

I feel like a fool saying so, but I've always identified with the Fool in the Waite tarot deck. The carefree young man in tights is so preoccupied with esoteric fancies that he is about to stroll off a precipice. Beside him romps a dog. One hopes the mutt has a better grasp of reality and that he will, by bark or bite, save the youth from himself. The Fool personifies the dreams and aspiration of

youth; the dog is the corrective force of the natural world. The dog as playmate and reality check. Wonderful. It's extraordinary how much truth can still be found in those strange pictures.

I'm too old now for tights and floral tunics, but I'll never be too old to make a fool of myself, particularly where dogs are concerned. I relearned that truth a few months ago when I was prowling the bed of the Ventura river with my dogs. Caught up in watching crawfish-stalking heron, I lost track of Basil, my handsomest and least cooperative Jack Russell. Too late, I

noticed him headed at a business-like clip for the nearby Ojai trail. The trail is off-limits to unaccompanied dogs, as he well knew, but one of the dubious charms of JRTs is their penchant for petty crime. I whistled and called without effect. (He has a tendency to become voluntarily deaf beyond thirty yards.) Basil had made up his mind. Something was odd over there, and he was on the case.

I noted Basil's trajectory and saw his target: a stationary cyclist in a mushroom hat and tight red and black garb that reminded me of the skin of a poison arrow frog. The words, "Uh-oh" sprang to mind. Cyclists and dogs seldom mix well. This was a stopped cyclist, which was somehow more ominous. He stood motionless, lost in thought, seemingly oblivious to everything around him. Basil's faltered and stopped. Tail-vertical and coat a-bristle, he cocked his head and said "Wuff?" It wasn't much of a bark; not a growl or a savage

snarl. Just "Wuff?" -- a simple canine expression of curiosity, the equivalent of what my daughter expresses as "WTF?"

Startled out of his reverie, the newcomer aimed a kick at Basil's head. It was a spiteful blow that could have done real hurt. Basil dodged. Then he really did bark, in protest, calling for backup and as a public service: "...this human is dangerous!" As for me, I was, as the Brits like to say, gobsmacked. I'll draw a veil over what followed. I did not mince my words in my opinion of the dog-kicker. The transcript would explode Charles Bukowski's spell checker.

The cavalry appeared in the shape of a jogging fireman with talent for handling verbal conflagrations. Order was restored. The protagonists went their separate ways with rancor undiminished. It helped that I saw Basil adding his ten cents - by peeing on the bicycle.

This was a classic clash of cultures. We

three lived in different worlds. Or at least the poison arrow frog did. Our languages were inadequate for bridging the gulf. The cyclist didn't speak dog. The dog didn't understand whatever language clueless cyclists speak. The dog-owner still can't understand how anyone can mistake a "Wuff" for a declaration of war.

In Basil's world a wheeled variety of human had become two-legged and, though still vertical, had lost all signs of life. Ominous. Worse, the human had failed to react to the approach of a particularly handsome and charismatic Jack Russell, something that was quite outside his experience.

The cyclist didn't get it. He was minding his own business. The dog threatened him. The brute was off-leash, dammit, which ought to be a felony. Didn't he have a moral and legal right to defend himself with a pre-emptive kick to the head? Then this burly, angry man came out of nowhere with threats and curses. Obviously a dangerous fanatic, like so many dog owners whose pets are a threat to life and limb on the bike trail.

I am not proud of that encounter. The cyclist is not to be blamed for not speaking dog. His failure to understand dog owners, on the other hand, is less

forgivable. There are more than 70 million of us in the United States, after all, and many are as passionate and voluble as I am about the furry little dears. My dogs are not possessions. They are my adopted children. Would he ever dream of kicking a child in sight of a parent?

At times such times I realize how hard it is to love my fellow man. For me, dogs generally do not present the same degree of difficulty.

A Paleolithic Love Affair

I fell in love with the Dog many years before I had one of my own. The story of Argos in the "The Odyssey" entranced me as a pre-teen. Odysseus, returning to Ithaca after long years of wandering, spies his old dog Argos dying on a manure heap. Starving and flea-bitten, the hound recognizes him, wags his tail, drops his ears and dies -- content to have seen his master one last time. At this point the manly Odysseus almost breaks down and "brushes a tear from his eye." I'm sure I wept too. I knew nothing about love then (what 12-year-old does?) but I recognized it when I read it.

"The Odyssey" dates from the Ninth Century, making Argos the first dog of
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A Fool for Dogs

By John Hannah

*"There are love dogs no one knows the names of.
Give your life to be one of them."*

-- Rumi



(Dogs continued from page 13) literature. Our interspecies love-affair began in the Paleolithic perhaps 30,000 years ago. Although wolves and dogs began diverging genetically some 145,000 years, it would have been hard to tell the difference between them until around 14,000 BC. The archaeological record at that point is 'suddenly' replete with evidence of rapidly evolving dogs living with humans. The advent of agriculture presented humans with a host of new technical problems, from herding ungulates to protecting ourselves from the neighbors to rousting the rats out of granaries. The designer dog was the inevitable solution. Domestication almost certainly occurred on many occasions in different parts of the world.

