

Ethical, Moral & Spiritual Considerations of Companion Parrot Care
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(Newly Revised!)

My life has been intertwined with the lives of parrots now for over 40 years. I have delighted in them as my companions, and have lived with parrots ranging in size from parrotlets up to the largest of macaws and cockatoos. As a breeder, I watched in wonder as young African Greys claimed themselves in flight and began to explore their surroundings. As a trainer, I felt the accomplishment of teaching parrots to fly freely outdoors and come back when called. In an informal role as a rehabber, I felt the gratification of taking in neglected parrots, teaching them better living skills, and placing them into better homes.

As a behavior consultant, I assist parrot owners to better understand their birds and resolve successfully the behavior challenges that arise. And now, as a veterinary technician, I help to heal them when they are ill. Not only do I love parrots and their many gifts, but I am fascinated by the relationships that form between people and their companion birds.

These experiences have given me not only knowledge of parrot behavior, but a growing desire to help them live happier and healthier lives in captivity. Many things must change in our caregiving practices before we can feel good about the fact that we have taken these birds from the wild and made them our own. The sad truth is that the majority are living neither happy nor healthy lives in our world. While many parrots are well cared for, the majority live in situations in which their needs are not being met.

As a behavior consultant, I've become aware of certain recurrent patterns in both parrot/human relationships and in the choices owners make about the way they care for their birds. These patterns have a negative impact on the care we provide our birds. If we can become more psychologically visible to ourselves, identify these patterns and better understand how they impact the care we provide, then we will be freer to see our parrots as they really are and provide better care. The truth is: *Their quality of life in our world is determined by the manner in which we see ourselves in relationship to them.*

The first patterns I examine below have to do with our motivations for adopting parrots and the ways we develop relationships with them.

First, we must accept the truth that we adopt parrots to meet our own emotional needs. This is true of most pet purchases. However, parrots are especially seductive creatures for this purpose. They are truly the stuff of which fairy tales are crafted... magical... brilliantly colored, capable of both flying through the air and speaking to us in our own language. The social structure of their flocks is similar enough to the social structure of human society that they are able to participate in relationships with us in a most sophisticated and intimate manner. It is no coincidence that so many parrot owners describe their parrot as a soul mate.

Second, most of us reach adulthood with a suitcase of unmet emotional needs. This is a result of having grown up in a dysfunctional family. As Earnie Larsen states in his book *Old Patterns, New Truths*, "To some degree every family is dysfunctional because perfect families and perfect people do not exist." Dysfunctional parenting techniques produce codependent adults.

There are many hallmarks of a dysfunctional family. However, the primary characteristic is that the family lives by a set of dysfunctional rules that are taught to the children. Within this set of rules is the assumption that the child is not 100% acceptable as he or she is. The rules tend to sound like these: *Do not talk about your problems...Do not talk about your feelings...Do not think or feel anything...Do not trust...Do not make mistakes...Do not ask questions...Do not be*

needy...Do not be selfish...Do not be yourself...Do not rock the boat...Do not have fun...Do not get too close or intimate.

If the rules we practice are dysfunctional, the relationships we develop will also be dysfunctional. The patterns of relating that we learn as children come to play out in our adult human relationships.

They also play out in our relationships with our parrots. There are many commonly recognized traits of co-dependency, and it is not too difficult to see how they manifest themselves in our relationships with our parrots.

Many of us growing up in dysfunctional families are covertly pressed into being a resource for the very people who should be caring for us. This becomes quite gratifying over time and often leads us into targeting employment as adults in the “helping” professions, such as nursing, teaching, or counseling.

However, for some this tendency becomes a pattern of inappropriate caretaking and rescuing. Those of us who love parrots may feel compelled to rescue them or become resources to those in need of help with their parrots. This is only a problem when those doing the rescuing forget, in their compassion and enthusiasm, that there is a limit to their resources. Occasionally, parrots need rescuing from those who rescued them in the first place.

It may be difficult to see at first how rescuing, or taking in, a neglected parrot is being done to meet one’s own emotional needs. However, the proof is in the often-heard announcement, “I *rescued* him!” Owners often announce this with a certain emotional charge in their voice, because the act of rescuing this creature says something good about them. They have a need to help and rescue the wounded and hurt and in doing so they feel better about themselves.

