

Dognition

1. Worry and Pain

Since all stories must begin by naming the important characters, allow me to introduce myself. I am Daniel, your narrator. I am 2 feet 9 inches tall, weigh a trim 45 pounds, have brown speckles and spots distributed liberally over my mainly white-ish body. I live in Harry's apartment at 985 Amsterdam Avenue on the island of Manhattan in New York City. Harry has dark hair, stands 5 feet 11 inches tall, plays basketball in the park three days a week, and sports a shaggy growth of beard stubble that makes him look slightly disreputable. And oh yes, I am a dog.

Harry, as they say, is good to me. We go to the park every day, sometimes twice. On Saturday mornings we take long walks during which I get a tremendous amount of sniffing done. I try to keep track, in a chemical sense, of my entire neighborhood, so I'll instantly be able to detect any changes that occur.

Right now it is a Thursday morning. Harry is eating breakfast, two eggs, whole wheat everything bagel from Absolute ("top-notch"), coffee from Fairway ("good enough") and I am waiting, my eyes transfixed on his as he reads his paper. He is in no hurry, never is. I study his face; he has a pleasant enough face, people say. More to the point, he has a pleasant smell, a combination I judge to include corn chips, bicycle oil, brown shoe polish, tree bark, and perhaps a dozen other things.

I thump my tail on the floor half a dozen times.

He keeps reading.

When Harry's very interested in something in the news he pauses, holding his toast at eye level, and turns it slowly as if to evaluate its structural integrity. Harry prefers a

“real” newspaper instead of an electronic paper because he says he learns much more from the real paper. Who am I to disagree?

I waffle.

“Well what do you know about that?” Harry says, referring to some item of interest on page A4, as if it mattered to me. He looks at me. I don’t move a muscle except for my tail, which begins to throb vigorously.

Note that even without newspapers, either paper or electronic, we dogs (the Civilized People) have access to enormous quantities of information that you humans (the Human People) simply cannot fathom. I can smell better than you can see. You see your flat world in two dimensions. I smell mine in three. Your elevated perspective of the world comes from above; I view events at ground level, which allows me to keep track of key details and relationships you miss out on. Plus I combine smell with superior hearing and vision to fashion a detailed map of my environment whose contents are completely searchable within my dog brain at any time, now or in the future. You have no such ability. Also, I can smell invisible things, intangible things: the ink in your pen; the electricity in the walls, the glue that holds that broken vase together. I can use my smell superpowers to “see” around corners, over walls, under rugs. I can smell friendliness, fear, doubt, treachery. You have none of these abilities.

As I said, it’s a dog’s world, if you know how to find it.

And yet, for all this complexity and richness, right now I am overwhelmed with only one thing — the magical aroma of Harry’s breakfast. For the moment, nothing else in my world exists. Oh my gosh, is there anything better than the smell of breakfast? When he

finishes he puts the plate on the floor still yellow with egg yolk, I lick it up greedily, gratefully. Once again. Excuse me a moment.

(Time out...)

Now where was I? By this point perhaps you're wondering why I, by all fair accounts a highly advanced moral creature, would allow myself to be "bought off" and "owned" by a mere Human Person when...

(And here I need to stop myself. I made a promise when I embarked on this project: I would not indulge in the unfairness of it all, the injustice. I would not rant. I would not bemoan. I am a dog, no more, no less. I will address issues on my own doggish terms, nothing more, nothing less.)

Now where were we? By this point perhaps you're wondering what a wapple might be as I have indulged in several of them since we started here. The wapple typically originates in the tips of the toes, gathers energy through the shanks and mid-haunches until it finally explodes into a shuddering whole-body shiver, a teeth-chattering shockwave that emanates a very audible and pleasing "wapping" sound. Thus, the wapple.

(Allow me to demonstrate...)

