

Can we live without cats? Interpreting and expanding on Ellson's question from a cat-lover's perspective[☆]

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Abstract

This commentary responds to Tony Ellson's, "Can we live without a dog? Consumption life cycles in dog-owner relationships" from the point of view of a cat owner and her cats. The author discusses cat-related consumption via a life-cycle framework and notes that consumption extends beyond basic food, veterinarian care, pet supplies, and pet services. Stories or vignettes emanating from subjective personal introspection reveal the complexity and intimacy of the cat-owner relationship and the plethora of needs and wants generated as a result of this relationship.

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1. Introduction

According to the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association, Inc. (APPMA), 38 million U.S. households own 91 million cats while 44 million own 74 million dogs (APPMA, 2006). U.S. pet owners spent an estimated \$38 billion on their pets in 2006 for food (40%), veterinarian care (25%), supplies and over-the-counter medicines (24%), and pet services, including grooming and boarding (7%). Less than 5% of the total expenditure went towards paying for animals themselves (APPMA, 2006).

How much and on what an owner spends for her pet depends to a large extent on where the pet and the owner are in the consumption-based life-cycle of their relationship (Ellson, 2008-this issue). Since consumption of pet-related goods and services reflects the values of the owner and what the owner thinks her pet would like, marketers of pet-related products improve their efforts by focusing on consumption activities of pets (Holbrook, 1987) and appeals should be value-based (Ellson, 2008-this issue). Besides, cats have yet to grasp the concept of going to the store to look at, try out, and purchase new stuff (Browne, 1999).

Using a subjective personal introspection (SPI) approach (cf. Gould, 1995; Holbrook, 1995; Woodside, 2006) within the life-cycle framework, this commentary expands on Ellson's dog-owner treatise from the perspective of the cat and the cat-lover. This framework allows for efficient classification of cat-related consumption activities in the few pages of this commentary. The commentary uses family-related terms (e.g., *Mama* instead of *owner*, *boys* instead of *animals*) to emphasize the intimate nature of the relationship.

2. Boo—my heart

The cats calling me *Mama* came to me at different stages in their lives. Boo, the first to enter my world was already an old man when he introduced himself to me. The life cycle of our relationship was compressed to just over a year and a half—approximately the length that Boo's lifespan was extended when he found me. This geriatric black cat showed up in my backyard just after Halloween of 2001, but not until Thanksgiving did Boo allow me to get close enough to see that he was very thin and also very clawless. In the months prior to meeting Boo I had considered getting a dog. After all, my family had always been dog people—you might even say anti-cat people.

But Boo stole my heart. He was helpless and he needed me. At first I put tuna fish on a paper plate and placed the plate and a bowl of water out on the back deck. Within a day or two, Boo had been promoted to store-bought dry cat food in his own

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store-bought dish. Within a week, he became an indoor kitty with all of its implications. Litter boxes and litter; wet food and dry food; soft toys and noisy toys; bowls and dishes; towels and blankets; a carrying crate, bed and scratching post—who knew that so many choices and decisions had to be made!?! The initial trip to the veterinarian meant shots and licensing and indicated the need for a special (prescription) diet more befitting Boo’s age, his kidneys and the reacquisition of his position in life as a housecat. Free cats aren’t cheap. But how do you put a price-tag on 4:30 am purring, kneading wake-up calls; sandpaper tongue, fish-breath kisses; spooky stares at things that aren’t there when you can’t remember if you locked the door; and melodious, mellifluous, melodic, melic me-ow? (Melly cat!)

Because Boo came to me so late in his life, he was always the easy-going mellow fellow. Boo seldom needed boarding unless he was ill. I usually just took him with me to visit the family and hired a house-sitter to feed, love, and clean up after him when my absences were longer than a day or two or when I went places that he couldn’t go with me. Boo was shy with strangers—except for one student who house-sat for me more than once—and he preferred to spend most of his day sleeping and grooming.