Most children who grow up in dysfunctional families never get the love they need and become adults constantly seeking relationships that make them feel loved. Often, disappointed by people, they will seek that same feeling...with a cockatoo. So intense is our desire to have that feeling of closeness that a young affectionate cockatoo can provide, that we look no further than the initial experience...only to be disillusioned completely when that same bird becomes a problem later. Certainly, cockatoos can be difficult companions, but I believe their large population in rescue organizations and sanctuaries also reflects the number who have been discarded because they were not able to sustain that early ability to make their owners feel loved.

The next truth we must examine has to do with the manner in which we relate to our parrots and the ways we behave with them. We have a tendency to set up relationship rules in our lives with our family and friends, and our parrots, that doom them to failure eventually.

We often assume that an unspoken agreement exists. This can be worded simply as “If I be nice to you, you will be nice to me.” If our partner doesn’t keep the unspoken pact, we feel victimized and take it very personally, unable to see that the behavior might not even have anything really to do with us.

And then we buy baby parrots and transfer this same silent set of expectations to our relationships with them. We forget that they are essentially wild creatures that need training and guidance, and when they bite us for the first time, we are devastated. We don’t say to ourselves, “Gosh! This must reflect a lack of training.” No, we take it *very* personally. I find the same reaction occurs with screaming parrots. I have consulted with many owners who feel quite victimized by their birds’ screaming.

Even beyond the business of setting up relationship rules that guarantee future problems, a deeper problem exists in the way we relate to our parrots. All sentient, intelligent creatures have a wide range of intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and physical needs. Regarding these

needs, we must understand one basic, fundamental difference in perspective that divides parrots from humans.

Parrots are not yet domesticated, and focus on the daily meeting of these needs in the same way that wild parrots do...largely through instinct. They have a primary focus still on the meeting of physical, or survival, needs. Further, they live, eat and breathe with the instinctive knowledge that their environment has the capacity to deliver either life or death each day.

However, humans divorced themselves from nature thousands of years ago. Living apart from nature, we are no longer primarily concerned with meeting our survival needs. It has been quite some time since the meeting of these needs had to be our primary focus, as it did when back living close to the earth, depending upon her for food and shelter.

My hunch is that meeting relationship needs probably did not loom quite as large in the human consciousness back then. In those times, too heavy a focus on getting love needs met might result in leaving a relationship. Leaving a relationship might result in an insufficient supply of food or lack of shelter or protection.

Now however, most of us have a lifestyle that allows us the luxury of focusing more on our emotional, spiritual, and intellectual needs. Of the three areas, the need for love and relationship looms largest for most people. I don't know anyone who doesn't have a need to feel loved. In our society, feelings of loneliness, isolation, and being misunderstood rattle us all.

This relates directly back to my statement that many people acquire parrots to help meet their own emotional needs. It is our need to fill our longing for love that often is at the forefront of our motivations when parrot is adopted. Couple this longing for love with a need to nurture, and you have the basis for every impulse purchase of a baby parrot from a pet store that's ever been made. Sadly however, whereas baby parrots may seem to us especially well suited to fill these needs, the same parrot five years later has usually "moved on," in terms of his developmental needs, while the owner has not.

This mindset we have when acquiring the parrot, and our focus on "relationship needs," then often leads to problems. It dictates in large part our expectations of our new companion. It colors our observations and our interpretations of his behavior. Such misinterpretations of his behavior then too often serve as the basis for the decisions we make about his care. And then we truly cannot see the parrot for what he really is. Unlike us, the parrot is an undomesticated creature, still concerned primarily with "survival" and physical needs.

As Henry Beston wrote in *The Outermost House*, "*Remote from universal nature, and living by complicated artifice, man in civilization surveys the creature through the glass of his knowledge and sees thereby a feather magnified and the whole image in distortion. We patronize them for their incompleteness, for their tragic fate of having taken form so far below ourselves. And therein we err, and greatly err. For the animal shall not be measured by man. In a world older and more complete than ours, they move finished and complete, gifted with extensions of the senses we have lost or never attained, living by voices we shall never hear. They are not brethren, they are not underlings; they are other nations, caught with ourselves in the net of life and time, fellow prisoners of the splendour and travail of the earth.*"

Truly, in our present practice of keeping parrots as pets, we see only *the feather magnified*...and the whole image in distortion. We assume them to be brethren. We see them as underlings. What we must learn to see is their autonomy, their presence in our world as *other nations*. Then, and only then, will we do our best work with them.