I bring this up because wapping works not only as a neuro-muscular event for dogs, but also as a mental event that functions to clear the board and provide a complete re-set from what transpired earlier. Are you bogged down by your current predicament? Upset, bored, distracted, drowsy? A quick wapple will shake you out of your rut and allow you to start over. Very therapeutic.

As I observe Harry I often feel sad that he's not wobble-capable. His moods and funks stay with him wherever he goes. He is incapable of any kind of fresh view of the moment. If he is in a good mood, he'll stay that way. If he is gloomy, he will continue in gloom.

Now what did I want to say here? Oh yes, I was describing how I "see" all and smell all and how your world is greatly limited compared to mine. But lest you think we dogs are soul-less creatures, mere machines who exist only for our food, our creature comforts, our naps and our walks and our sniffs, and the vapid praise we get for performing meaningless tasks, I would say: You're wrong.

But you're also partly right.

The truth about dogs is that we are hopelessly compromised by our one major need. And no, that need is not food. (Though let me tell you: there is some human food that is so good, so absolutely *heavenly* that I am genuinely surprised that when you go to your dinner parties and partake of that stuff that at least one or two individuals at the table might just roll over and *expire* right there out of pure pleasure. It's *that* good!) But I digress: How can I say this: We dogs, as prodigiously moral creatures (though I promised I wouldn't get into that), possessors of not just one but *three* genuinely certifiable superpowers, though we dearly love food, it is only a secondary, non-fundamental requirement for us; we do not live not for it.

What we live for is love. *Come again?*

To be more specific: What we live for is *hrah*, the one-way, wholly uncontrollable and compulsive love of *you*. (In Dogspeak *hrah* is the love itself while *Hrah-ben* identifies the object of that love and the *Hrah-nee* as the one who venerates the *Hrah-*

ben.) How much do we love you, *Hrah-ben*? Are you kidding? We suffer for you. We are heart-sick for you. It sickens me how much we invest in you compared to what we get in return. But then again, there it is. When you go, we whine and ache because we think — we *know* — you will never return. When you actually do return we suffer again because we fear you are going to leave again. It is never-ending cycle of worry and pain, followed by momentary relief from that worry and pain, followed by more worry and pain.

2. And yet — the joy you give when you, *Hrah-ben*, look down upon us lovingly is boundless. There is, I am convinced, no stronger or greater force in the universe. I can't tell you the pleasure, the ecstasy, the happiness I feel from a simple morning belly rub from Harry after breakfast. If licking up Harry's egg and toast remnants rates a 10 on the dog pleasure scale, as sublime as that is, it shrinks to zero in comparison to the basic belly rub, the BR, or, as it is affectionately known, the *belly*.

Which I am experiencing right now. This *belly* a good one (they are always good ones!). Harry starts on the belly and slowly moves up under my haunches. As he keeps kneading and rolling I turn over in a highly undignified way, flailing and fish-tailing awkwardly on my back in both directions and as the wave of pleasure washes over me I descend into a profound torpor, a complete shut down of all intellectual and cognitive function, a state of total *hrah* in which I am no longer myself, I am no longer 2-foot 9-inch 45-pound Daniel who likes to go on long walks in the park and sniff out raccoons. I am simply an expression of the pleasure I feel. I am blissed out, floating in a featureless, abstract *hrah* world.

And here's something that may surprise you: though we desperately love (and *need*) all forms of physical affection, including being petted, fondled, caressed, etc. and the *hrah* that accompanies this activity, ultimately there is something we crave even more achingly than physical affection, and that is verbal/emotional affection; that is, in a word, good old-fashioned *praise*. You know, the "Good dog!" stuff: the compliments, the affirmation, the magic words when expressed in a voice that only you (the one and only *Hrah-ben*) can provide:

"You are such a GOOD DOG!!!"

Oh my gosh. (I need another time out.)

I'm dizzy, weak in the knees, eyeballs wobbling in the back of my head swooning, completely immersed in *hrah* just thinking about it. There is simply nothing better, no moment sweeter, nothing that compares to that singular moment when Harry, in a fully genuine and sincere way, says to me, "Good dog!"

