

IN PRAISE OF PETS

We say we love them like we love family members or best friends, but it's our pets' uniquely *nonhuman* traits we truly should be thankful for. Read on and discover the quirks and qualities that we often take for granted but make our lives that much sweeter.

ILLUSTRATION BY MARQUITOS FARINA



Let us now praise our pets—not because they're game for long walks through the park, or because they look so adorable playing with their favorite toys, or because they snuggle up on the sofa with sincere affection. No, let's praise our pets this Thanksgiving season for something different, for something we didn't even expect to enjoy about them when we first took them into our homes. Let's praise them for being animalistic and *not* human.

"With our pets, we can let our guards down, be our raw

selves, and show them all our emotions," says veterinarian Gary Weitzman, president and CEO of the San Diego Humane Society, and coauthor of *How to Speak Dog* and *How to Speak Cat* (National Geographic, 2013, 2015). Be sad or envious; cry or laugh. Gloat. You can't do that even with a best friend. Unlike with people, we know our pets can handle us at our worst—without thinking any less of us. "That nonjudgmental presence is a tremendous boon to our emotional well-being,"

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says psychologist Megan Mueller, associate director at Tufts Institute for Human-Animal Interaction.

And who, besides our pets, can be there for our life transitions as a silent witness—emphasis on *silent*? Through all the celebrations, relocations, breakups, and career shake-ups? Not even siblings or spouses, who are prone, after all, to giving commentary (wanted or not). But our pets

are always by our side, waiting and watching. They can't offer advice—and that's exactly what's so wonderful about them. We can be by ourselves, yet not be alone. Which is why it's not too surprising that a study at Saint Louis University found that nursing-home residents who were treated to regular visits by dogs reported a greater decrease in loneliness when those visits were quiet time alone with the dog, rather than along with a group of people.

If your animal friend belongs to you, you're getting additional benefits that go paw-in-hand with pet companionship. "When you look back at all the landmarks in your life, you realize your pet was the constant," says veterinarian Wendy McCulloch, who operates an at-home concierge vet service in New York City. "I see a lot of people who move here from other places, and they're disconnected from their families," she says. "This little creature is their anchor."

Our pets encourage us to live in the moment and to make it a joyful one. Think of the last time you walked through the door and were greeted by a wagging tail. (In fact, an American Animal Hospital Association survey of more than 1,000 pet owners found that 78 percent reported being welcomed by their pets before their spouses.) Pets never question where you've been or complain about their days. They simply look up—happy you've arrived. Suddenly that miserable commute home (or other such annoyance) is long forgotten. Now *that's* something to be thankful for, each and every day. —Lindsay Van Gelder