



A Winter's Tail
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When I was growing up there was always a pet in my home. My mom's dog, Junior, from her pre-marriage days, was of unknown ancestry (but we always guessed chow and something with really long fur). He looked like a tiny orange lion with a black tongue. Junior was an ever-present part of the landscape of my childhood. My baby portraits always included Junior. I used to pretend he was a lion and would pry open his jaws and stick my head in his mouth; when he had had enough he would crawl under the couch. He understood the word "bath" in eight languages and managed to hide effectively whenever it was mentioned. Junior was an integral part of several families, passed among different family members over the course of his 18-year life, and always brought joy. There is also the story that Junior saved me from being kidnapped by barking frantically when my mother left me in the baby carriage to quickly go into a store. She looked up to see someone running away with the carriage, with me in it. I'm not sure whether they wanted the carriage or me (it was a really nice carriage), but Junior's barking saved my life— at least that's the story.



Pets help us in so many ways

Recently one of my favorite people, who wasn't feeling well, asked me how the "fuzz butts" were doing. Those of you who have been to my office know that I have two Siberian cats (hypoallergenic) that are quite entertaining. I sent her a few pictures of the cats being ridiculous, hoping they might make her feel better. In one picture, one of my cats is lying on the floor with her legs spread in a position I call "porno kitty" (see above).

Animals are a reason to get out of bed on the worst mornings. I know that somebody jumping on my bladder, then walking up to death-stare into my eyes repeatedly is bound to get me out of bed to feed the cats and change the litter. They begin and end my day. They make me laugh, annoy me, act goofy, knock things over and steal small items, (most notably a pearl earring) and so on. If I'm away I often find myself waking up thinking, Oh I've got to get up and feed the cats. Our pets provide a structure to the day

because they are dependent. Unless they develop opposable digits, it's pretty much up to you to open that can.

Pets increase your physical activity. Having a dog to walk requires going out, even in subzero weather, and making sure that your dog's needs are taken care of. Even if you wouldn't normally go out, knowing that your dog needs to get you out. Taking your dog to the beach or a park and walking or running with them feels less like forced exercise— it's pleasurable.

They're amazing companions. You can complain to them about anything and they will pretty much sit and listen. They will often stay in the same room with you just to be social. Having a dog or a cat sit on your lap and look at you with blissful eyes is a wonderful experience. They give so much more than the effort you have to put in.

They reduce anxiety. There have been a lot of studies about this. My favorite one found that the sound of purring lowers blood pressure. Petting an animal provides both parties with a rewarding experience. Everybody feels loved.

Pets can help you meet new people. If you have a cute dog, people are going to stop and say hello, and pat the dog's head. My friend who walks her cat gets into some great conversations. There are lots of social groups that evolve around animals, such as dog training and dog play groups. These activities keep us grounded and focused, and can give our day purpose and a sense of accomplishment.

“But I don't have room for a dog”

Here's what I'd say: “Think outside the crate.” Besides dogs and cats, there are lots of other animals that are fun to have. When my child was younger we had “Kiwi Herman,” a guinea pig. I never thought I could love a guinea pig, but whenever the refrigerator door opened, she sang and chirped— it was really a cheerful experience! Plus, her maintenance was extremely low effort. I even had a pet rat. That's a long story, but rats are fantastic pets for some people. They are quite smart, they love peanut butter, and they can be good companions that take up very little space. My rat's exercise circuit was completely contained in the bathroom. That was in great part due to the fact that I had two cats who thought he'd make a delicious snack. I'm personally not a big fan of fish, but some people really enjoy them. I've even met some snakes that I thought were pretty cool, and I have a friend who has chickens for pets. Think about the space you have, even in a tiny apartment; you can have an animal like a guinea pig or a pet rat.

If you absolutely cannot have an animal you can volunteer at a pet shelter, or foster animals. Even visiting petting farms can be rewarding and comforting.

I think one of the cool things about animals is that they create a space for the giving and receiving of unconditional love. Isn't that an amazing gift?

Namaste,

Wendy