And it doesn't matter whether the "Good dog" was earned for something noble and important, such as rescuing victims from a mine shaft, or something trivial and meaningless, such as the useless tricks humans enjoy seeing dogs perform, such as "Roll over" or "Heel."

In either case, the basic drug of "Good dog" works in the same way. When it is said to me I go limp, and for a brief instant my life of dog-desperation and worry/pain is put on hold, only to resume a few moments later when I start worrying that once again that you are going to abandon me somehow.

As I said, it's a dog's life.

If you are surprised by all this, you shouldn't be. Just think of those killer breeds, the pit bulls and other aggressive types that are bred for viciousness and destruction. What could possibly turn such a gentle and loving creature — which we dogs are by nature — into a violent killer? What could motivate an individual to go against his/her inborn character so profoundly? There can be only one answer, if you think about it, and that is the same basic drug I've described above, the strongest force in the universe — *you, Hrah-ben*. You couldn't compel, say, a house cat, or a horny toad, or a parakeet to become that vicious — to go against its own nature — even if you tried. Those species just don't have it in them; no combination of rewards, threats, or punishments from their “master” could compel them into becoming any more of a killer than they already are (or aren't).

But with a dog the matter is different. A dog will do anything, and I mean *anything*, if you give — or fail to give — the *hrah* it needs and craves and suffers for. Ultimately, this painful form of love, this devotion, is our opiate of choice, the remedy we must shoot ourselves up with on a daily basis. If we get it, we will go down any path you choose. It's that simple.

Which brings us to the question: Why would dogs be such patsies for this kind of thing? Other animals, especially mammals, do seem to enjoy being petted and praised to a certain degree, but only one species devotes its entire existence to seeking *hrah* in all of its forms during all of its waking moments — the dog.

So why would this be?

To account for it, rather than go into a lengthy exposition that would probably be unconvincing, I'll provide an explanation the Dog Way, that is, with what we term a *Howl*, the dog form of singing a song.

So here we go, a Dog Howl. This howl was "written" by my good friend Victor, who is a philosopher and a scientist of no small reknown in the Civilized World, and is the author of all howls you will have the privilege of reading in this volume. (You will meet Victor shortly.) To howl it properly you must begin with a long series of yowls and yips and yippy-ki-yi's, (the *yippage*) for 30 seconds or so. Then, once your *yippage* ends, sing out these words in your best yippy-ki-yi dog-howl voice:

The Story of Dog's Gift,

or

That Rascal Dog Gets What He Deserves:

A Howl, by Victor, Sung in the Key of *Yip*

In the Far and Ancient Times
The Queen of all the Earth
Decided to pass out Gifts to her people
According to their value and worth.
Aroo! Aroo! Aroo! Aroo-koo-koo-koo-koo!

Monkey stood first in line
Grinning from cheek to jowl.
"A gift, my Queen," Monkey said,
And let out a monkey howl.
Roo-arrk! Roo-arrk! Roo-roo-arrk!

The Queen dismissed this impertinence, and
With a wave of her royal hand,
Said, "I hereby award this gift to Monkey:
"All bananas that grow in the land!"
Aroo! Aroo! Aroo-koo-koo-koo-koo-ka-roo!

And so it went for the others
One by one they filed past
As the Queen presented gift after gift
Each more magnificent than the last.

Spider got its orbs and webs,
Butterfly its fragrant flowers,
The Queen was exceedingly generous
In deploying her royal powers

Goats got to roam the rolling pastures
The meadows were bestowed upon Rabbit
This made sense because she liked to nibble
On fresh green shoots as a habit.

Snake and Bear took the underground caves.
Crow the rain and thunder
Lizard the sandy floor of the desert
With plenty of rocks to hide under.

Owl took possession of Darkness
Moonlight belonged to the Bats
Fox obtained the early Morning dawn
While Midnight became property of the Cats.
Aroo! Aroo! Aroo!