I first saw this with the greatest clarity when rearing African Greys. They had previously been described in writing as "nervous," "sensitive," "clumsy," "neurotic." The first year of breeding, I allowed them two weeks of fledging and flight before clipping their wings so they could go to new homes. With each successive year, I allowed longer periods of flight, until in my last year, I

did not clip wings at all. I sent all babies home that year fully flighted, having never experienced a wing clip, and trained to fly to their owners on cue.

That experience was a revelation. I saw with clarity that most of what is written about parrot behavior applies only to clipped birds. I also realized that almost nothing written about African Greys was true at all. Today, living with a flock of flighted African Greys, I can describe them as bold, curious, opportunistic, funny, clever, quick...and extremely coordinated. Truly, they are "other nations"...creatures with a wealth of intelligence and resources. Living with these resourceful, energetic, brilliant creatures has given me a clear understanding of just how inadequate are the generally accepted assumptions about parrot needs and how to provide for them.

Let us return now to my assertion that we err when we purchase a parrot with our own emotional needs in hand, and proceed to focus on our "relationship" with him when caring for him. Such a focus often leads directly to the day when the parrot loses his home.

I will give you an example. More than one individual has told me that her bird is her "soul mate." This is a statement that makes me squirm. *Soul mate*. That's a term that carries a heavy burden, if applied to an undomesticated species relatively new to captivity. Parrots are not exactly well-suited to this role and I suspect that a single parrot could be profoundly unaware of his "job" in such a relationship. A parrot given this weighty job is almost sure to fail.

Consider the all-too-common phenomenon I often describe as the "lover's triangle." This occurs primarily in homes with cockatoos, although sometimes Amazons and others are the unwitting victims.

Many are drawn into cockatoo ownership when they first meet the baby Moluccan. It is gratifying to hold such an exotic animal, have him place his huge, peach-colored head on our shoulder, and relax into our human chest as we stroke those soft feathers. Such possession of the wild...of the exotic...is quite beyond anything ever visualized or previously experienced. It makes us feel very special. For those of us who might be a little lonely or a little needy, the experience is intoxicating and compelling. For some, it may even be enough for us to regard this creature as a soul mate. We hold him on our lap while at the computer. He sits on our shoulder as we fold laundry...a soft, exquisite, reassuring feathered presence, reminding us we are loved.

However, it is the very differences in paradigms held by parrot and human, which we examined earlier, that leads to later problems. The owner may have come to regard the parrot as a "soul mate." The parrot, meanwhile, has become sexually mature and has formed an inappropriately strong and dependent pair bond with the owner. He often begins to display resource guarding behavior towards other family members.

Most of us know intellectually that a young parrot behaves differently than an adult, sexually mature parrot. However, this knowledge seems not to prepare the owner, for the day when the beak attached to the peach-colored head suddenly and unexpectedly bites deeply into the flesh of the forearm in response to the mere entrance into the room of the other person who lives there. It's a shock. It hurts our feelings. We search for some reason. What did we do to deserve that? Nothing, we are sure.

This behavior often then escalates to the point where the cockatoo attacks and bites the other partner. In the majority of cases the "other" human was not the one fondest of the parrot in the first case. Sometimes, not fond at all. Now, having to endure surprise attacks in one's own home from a creature of whom you are not fond seems to be more than many people want to deal with. Sadly, this situation usually results in the bird's losing his home.

If we are to be successful with parrots in captivity, and prevent their frequent relinquishment, we must realize the folly of placing relationship expectations upon them. It is time to take a step back and review our thinking related to parrots. We must again revisit and take to heart

the truth that they are not domesticated, while we are, and explore the full ramifications of that.

Other problems also exist in the way we relate to our parrots. Once proof of an exotic species' intelligence is irrefutable, we then proceed to sentimentalize that species. This has happened with dolphins and the latter are now subjected to having to "swim" with humans. I doubt that this was what dolphins had in mind for themselves as their next evolutionary step. They get no choice in the matter, however. They are ours for training and entertainment.

