

Hygienically Wrapped and Looking Pretty

Routine case: Man phones, wanting to get rid of dog. Reason: child suffers allergy from dog hair – or so doctor says. (Doctors are a dog's worst enemy. When they can't think of the real cause of the allergy and they discover the family keep a dog and/or cat, they invariably put it down to that; hence the abandonment of many pets on this trivial pretext.) Try to convince man that doctor may be wrong, chance of dog finding a new home slim, better that he should continue keeping dog. But he is adamant: dog must go. Man and wife arrive with dog a few days later. On meeting the wife the whole thing becomes crystal clear. Dressed from head to foot in protective clothing, complete with long rubber gloves and a face mask, she looks as if she's just stepped out of an operating theatre, an apparition from Chernobyl. At first, I worry in case she thinks my place is contaminated but then realise that all this paraphernalia is to protect her from the dog which is shedding hair (naturally, it being spring) at a great rate – obviously, no attempt has been made to brush the poor creature. Each time the dog comes near trying to be friendly, the woman shrieks and jumps a mile. Man clearly loves dog, woman in advanced stage of canine-phobia. Feel inclined to suggest that man throws away wife and keeps dog instead but my mouth is firmly clamped. Dog, needless to say, is completely hyped by being treated in this way. Its name, by the way, is 'Happy'. Moral: Don't believe excuses people make when they want to abandon their pet; they lie through their teeth.

There is a firm demarcation line in Japan between inside dogs (*shitsunai-ken*) and outside ones. Inside ones are those likely to be small and yappy. Once a week they endure a visit to a beauty salon where their hair is shampooed for the umpteenth time and tweaked into little knots and bows. Their nails are painted to match their owner's and once done they are often dressed in protective clothing according to season: raincoat for rain, overcoat for winter, etc. Actually, these dogs seldom touch the ground as their owners think exercise is unhealthy for them. When not carried they are put in shopping baskets or in the back of bicycles. Their diet of sweets and soft food means they age prematurely, lose their teeth and frequently suffer from diabetes. Conversely, outside dogs are never allowed a paw inside the house as they are regarded as smelly, ill-mannered and aggressive. (Well who wouldn't be, chained up all day?) Being 'in the dog house' takes on a real meaning as the existence of many of these dogs is tantamount to a life sentence.

As the canine-phobic life illustrates, a lot of people are growing away from nature and animals, or if they have an animal or a plant they want it hygienically wrapped and looking pretty. In the highly urbanised societies that we live in today pets and plants have to adapt but they also play an important role in people's lives. Marvin Harris, in the essay "Pets as Proxy Humans," points out that since we have forgone the village community surrounded by close neighbours and relatives, and now live in isolated family units (often in places with no roots and no friends), pets compensate in many ways for the lack of companionship. There is clinical evidence to support this. People relieve a lot of their tension by pouring out their worries and troubles to someone. When there is no sympathetic human around, pets make excellent listeners and confidants. Touching one's cat or dog or even staring at your goldfish is supposed to reduce blood pressure. People that have suffered heart-attacks are more likely to recover faster and live longer after-wards if they have a pet at home than people without. Doctors and social welfare workers are

increasingly finding that animals provide much valued therapy in a variety of ways. For the elderly they offset loneliness and depression, for the terminally-ill they offer hope, for those recovering from serious illnesses they stimulate the will to recover and for mentally disturbed patients they help as a means of communication. Their role in helping the blind and the physically handicapped has of course been long recognised, and some dogs have been trained to carry out a multitude of functions around the house for people unable to move at all. Not only with the old and sick can animals help to heal and comfort.

Schoolchildren also suffer withdrawal symptoms, especially in adolescence, refusing to communicate with their parents, teachers and peers. The Japanese education machine, with its unrelenting pressure on kids to conform and study, produces many extremes in behaviour: suicides, hooliganism, violence, bullying or (recently), the refusal of many kids to go to school at all.

Two 14-year-old girls I know fall into the latter category. In one case, a lonely child, and obviously friendless, suffered from stomach pains and was hospitalised by doctors and stuffed with drugs. There was actually nothing the matter with her but she pretended she had pain to draw attention to herself. Working hard caring for animals has helped her to recover both physically and mentally. She still skips school sometimes but by concentrating on the animals she loves she forgets her own problems. The other had parents who refused to allow her a pet and pushed her to study. She rebelled and dropped out of school. Fortunately one of her former teachers and his wife took her under their wing. They encouraged her to help with dogs they rescue and to take up painting, a talent which other teachers ignored. Both these girls are now keen to become vets or do something with animals and they realise that studying at school is necessary to achieve this. Part of their summer holiday will be spent with me. Whether they like each other and become friends remains to be seen but at least they will have something in common.

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The essay 'Pets as Proxy Humans' can be found in Marvin Harris' book,
"The Sacred Cow and the Abominable Pig."