How long, you may ask, does it take to turn an aloof 85-pound Gray Wolf into a love-addicted, handbag-sized Chihuahua? The answer, surprisingly, could be as little as 50 years. That's how long it took Soviet scientist Dmitry Belyaev, using selective breeding, to turn the notoriously antsy wild silver fox into a calm, piebald, floppy-eared, tail-wagging people pleaser. In short, Belyaev found another way to make a dog.

Canis lupus familiaris is a product of human needs -- pragmatic, aesthetic and emotional. Today material comforts are easily won without them, but the dog still has a role in the pursuit of what has become a more elusive quarry: happiness and fulfillment. Both are dog specialties. Happiness for Basil is a new squeaky toy or a wild romp with his gigantic Vizsla pal, Riley. Fulfillment is in his long, luxurious sigh when he succeeds in sneaking under the duvet at night and I pretend not to notice.

In the past half-century Science has made enormous strides in understanding just what makes dogs tick. The average man in the street, or on the bike trail for that matter, still has some catching up to do. For example, many of us cling to the belief that the dog-owning family is best organized along the lines of a wolf-pack. Everybody has a place in the pack hierarchy. At the head is the Alpha (male or female) who brings home the Alpo and at the bottom is the status-deprived Omega. When crimes and disobedience occurs, Alpha or his proxy uses actual or psychological violence to remind the Omega of his place. The submissive dog soon recovers from the indignity.

He may even be reassured to be reminded that Alpha, whom he now loves

more than ever, can still kick ass in a crisis. That's the theory, anyway.

Dogs aren't like that at all. Ironically, neither are wolves. The flawed wolf-pack analogy is based on observations done in the 1970's of captive wolves in a fenced compound. Strangers to each other, they were forced to organize themselves through protracted power struggles. Imagine a team of extraterrestrial anthropologists coming to study human social organization by observing the interactions in the exercise yard at San Quentin. We now know that the wild wolf pack is a much more peaceful institution: a mating pair and their immediate descendants held together by bonds of affection, cooperation and mutual defense. Dysfunctional human



families are not uncommon, but a dysfunctional wolf pack is a contradiction in terms. It couldn't survive.

I often encounter the Alpha human when we walk our mountains. He or she is the one with the tense expression and the strong dog straining at the leash, as if itching to prove he can Alpha-beat up any undisciplined, leashless canid he meets. This is not natural dog behavior; it's human behavior. The wolf-pack delusion persists because everyone likes to imagine oneself an Alpha -- at home and in the car if nowhere else. The actual model for this kind of social order is not the wild wolf pack but the ubiquitous Corporation. I worked for a multi-national for years, and I remember verbal dog-fights that still make my blood run cold.

I should declare here that my Paleolithic style of dog-walking is not for everyone. No doubt Alpha-male is as scandalized by me as I am by him. My little pack -- terriers Basil and Phoebe and Chloe, the yellow Lab -- and I like to roam leash-free and off-trail, in the tick- and quail-infested brush and tangle along the river. Staying in tune takes vigilance, but the rewards in dog satisfaction are considerable. I hook them up when danger threatens, or to make other on-leash

strollers feel more comfortable. Cesar Milan understands the power of the Paleolithic style. I once went afield with him and 40 pit-bull rescues in the hills and beaches near Sycamore Canyon. I was soon left far behind. Other joggers turned white. Dogs and runners became happily exhausted. Cesar has turned the Paleolithic style into an industry. I wish I'd thought of doing that.

Most dogs would rather play than fight anyway. They don't do it for hunting practice, to establish dominance, or for exercise. There seems to be no evolutionary advantage to it. Anyone who's watched the hilarious antics of the pooches gone joyously berserk knows why they do it. They do it for fun.



Psychologist Alexandra Horowitz spent a year videotaping and analyzing dogs at play. She found that even the most rambunctious, most chaotic, most random seeming play is structured. There are many rules and rituals and standardized moves. Every session begins with an offer -- Basil's is the classic rump in the air, elbows on the ground pose -- that must be replied to before battle commences. Much play looks like a no-holds-barred, rough-and-tumble wrestling match. Basil and Phoebe like to fence with their teeth. Chloe likes to shoulder barge and tries for flips with her long forelegs. When one of them calls for a pause, for a breather or a snack of grass, everything stops.

Horowitz's book "Inside of a Dog" is essential reading for anyone who wants to understand what makes Fido tick. Her research suggests that dogs have a well-developed sense of themselves and can empathize with the feelings and differences of other individuals, seeing them as separate individuals like themselves. This 'theory of mind' was long thought to be uniquely human. Most children acquire it at around the age of four. Dog play is marked by such mindfulness. A Great Dane will change his moves and style when playing with a Chihuahua. He'll pull his punches, nip and grip lightly and even

roll on his back as if overpowered by his tiny adversary.

