, most importantly, bend his will to our own. We view dogs as "good" or "bad" to the extent that they unquestioningly comply with our demands, satisfy our need to be adored, and accept us as "leader of the pack."

Local shelters and rescue groups are replete with wonderful animals who either could not or would not deny their intrinsic natures and curb their natural instincts to be the dogs they were born to be and were bred to be. Common reasons for surrendering a pet include digging, running and chasing, barking, chewing wooden furniture, wailing and crying when left alone for hours at a time, getting into and destroying household items when no mental or physical outlet and stimulation are provided, refusing to perform every trick or obey every command on cue, and not being able to hold their urine for 10-12 hours at a time.

If you really want a dog, and would enjoy the experiences and excitement that only an inter-species household can provide, why not visit a local shelter like the Montgomery County SPCA in Conshohocken and ask to meet several of these throw-away pets. I think you will find, as I have, that there is an undeniable dignity about a creature who chooses to hold onto and express his innate individuality — regardless of the reactions or consequences that might result from such a decision — no matter what the species.

A long time resident of Mount Airy, Karen Reed Hadalski is a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Temple University and holds a Master's degree in English from Boston College. Intermittent departures from teaching literature and writing have taken her into the Alaskan bush and inner-city, where she did community development and social work and coordinated Philadelphia's Family Literacy program. Karen currently lives in Virginia Beach with her husband, John; dogs Odin and Serena and Lily, the cat. Karen is a freelance writer, columnist for Pet Tails magazine and author of the award winning novella *Enduring Destiny* and a forthcoming book on the subject of karma.