And so when all was done and said
No one got left out or ignored
Mouse got the grassy green fields,
While above her Falcon soared

Lion took pride in the prairie
The pond became the haunt of Frog
In fact no one at all was forgotten
Except that old rascal, Dog.
Aroo! Aroo! Aroo-koo-koo-koo-koo-ka-roo!

“What about me, Your High-ness?” Dog asked
His voice full of good-hearted cheer
“I have given the gifts away,” said the Queen,
“I’m afraid they’re all gone, my Dear.”

“Gone?” said Dog, “That’s ridiculous.
“Let me list what I humbly deserve:
“The sun, the moon, all the stars in the sky.”
Laughed the Queen, “You’ve a great deal of nerve!”

“Plus,” Dog added, “all the fruits in the fields,
“All the carcasses, fresh and spoiled,
“All the eggs and grains, all the fish and fowl,

“All the meats both raw and boiled.”
Aroo! Aroo! Aroo-koo-koo-koo-koo-ka-roo!

“You ask too much, canine cousin,”
Said the Queen, shaking her head
“All right,” said Dog, “I’ve changed my mind
“Here’s what I offer instead...”

At this point just as Dog began
To announce his Gift to the crowd
On the horizon, dark and threatening:
A cumulo-nimbus rain cloud.

“I hereby announce,” said Dog to the Queen:
“As my Gift I would sincerely LOVE — ”
At this point CRACK-K-K! came an enormous bolt
Of thunder and lightning from above.

Which completely drowned out what Dog had said
So the only thing the Good Queen heard
Instead of the whole phrase — whatever it was
Was a single, solitary word.

And that word was *love* — Dog desired love
At least, this was the Good Queen’s conclusion.
So she I announced: “I give to Dog: LOVE,”
Which only added to the overall confusion.
Aroo! Aroo! Aroo!

By this point it was raining cats and dogs
And the whole party started to run.
And before Dog could complain, the Queen duly declared,
“Gift-giving is now officially done!”
Aroo! Aroo! Aroo! Aroo-koo-koo-koo-koo-ka-roo!

So that was how Rascal Dog
Under extremely peculiar conditions
Became Earth’s Creature of Love and *Hrah*
Despite very different ambitions!
Aroo! Aroo! Aroo! Aroo-koo-koo-koo-koo-ka-roo! Brooo! Brooo!
The End, copyright © Victor the Canine

3. Abandoned

I begin the day in abject misery. Typically I'd spend the morning snoozing under Harry's desk while he does his "work," clicking and clacking, pushing buttons, scribbling, talking on his phone, tapping his finger on his chin while he mutters to himself and ponders the issue at hand, while I keep a close eye from my ground level position to keep track of critical developments.

A word on positioning. There's an old saying in DogSpeak, *Not too close. Not too far.* Simply put, your positioning is everything; you've got to get it right or you're nowhere, you're lost and without hope. Or as I always say, *Know where you are, know where you want to be.* (But I am off topic again here, I apologize; so no more on this for now because it's important to make sure the narrative keeps its flow, moving along at a lively pace.)

Now where was I. Oh yes, sitting under Harry's desk in perfect position for a *normal* morning (*not too close, not too far*) but unfortunately this is no normal morning. To my great dismay, Harry has to go out to some kind of meeting for which he puts on a "nice" shirt and stands at the mirror for several minutes eyeballing himself, running his hand through his shaggy hair and sprucing up his shaggy stubble.

I am upset. I am furious, actually. His departure, always painful, is completely unplanned, without warning. I would like to show my displeasure at the prospect of being left behind by doing something drastic like baring my teeth, but of course I don't. I whimper silently, imperceptibly.

