

# My Dog Ralph

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Our dog Ralph came into our lives eleven years ago. He is a handsome, black pit bull/lab mix, and, as I recently said to someone, more of a man than I'll ever be. Unless it's just a trick of the light, he appears to be kind, accommodating, cooperative, peaceful, and serene. He is not a cow. Now and then on walks, he sees another dog who interests him for whatever reason, and he barks, growls, and strains at the leash with aggression. But he wags his tail, which we think indicates that he mostly just wants to play.

Ralph, as we are told is the case with many dogs, sleeps and rests a great deal of the time. He lies on the couch, on the floor at our feet, or tries to insinuate himself onto the chair my partner sits in. Oftentimes, he is let in, and my partner has to sit on the edge to make room. Frequently, when he's lying around, I crawl over to him and kiss him, and rub my hand over his coat, or scratch his belly. Often, he breathes in deeply, and then expels the air through his snout, and I like to think his sigh is exactly the same as that of a human who's trying to sleep only to be repeatedly interrupted. I choose to interpret the sigh to mean "Here he is again, bothering me when I'm trying to sleep."

I also like to kiss him on the snout, and frequently, he will lift up his head when I do this, and lick my face with his big black and purple tongue—particularly my eyes. He loves to

go for the eyes, and I wonder at this act, and choose to interpret it as an attempt to tenderly lick away my tears. What if I'm wrong? What if the reason he licks my face is not to lick away my tears, but just because he likes the salty taste of human sweat and tears?

There was a dog in the news recently, being studied by scientists, that had been taught over a thousand words, and was capable of distinguishing verbs from nouns. Science is revealing that dogs, at least, have a level of sophistication significantly greater than we knew until fairly recently. However, no matter what I choose to believe about Ralph's motivations, no matter how advanced the techniques become to study dogs' minds, it will *always* remain impossible to be certain, or even *close* to certain, of the dog's motivation for licking my face and eyes. Love, a fondness for salty tastes, or something else entirely? We can't know.

Mostly, the uncertainty comes from a lack of evidence. If it were my partner licking my tears away, I could ask him why he was doing that, and he could answer in words. Testimony is an important type of evidence—a concept Americans are quite familiar with. I can consider all of the conversations I've had with my partner, and everything I've ever heard him say or seen him do, weigh the evidence, and induce with a reasonable certainty that he is licking my face out of love. But the dog has no words. He can offer no testimony. He can neither confirm nor deny my interpretation of his behavior with language. Hence, *any* of my suppositions and conclusions about his behavior are highly suspect.

Nevertheless, I *can* observe consistency in Ralph's behavior. He sleeps a lot, so he seems to like sleeping. He always walks quickly and directly to doggy day care, where he gets to spend the day playing with other dogs. When going home, he lags behind, and sniffs, and seems to delay. I find my interpretation of all this to be supported by the consistency of

his behavior. I think he likes to sleep. I think he's eager to get to doggy day care, and, high from a day of energetic play, he doesn't want to go home, where it's boring.

But since we cannot share language, my conclusions are at best educated guesses, and are possibly projections of myself and my understanding of my own motivations and behaviors. It may be misleading for me to pretend to understand the dog's mind by comparing his behavior to *my* behavior. Does he *like* sleeping, or is he *resigned* to sleeping a lot, or does he do it because he's bored? Is he *eager* to get to doggy day care, or is he *compelled* to go to doggy day care? Or does he have motivations and thoughts and feelings completely alien to mine, which I will never experience because I'm not a dog?

No matter how close I may come to Ralph, no matter how much I may love him and he may seem to love me, no matter how long I may observe him and induce conclusions about his motivations and character, *there will always be a deep, dark chasm between my self and his self, that can never be completely narrowed.* In fact, even if dogs suddenly acquired human language, this chasm would still not narrow to the point where we could be utterly confident in our understanding.

A deep, dark, wide chasm still exists between my partner and me, even though we have been conversing, and fighting and loving, and testing and probing, and crashing up against one another for twenty years. Sometimes I despair of communicating thoughts and feelings to him, because it may turn out that he isn't equipped to understand them, and may *never* be. And the same goes in the other direction. He's like a very complicated novel. I have to read it over and over again, and every time I do, I see something new in it. Or I read it today in a way that contradicts yesterday's reading.

Experiencing one's partner is very much like reading a great novel. One discovers new things constantly that force

reevaluation, reassessment, and modification of one's understanding. But if I ever reach a point where that chasm is completely bridged, and I understand my partner fully, how can there *ever* be new things to discover? Also, when I crash up against my partner, I sometimes alter him in unpredictable, novel ways. This resembles the twentieth century scientific discovery that the observer alters the observed in the observing. Furthermore, the reader's prejudices and preferences deeply affect his interpretation of the narrative. I like metaphor and seek it out. My partner is interested in style, technique, and dramatic flow. We can see the same movie or show and interpret it in dissimilar ways.

The space between two human beings is at times profoundly narrow, at other times as wide as the Grand Canyon, but it is *never* gone. The inescapable conclusion I have come to is that deep, spiritual loneliness is a fact of life. This is not the same as alienation. Alienated people are lonely, but lonely people are not necessarily alienated. One of the greatest artists of all time, Stephen Sondheim, said (in a grand way) that love is company. We seek out and enjoy one another's company. We cooperate to achieve goals, and we share money, ideas, and ourselves with one another. All of these strategies *do* assuage our loneliness. But it is never gone. My partner has an adage: given the opportunity, anyone will disappoint you. Now and then our company insults us, attacks us, hurts us somehow, and we inevitably feel betrayed. Thus, the chasm widens.

Is the world I'm describing constructed this way for better or for worse? After all, loneliness is suffering. Why was the world made in such a way, with this suffering inextricable from human existence? There are a lot of people who express, unconsciously or consciously, an interest in becoming "one" with another person, usually a lover. There is a large body of work celebrating this desire. It is, of course, my contention

that the fulfillment of this desire, on this planet, is completely hopeless, but the desire itself is certainly understandable. It's not just love songs. The Bible describes how a woman must leave her family and "cleave" to her husband, but feminists would be quick to point out that this was written at a time when women were considered to be *property*.

I contend that it is no more possible to overwhelm one's property (a sweater, for instance) with one's self, so that one can become "one" with it, than it is to become "one" with another person. "Cleaving to" and "becoming one with" are illusions (frequently neurotic illusions) of people who are so profoundly lonely and self-uncertain that they become *infatuated* with the beloved. I have to observe that infatuation is inappropriate after age twenty. People who become infatuated are insecure about themselves and they seek salvation in their beloved. That may be fine for adolescents, but it is not helpful for adults.

My partner and I engaged in slave-Master play for the first year we spent together. He was the Master, I was the slave. After a while, he said to me, "I have to be constantly on my toes, telling you what to do, creating new games to play, spanking you when you're bad, rewarding you when you're good. I'm much too lazy to keep this up all the time."

That's the problem with attempting to become one with another human being before the afterlife—where anything's possible. It's incredibly exhausting to live *one* life, to maintain and nourish and monitor and contemplate and feel *one* ego, *one* self. Completely absorbing another human being is simply impossible. It's nice to play at it for a while, but in the end both of you have to go home and contemplate it alone.

And finally, what joy in loving a human being across the chasm. What joy in new discoveries, new frontiers, always growing, always changing, always *interacting*. What bitter-sweet bliss in the knowledge that someone *else*, someone out

there in the world, another person, *free of obligation*, chose to love *you*. One and other, other and one, forever crashing up against one another, and then separating again. To feel that way must be what it feels like to glimpse the face of God.

— PUP

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