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## “One more thing to be thankful for...”

I'll admit it; I talk to my pets. Not just the "goofy talk" stuff we all mutter from time to time, but some real intellectual stuff. For instance I'll remind my pets (two spoiled cats and a "high energy" dog) how lucky they are to live with a family that cares about them, feeds them nutritious food, and provides them shelter and security. Yes, I'll even lecture them about the vast majority of animals in this world that don't even come close to the level of creature comfort they enjoy. They should be really thankful they found us. OK, I'll eventually concede to them that living in the same house as a veterinarian may not be their idea Nirvana, but they are one lucky crowd nonetheless.

Yes our pets are lucky to have what they have. But sometimes I'll privately wonder to myself; maybe we, the human family members, are really getting the better end of the deal. Every year as we approach the holiday that reminds us to pause and be thankful, I am mindful of the many benefits and special things our pets bring to our lives.

Can anyone deny our furry friends' knack for facilitating social contact with friends, neighbors, and even strangers? So often two strangers passing on the street would never have any reason to speak. But bring a dog into the mix and they likely will strike up a conversation to discuss their mutual interest in the creature on the far end of a leash. I'm impressed how clients in our office (usually complete strangers) will chat while waiting in the reception area. The discussions usually center on their pet's healthcare but probably wouldn't even get started if their animals weren't there with them. I can't think of the last time I "chatted" with a complete stranger while waiting in my doctor or dentist's office.

No doubt animal lovers can be thankful that our pets bring us better health, both mental and physical. The companionship and warmth a pet provides can be vital to getting through those rough patches in life. I don't have to look past my own practice to see just how important pets have become to people. Every day I see bonds between people and their pets that rival the closeness of any person-to-person bond.

Children benefit from having pets by learning nurturing and caring skills valuable throughout life. The life-enriching quality of caring for an animal may help children through difficult family events such as divorce or relocation. By caring for a pet, children can develop self-esteem and learn life habits of compassion, sensitivity, and empathy so important for developing strong inter-human bonds (i.e., making friends at school). In some classrooms animals are part of a new approach helping children to deal with attention-deficit problems and improve their learning experience and opportunities.

Animal-assisted therapy is the latest term for involving animals in all kinds of rehabilitation. This therapy may be for physically challenged individuals recovering from injury or illness, as well as those with mental illness encouraging them to participate in group therapy sessions.

We all have seen how liberating the guide dog for the blind or the hearing dog can be for their masters. For people confined to a wheelchair a specially trained canine companion can open and close doors, pick-up dropped items, and generally provide a level of independence otherwise not possible.

Recent studies suggest that pet ownership can improve physical health parameters such as cholesterol levels and blood pressure. Pets seem to have their most striking benefit with seniors. In one study of Medicare recipients, those who owned companion animals reported fewer health complaints and subsequently fewer trips to their physician. For seniors living alone their pets can be their major source for social and emotional support.

Service dogs such as police dogs, drug and explosives sniffing dogs and search and rescue dogs are not only beloved pets, they also help keep our community safe by providing their special services in times of need. These quiet heroes benefit us each day.

So much to be thankful for!

SOK, so maybe the next time I lecture the animal members of my family, I'll remember how these creatures, big and small, young and old, pretty and not so pretty, all give me unlimited and unconditional love. They don't ask me about my past, what my income is, my political affiliation, or what kind of car I drive. They don't care if I work long hours and don't get home until late. They patiently wait all day just for those few minutes I might have for them-and are very happy for that. My pets are infinitely loyal, lifelong companions and ask relatively little in return. The least I can do is give them an extra hug, a pat on the head, or a few extra minutes on their walk to show my appreciation for all they do for me. Have a nice

Thanksgiving and don't forget to be thankful for your pets. Or better yet, just tell them. Trust me, they'll understand.

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