In a dog's world, and surely in ours too, play is an aspect of love. A dog's expertise in both can make us look rather dull and sour. A dog's love is superior in some ways. It is not encumbered with ego or much burdened with self-interest. His demands are few: food, play, cuddles, company, walks and toys about covers it. It is untainted by narcissistic projections.

Perhaps his love's only flaw is that it has a degree of obsession that would verge on the illegal in the human world. Your dog is a stalker. You have no privacy with him. Everything you do is of interest to him. He devotes most of his waking life to studying you. He knows your routines,



your eccentricities and your limitations by heart. He can tell when you are relaxed, stressed, tired, excited, irritated or afraid. He knows when you showered, when you went to the movies, what you had for dinner, when you had sex and what you smoked afterwards.

He knows a lot about you that you don't know about yourself. He certainly knows more about you than you know about him. A lot of it rather embarrassing.

Much of that information if acquired through his sense of smell -- a human is a very stinky animal -- which is at least 100 times more acute than ours. He lives in an alternative universe of smell, a place filled with more information than we can possibly imagine. "No man steps into the same river twice," said Heraclitus. No dog ever sniffs the same fire hydrant twice either. It doesn't matter how many times my dogs go up the Sulphur Mountain trail they always act as if it were the first time. They sniff the same rocks, trees, weeds and piles of poop with intense concentration. The trail is their newspaper, updated daily, redolent with events and announcements. A coyote crossed here. And a raccoon. And that angry black dog; he could be sick, by the smell of him. That yellow bitch

smells goood. Basil will usually leave a comment of his own, sometimes underlining it by vigorously scratching the ground with all four feet.

A dog watches his love object, ever vigilant for any shift in body language, conscious or otherwise. He studies your face for tell-tale expressions and he pays special attention to the direction of your look, however fleeting. They are experts in body-language. Sometimes they can tell the exact moment I decided to take them out, a second or two before I knew it myself. They know when I'm not serious. "NO you are NOT coming in the car," I'll insist sternly, but three tails will wag and my mind is changed. They heard my lips saying one thing but they know a sucker when they see one.

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A dog studies you frankly and openly. There is nothing covert in it. Unlike many animals, he is at ease with the direct eye-to-eye gaze. A wolf avoids a direct stare and raises his hackles. For dogs, eye-contact does not necessarily signify a threat. It's simply, like ours, a way to get information. He notes the direction of your gaze and what it is you are focusing on: whether it's the door, the refrigerator, the tennis ball or at him. Basil has particularly fine eyes. His melting, honey-brown gaze is also a highly effective way to beg for things. His "imploring" expression may be my projection, but I give into it more often than I should. Basil is an extremely charismatic dog.

How intelligent is Basil, or any dog? A tough question, if only because intelligence is hard to define. For practical problem-solving, the wolf beats the dog paws down. A dog's intelligence is more of the emotional kind. One reason dogs underperform in some experiments is because they have learned helplessness. We taught them that. If a problem is intractable they are likely to throw up their paws and beg a human for help. (The "smartest dog in the world," if you must ask, is probably Rico, the collie who knows the names of more than 200 toys and can fetch any you ask for.)

Towards a New Dogmanity

Four dogs are buried under the olive trees at the foot of my yard. At night my bed groans with the weight of two humans, two Jack Russell terriers, and sometimes a stealth Labrador. Also sharing our space, less intrusively, are three ghost dogs, all of us snoring as if to wake the dead.

I'll never stop grieving for them. Even now I avert my eyes when I pass Badger's cairn. He was killed two years ago. (A typical Jack Russell/ basketball/speeding truck misunderstanding.) Badger hasn't turned up in my dreams, but Boris makes an appearance now and then, and sometimes the noble Kifli, the Cary Grant of Vizslas, saunters in for an incorporeal cuddle, looking much better now that he's dead. My last Kifli dream was a week ago. We were in the parking lot waiting for the vet to come out. Poor crippled Kifli sniffed around for a while before going back to the car. I told myself that if he can manage to get back in the car we're going home. He tried dogfully, but the hips were too far gone. The vet came out and I held Kifli's paws and watched the pupils in his golden eyes widen into black empty pools. I awoke in tears because it wasn't a proper dream, just a memory that will never leave.

I've spent most of my space here trying to give a sense of what it must feel like to be a dog. This is an effort of imagination we all should make. Deliberate cruelty may be relatively rare, but ignorance leads many to casual cruelties. We know a lot more than we ever did about dogs, and recent science tells us that we no longer have the excuse of justifying cruelty with the claim that they are 'mere' animals. Your dog is not a furry automaton, but a feeling, loving, thinking being with a sense of his own identity and a devotion to your identity. Incurably species-centric as we are, we love to compliment ourselves on our humanity. It's time we started working a little harder on our dogmanity.

John Hannah is a Scots-born journalist and photographer who came to California in 1976. In 2005, after three decades in popular journalism, he retired as Associate Bureau chief for People Weekly. Since then he has focused on his first love: wildlife journalism. "Working for People for so long gave me a real appreciation for non-humans," he likes to quip. John lives in Oak View with wife Maureen and dogs Basil, Phoebe and Chloe.