

cite comparative data from societies that are less troubled by the problem of companionship to see if they also talk to pets as persons...

Psychiatrists, veterinarians, and social workers are just beginning to realize the implications of the fact that in the United States and similar societies, pets can serve as proxy humans. They are rapidly creating a whole industry of pet-assisted therapies based on the principle that animals can provide supportive companionship for people who are deprived of security, warmth, and love in their experiences with real humans. They are bringing pets into psychiatric wards and finding that patients who will not talk to people will talk to dogs, cats, and fish, and that once this breakthrough is achieved, patients become more responsive to their doctors and eventually talk to them, too. Pet-assisted therapies are also making their mark in nursing and retirement homes where loneliness, depression, boredom, and withdrawal are acute problems. After acquiring a pet, nursing home residents interact more with staff and other patients. Outpatients with various kind of health problems report that pets help them to laugh, cope with loneliness, and become more active physically. Pets are also being introduced into prisons in order to improve morale and to stop the inmates from fighting with each other.

Experimental evidence indicates that when people pet their pets, heart rate and blood pressure readings of both humans and animals decline. Just staring at fish in a home aquarium lowers blood pressure to a clinically significant extent. Other studies show that where victims of heart attack are divided into two groups--those who have pets at home and those who don't--only 72 percent of the non-pet owners were alive one year after hospitalization as compared with 96 percent of the pet owners. Naturally, other variables played a role in promoting survivorship, but owning a pet accounted for more of the difference than any other factor.

Supposedly useless American pets, like supposedly useless Hindu cows and Australian dingoes, turn out on closer inspection to be quite a bargain. They don't make agriculture possible, but they make urban industrial society a lot more livable. As proxy humans, one or two pets can take the place of a whole army of human service workers. They can entertain us like stand-up comedians, educate us like biology teachers, exercise us like gym coaches, relax us like wives or husbands, love us like children, listen to us like psychiatrists, confess us like priests, and heal us like physicians. And all for a few hundred dollars a year.