And so it is with parrots now. Parrots are dynamic and exciting pets, offering us a previously unexplored companion animal experience. We sentimentalize them, attributing our own emotions to them. We expect them to be "in relationship" with us, and to behave in ways that are consistent with the unspoken relationship rules we set up for them. Further, because of our unrecognized differences in perspective, we misunderstand their needs, misinterpret their behavior, and focus on *pleasing* them. This leads us to stray far from good parrot keeping standards, which leads directly to the development of behavior problems.

This tendency to focus solely on relationship and our lack of true understanding of parrots...the tendency to see only *the feather magnified*...leads us to misinterpret their behavior and their needs.

The biggest problem I see, however, is the way we strive to *please* our parrots and make husbandry decisions accordingly. Many owners demonstrate caregiving decisions that are strongly centered on the owners' perceptions of what the bird likes. If he doesn't seem to *like* vegetables, we stop offering those. But, if he really *likes* peanut butter-filled pretzels, he gets eight a day and good nutrition is sacrificed in our need to make the bird happy. The majority of parrots in captivity suffer from malnutrition, and this is one of the reasons why. Further, owners are reluctant to introduce any new foods or experiences that their parrot doesn't seem to like. This often results in a parrot profoundly lacking in living skills.

I believe this need to please stems from two sources. First, children who grow up in dysfunctional homes must stay safe by learning to anticipate the needs of others and by doing whatever it takes to make those others happy and content. Second, any of us will, sooner or later, begin to feel guilty about having parrots. The simple truth is that they should not be here with us. Some of us allow this truth to creep into our consciousness, and others manage to keep it at arm's length.

In most areas of the United States, capturing a wild bird and keeping it in a cage is illegal. For any who might have tried it, the bird's distress is horrifying and heartrending. Even without the firsthand experience of trying to cage a wild bird, even the thought makes us shrink. We know that this would be very wrong. And, yet keeping parrots in cages with clipped wings has become quite acceptable. It is my assertion that this is only because we are able to distance ourselves not only from their true natures, but from the fact of their origins.

I believe it is really this sense of guilt that only occasionally creeps into our consciousness that causes owners to be so overly-concerned with what their parrot *likes*. If the parrot doesn't eat his breakfast, they make him another. If he screams, they run to him to see what he wants. A large cockatoo is allowed the run of the house, and the fact that he bites the feet and ankles of visitors is tolerated. Never would we behave this way with a human toddler, and yet we tolerate out of control behavior from parrots, afraid to set limits and boundaries for them, which would easily be accomplished by teaching acceptable behaviors through the use of positive reinforcement.

I hope that these examples are enough to convince readers of the fact that we have taken a rather profound wrong turn when it comes to providing for our parrots in the home. It is essential that we take a step back and view our parrots a bit more dispassionately. We must

recognize and acknowledge that we should not have them. They don't belong here. They have a set of needs that is most difficult to provide for when we keep them in captivity. Further, *all* of these needs must be met if they are to have an adequate quality of life. Their need for social relationship is only one of those needs and it must be provided for in good balance with their other needs.

What are a parrot's basic needs? I will assert that, since they are only a few generations out of the wild at most, parrots still have a primary focus on basic survival and physical needs – the need for a high quality, appropriate diet that insures optimal health, the need to forage for food, the need to be busy, destroying things with their beaks, the need for social interaction and expression on multiple levels, the need to bathe, the need to exercise, the need for adequate rest, the need for safety, the need for fresh air and sunshine, the need for medical care, and the need to learn new things.

I encourage all who live with parrots to adopt what I have come to think of as a *zookeeper's approach* to providing for them. Any good zookeeper working with parrots enjoys them and even loves them. However, he recognizes that his responsibility to them is the most important thing. If we place ourselves in relationship to our parrots in this manner, then we don't worry so much about what our parrots "like." We don't worry so much about being rejected by them and we don't get our feelings hurt by their behavior. Instead we focus on our responsibility to understand and provide for their needs in the most excellent way we can. This, I will point out, is a *selfless* endeavor.