My plan for the morning, once he departs (if he actually does depart, because I am hoping, perhaps irrationally, that he will decide to forget it all and take me for a long walk in the Brambles), is for:

- a. additional whimpering, sulking, and brooding,
- b. an extended session of staring intently at the front door coupled with
- c. intermittent kickie-scratching, nibbling, and wapping until
- d. he finally returns (if he does return), at which point
- e. all will be forgiven and I shall be overjoyed, once again, to see him, my *Hrah-ben*.

This was what I had planned. However, you must keep in mind that the Dog is a creature not only of *hrah* but also of several other nervous compulsions or *frah*, one of which, I'm ashamed to say, is barking. Please don't ask me to explain (or excuse!) dog barking. I can't. No one can. As far as I can tell, something gets triggered; an "intruder" steps across your mental-territorial tripwire and there you are, trapped within yourself, within your *frah*, emitting these loud, houndish (I am part beagle), thoroughly unpleasant sounds that you swore would never emanate from your doggish vocal cords, but there they are:

BURF BURF BURF BURF!

This is so embarrassing! To imagine oneself — and I like to see myself as a forward-thinking, progressive-minded Highly Civilized Being — locked into this mindless, primitive, *uncivilized* display, this complete and utter of lack of self-control. The very thought of it offends something deep and primal in me; I am ashamed, not only of myself but of all dogs, of the Dog species itself, and yet there I am, standing at the door of the living room, mindlessly yarping away at the UPS man down the hall trying to deliver a package (or some such), a sound so loud and disruptive and irritating that not only can no one nearby hear themselves think, I myself am also incapable of any organized form of thinking — when the door suddenly opens and in walks Harry, still sporting his nice shirt

with the colorful patterns, a big happy grin on his face. Surprise! He's apparently done with his "important" morning meeting and has returned, glad to see me, but unfortunately, his presence takes me so completely off-guard that rather than greet him with the delight I actually feel, I continue to be stuck in bark mode for several additional rounds.

BURF BURF etc.!

Harry, of course, fails to understand. He chastises, wags his finger and makes his customary disapproving *Stop-that!* face and *Unh uh* "no" sound, which I of course fail to respond to, then continues to admonish me to no avail, which finally, after what he deems a reasonable period of time, causes him to hit me with the crusher:

"Bad dog! Now stop it. Right this second!"

Now if I've gone to great lengths to describe the sheer delight we dogs take in praise ("Good Dog!!") from our "owners," you can multiply that by a factor of ten thousand and point it in the negative direction when it comes to the anguish and sheer terror we feel from a single pronouncement of "Bad Dog!" I am lost, mired in regret and sorrow, and yet, through it all, there I am, amazingly, still barking.

BURF! etc.

"What's with you, anyway?" Harry asks, genuinely puzzled.

A thought: is it possible I actually *am* a bad dog, unworthy of someone as kind, generous and full of tender goodness as Harry?

"What's wrong, little buddy?" he asks, taking me by the ears with deep affection, clearly more than ready to forgive and forget.

At which point my barking fit abruptly (finally!) subsides, only to be replaced by a ridiculous display of happiness in which I jump and lunge about in circles all over him as

if I'd accidentally grasped the frayed end of a live electrical wire, my tail vibrating at ultra-hyper triple-thrum lift-off frequency, overcome once again, with the pureness of the moment.

Ahh, the pureness of the moment.

I mention all of this just to give you a glimpse of what we dogs are forced to endure on a regular basis. While you sit at your desks, in front of your television sets, at your cafés reading your newspapers, placid and for the most part unperturbed and fairly imperturbable, we careen from one desperate moment to the next. As I said, it's all pain and worry, worry and pain, with a few chunks of jubilation and respite tossed in there every so often.

4. A few moments later we are out on the street, strolling down Amsterdam toward the park without a care in the world. It's a sunny day and Harry, still in his nice shirt, is jaunting along, as am I in my doggish four-footed way, strutting proudly down the sidewalk, nose up, tail elevated to E5 and fluttering merrily, like a flag in the wind, happy as a clam. A man and his dog: what better two-some in a logical and well-ordered universe?

