

Having a pet will be like a journey

When you bring a pet into your life, you begin a journey -- a journey that will bring you more love and devotion than you have ever known, yet also test your strength and courage.

If you allow, the journey will teach you many things, about life, about yourself, and most of all, about love. You will come away changed forever, for one soul cannot touch another without leaving its mark.

Along the way, you will learn much about savoring life's simple pleasures -- jumping in leaves, snoozing in the sun, the joys of puddles, and even the satisfaction of a good scratch behind the ears.

If you spend much time outside, you will be taught how to truly experience every element, for no rock, leaf, or log will go unexamined, no rustling bush will be overlooked, and even the very air will be inhaled, pondered, and noted as being full of valuable information. Your pace may be slower -- except when heading home to the food dish -- but you will become a better naturalist, having been taught by an expert in the field.

Too many times we hike on automatic pilot, our goal being to complete the trail rather than enjoy the journey. We miss the details -- the colorful mushrooms on the rotting log, the honeycomb in the old maple snag, the hawk feather caught on a twig. Once we walk as a dog does, we discover a whole new world. We stop; we browse the landscape, we kick over leaves, peek in tree holes, look up, down, all around. And we learn what any dog knows: that nature has created a marvelously complex world that is full of surprises, that each cycle of the seasons bring ever changing wonders, each day an essence all its own.

Even from indoors you will find yourself more attuned to the world around you. You will find yourself watching summer insects collecting on a screen. (How bizarre they are! How many kinds there are!), or noting the flick and flash of fireflies through the dark. You will stop to observe the swirling dance of windblown leaves, or sniff the air after a rain. It does not matter that there is no objective in this; the point is in the doing, in not letting life's most important details slip by.

You will find yourself doing silly things that your pet-less friends might not understand: spending thirty minutes in the grocery aisle looking for the cat food brand your feline must have, buying dog birthday treats, or driving around the block an extra time because your pet enjoys the ride. You will roll in the snow, wrestle with chewie toys, bounce little rubber balls till your eyes cross, and even run around the house trailing your bathrobe tie -- with a cat in hot pursuit -- all in the name of love.

Your house will become muddier and hairier. You will wear less dark clothing and buy more lint rollers. You may find dog biscuits in your pocket or purse, and feel the need to explain that an old plastic shopping bag adorns your living room rug because your cat loves the crinkly sound.

You will learn the true measure of love -- the steadfast, undying kind that says, "It doesn't matter where we are or what we do, or how life treats us as long as we are together." Respect this always. It is the most precious gift any living soul can give another. You will not find it often among the human race.

And you will learn humility. The look in my dog's eyes often made me feel ashamed. Such joy and love at my presence. She saw not some flawed human who could be cross and stubborn, moody or rude, but only her wonderful companion. Or maybe she saw those things and dismissed them as mere human foibles, not worth considering, and so chose to love me anyway.

If you pay attention and learn well, when the journey is done, you will be not just a better person, but the person your pet always knew you to be -- the one they were proud to call beloved friend.

I must caution you that this journey is not without pain. Like all paths of true love, the pain is part of loving. For as surely as the sun sets, one day your dear animal companion will follow a trail you cannot yet go down.

And you will have to find the strength and love to let them go. A pet's time on earth is far too short -- especially for those that love them. We borrow them, really, just for a while, and during these brief years they are generous enough to give us all their love, every inch of their spirit and heart, until one day there is nothing left.

The cat that only yesterday was a kitten is all too soon old and frail and sleeping in the sun. The young pup of boundless energy wakes up stiff and lame, the muzzle now gray. Deep down we somehow always knew that this journey would end. We knew that if we gave our hearts they would be broken.

But give them we must for it is all they ask in return. When the time comes and the road curves ahead to a place we cannot see, we give one final gift and let them run on ahead -- young and whole once more. "God speed, good friend," we say, until our journey comes full circle and our paths cross again.

by Crystal Ward Kent