Many years of consulting has shown me that the majority of behavior problems are the result of unmet needs, coupled with a lack of training. In almost every consultation I do, I simply improve the diet, make recommendations for a better environment and stress reduction that will result in a greater sense of safety for the bird, and then explain how and what to train. If all owners focused more on providing an exceptional diet and environment, and then trained their birds, there would be very few behavior problems.

This recognition of our responsibility to provide *selflessly* for *all* of the needs our captive parrots have mirrors the same responsibility we have to wild parrots, of which we must remain cognizant. Our experiences with our companion dogs and cats do not call us to consider a higher level of responsibility, due to the fact that their link with the wild has long since been erased by centuries of domestication. However, parrots are not domesticated and their habitat is being destroyed with each passing day.

I assert that it is critical to our spiritual development as humans that we work to honor *the wild* in any way we are able. We are lucky to have our parrots to provide us with a daily reminder of the magic of that wild world.

Barbara Kingsolver wrote, in her collection of short essays titled *Small Wonder*, about some friends who had visited Cancun. They were dismayed at the devastation of the forested area that was becoming evident. Kingsolver reports that her friends, wanting to preserve something of that remarkable place, brought back with them some orchids they had collected.

Kingsolver comments, "*I admired their enterprise and empathized with their heartbreak at seeing delicate, rare lives crushed. And yet if it had been my choice to make, I think I'd have felt uneasy at the prospect of profiting in any way – even just aesthetically – from the destruction of a sacred place. Maybe I'm wrong about this, or maybe there really is no right way to look at it, but my heart tells me it's better to grieve the whole loss than to save a handful of orchids. Better to devote oneself to anger and bereavement, to confront the real possibility that soon there will be nowhere left to go, anywhere, to see an orchid in the wild, than to derive a single iota of pleasure from these small, doomed relics of a home that's forever gone. Anger and bereavement, throughout history, have provided the engine for relentless struggles for change.*"

In a greenhouse these orchids will flourish awhile and then, after a few years or many, die. A jungle is a form of eternal life, as ephemeral and enduring as the concept of love or mystery. It cannot be collected."

And yet...that is just what we have done. We have collected our prizes... our greys and Amazons and cockatoos. We keep parrots, who naturally have the exuberance and energy of sentient, flighted creatures, in cages with their wings clipped to inhibit their movement...for nothing more than our own pleasure. As Kingsolver states, perhaps there is no right way to look at this. And certainly, I am not suggesting that we return our parrots to the wild. Nor am I suggesting it is wrong to keep them in cages and enjoy them. I am suggesting, however, that we do so consciously and with compassion and with respect.

As Sandra Ingerman writes in Medicine for the Earth, "Life is a spiritual practice. You must concentrate your efforts on living a life infused with spirit." This requires that we face squarely the truth that our parrots do not belong here with us...that we accept this without squirming and make some decisions based upon this.

First, be the very best zookeepers we can be and provide selflessly for our birds.

Second, let's work to see that all parrots have a better existence in captivity. Perhaps we should not spend our money in stores that sell parrots. Each of us must decide where to draw the line. Each of us can choose daily to speak up when we see a bird being inadequately cared for or mistreated. We do not have to be silently complicit with any neglectful conditions. We can learn to educate others kindly and clearly.

Third, we each have the power to both help parrots in captivity and those in the wild by contributing to organizations whose work is well-known and reliable. We can support organizations like the World Parrot Trust or other cause each year. Such a contribution might be made on your parrot's birthday. If we look, we will each find ways to contribute that are within our means.

Years ago I wrote the following: *Parrots are only recently out of the wild. Essentially, we have in our hands the interface between the wild and man in civilization. What we allow ourselves to learn from them could have far-reaching implications. Sometimes I allow myself to wonder if they could conceivably have the power, by virtue of their place with us in space and time and their great beauty and intelligence, to finally convince man of the need to preserve what is natural and most precious. They can touch us where we live.*

Let's enjoy and provide for our companion parrots with full recognition of the fact that we owe a debt to parrots...those in our homes...and those in the wild. Accepting this and taking action upon this truth will make us better caregivers in captivity. It will serve to prevent us from taking for granted the feathers in our homes and help us also to remain aware of the need to ever search for better ways to provide for them in captivity, as well as preserve them in the wild.