Where are we going? Harry has decided to "blow off" the rest of the day, no more toiling at his desk, so it doesn't really matter. We wander a bit, first up the avenue, then down. At 110th we pause at the sculpture garden next to Saint John the Divine. Tour buses line up on the street for the cathedral while in here — a little flower-festooned enclave populated by whimsical sculptures of mermaids, dragons, etc. (with the occasional Albert Einstein or Charles Darwin tossed in) — assorted citizens on lunch

break sun themselves on the benches, sipping from paper coffee cups and nibbling on various food items.

I sit quietly. From my position under the bench (*not too close, not too far*) I stare intently at a pony-tailed young woman in sunglasses, baseball cap, and bike shorts, my eyes never drifting from the target: her chicken salad sandwich. Were it to leak, drip, or heaven help us! completely fall apart in her hands and spill its highly edible contents onto the ground I am ready to take advantage, I am ready to pounce. As I said, it's all about positioning.

Harry pays no attention. Without even a glance at the whimsical figurines, he pulls his laptop out of his backpack and takes a place on the bench so he can sit with a too-solemn look on his face and start in on some clicking and clacking. Meanwhile I'm conducting an N2 level nose-probe of my own. A preliminary two-sector scan informs me that there are at least three *actives* (canines) in the area from which I am downwind, but the signals I get are weak, suggesting none in this immediate locale. Then I detect something strong and quite unusual from the garden area. It's clearly a *biological*, but I'll need to search my memory banks thoroughly before I can identify precisely what it is.

You need to understand, when doing a scan the first thing a dog must ascertain when he/she picks up a live scent is whether it is *drem* or *udrem*. The *drem* are the friends. You know, most (but clearly not all!) of the dogs out there, plus a sizeable contingent of the Human population, e.g., Harry, Harry's friend Babs, who has a very nice smell, Mr. Boulem, the super, the nice lady in the frame shop who hands out liver treats, and many random others; the list is long, ever-changing and cannot be boiled down to a simple rule or principle, except perhaps:

Drem don't get barked at. *Udrem* do.

Udrem are the enemy, the non-friends, the prey, the strangers that live outside the circle of trust, those who provoke *udrah* (fear, hate) and become the targets of our barks and snarls and in the rarest of cases (for me, anyway), of being snapped at. Who are the *udrem*? Roughly speaking, I'd include most (but not all) cats, raccoons, rats, and sadly, some Human individuals as well. We will bark at these folks without hesitation and without probable cause, and keep barking until they back off, or better yet, vacate the premises completely.

How do you distinguish one from the other? Victor, of course, has done research in this area and maintains that there are two schools of thought. First, there are those who claim that a dog will bark (or not bark) before he/she knows who he/she is barking or not barking at. In other words, it's all *unconscious*. In this "bark first" view you essentially listen to your inner *frah* and say:

- a. I am barking, therefore this individual must be *udrem*. Or conversely:
- b. I am not barking, therefore this individual must be *drem*.

Though sometimes I swear I do begin barking even before I know what or who I am faced with, to me it's more simple than that and works more or less like this:

1. Doorbell rings.
2. Dog sniffs, listens, etc.
3. Dog decides: *drem* or *udrem* based on smell, posture, attitude, etc.
4. If *udrem*, -----> bark.
5. If *drem*, -----> no bark.

With all this said, there is also the fact that you never know about a particular individual, especially those who are members of the “maybe” groups, who may or may not be enemy. To name just one very prominent example, a squirrel is typically *udrem*, but in my experience some squirrels are highly sociable, and if you can get past their endless fidgeting and the ignorant-sounding *patois* they speak, can be downright *droll* and highly *drem* if you give them half a chance.

All this aside, this *biological* I’ve located near the sculpture garden near the cathedral in my probe appears to be neither *drem* or *udrem*, but something in between, something I had never actually encountered in real life before: a peacock.

A white peacock!

In the middle of New York City?

[to be continued, part of a longer work]