3. Sylvester—my soul

I first met Sylvester when he was Coal Miner and occupied the center square of the tic-tac-toe cages in the dog room at Boo’s vet. We don’t know what his real name was—Smokey, Shadow, Blackie? But he was such a good-natured kitty even though he spent approximately one-third of his young life in the midst of large, smelly, noisome, noisy dogs whose teeth and jaws were only a thin wire mesh away from making him a midnight snack. Perhaps he was grateful just to be rescued and to be alive. I was told that this fine, obviously well-bred, cat spent anywhere from two to three and a half weeks locked in an unoccupied house after his deceased owner was removed. They think a realtor or a relative found this once pampered cat alone, hungry and scared among overturned houseplants and ripped up cereal boxes in a vain attempt to find something to eat, not knowing when his Daddy would come home to feed him. After Boo died, I tried to replace him with Coal Miner who I briefly, and mistakenly, named Lazarus (as if Boo could’ve risen from the grave!). With new-found attention, peace, and security, the erstwhile Coal Miner cum Lazarus blossomed into the magnificent, but comical, Sylvester. Where Coal Miner/Lazarus was your basic young black cat with a dusty underbelly, the newly metamorphic Sylvester sported a complex black/brown/gray coat with a bushy black tail, black boots with white-gray whispers of a pedicure, a curly gray tummy, gray-white chest plate, and a conspicuous lion-king spiked gray mane or ruff—not unlike Elizabeth I, Leo of MGM or Clarence in Daktari. Sylvester’s resplendent countenance even stands out from the foliage whether he is on the ground or up in his favorite tree, as shown in Fig. 1.

Moreover, Sylvester speaks like a Sylvester. My big boy says everything *except* Meow, and he chirps and lips instead of gutturally articulating. Quoth Sylvester—and he needeth to quoth rather than to quote—“He-he, Ho-ho, He-oh, me-he, oh-



Fig. 1. Sylvester in the tree.

ah, me, me,” and so forth. (Think of the *real* Hummer—not the H2 or H3—with a high frequency Honda horn.) Sylvester is verbose and loquacious, to say the least, and I wouldn’t be a bit surprised if he were invited to pontificate at some resort destination as a distinguished scholar of lounging, grooming, and “I don’t give a damn that you had a blow out/lay off/divorce; where the &*&% is my food!” research.

If Boo was my heart, Sylvester is my soul. He is like a spirit that is always with me. I plan my life around him as if he were my only child.

4. Huey—my patient

Sylvester was required to make room for a little brother in the fall of 2003. I thought he might like company since I would be gone all day. I was wrong. Huey was the little black cat that came to us as an infant kitten. His full name is Huey P. Newton, as in the original Black Panther. Perhaps I should have named him Licorice instead. But Huey, Hoo-Hoo, Baby Hue or the Who all stuck. Someone found Huey in a dumpster when he was less than one week old, and he had maggots. Whether he was put there by his human or his feline mother is beside the point. As far as I know, poor little Huey underwent five or six operations before he was six months old—hence the short-lived nickname Franken-Kitty. The vet designated December 31, 2001, as Sylvester’s birthday and June 6, 2003, as Huey’s birthday. However, Huey was not allowed to come home to us until September, and even then he got a nasty bite that required surgery, stitches, antibiotics, a drainage tube, et cetera.

Since I felt so bad about the ordeals that my boys endured in their young lives, each was allowed to choose his own favorite chairs and windowsills, and each boy chose his own bedroom. A second cat necessitated duplicates of everything, including carrying crates. The second sink in my bathroom is Sylvester’s, and his plastic cup is kept there filled with water. Huey’s

favorite hidey-hole is inside the box springs of the bed in his room, while Sylvester likes to get on the top of the refrigerator during the day. Instead of a food dish and a water bowl, the boys have a feeding station complete with water tank, large dry food dispenser, at least two choices of snacks, and at least two choices of moist food (usually chicken or tuna, although they occasionally go for turkey, beef, salmon or duck.) Even with this abundance, the boys bring me gifts from time to time. They see me as their kitten that needs to learn to hunt. These little surprises—sometimes living, sometimes not—have included birds, squirrels, moths, frogs, geckos, lizards, and a few things that could only be inconclusively classified as animal, vegetable, or mineral.

Sylvester and Huey didn't directly use many of the things that Mama purchased or consumed in the introductory stage of our relationship. In addition to food, toys, veterinary services, et cetera, Mama made several large cat-related purchases. Most noteworthy among (but certainly not limited to) these consumption activities were: (1) doctor visits and emergency inhaler for the bedside table in case Mama's throat closed up in the middle of the night when everybody was up in the bed together; (2) purchase and installation of a cat door for easy entry and exit between food/toys/lounging spots and backyard; (3) more frequent cleaning service for rugs and furniture because of cat hair, dirt, and leaves brought in on the cats, the evidence of gifts and interlopers through the flap—including a raccoon, juvenile possums, a visiting cat and even a dog or two; (4) increased use of boarding because of #3; (5) a heavy-duty, strong suction, HEPA filter, anti-allergen vacuum cleaner which was traded in for a newer, stronger model fewer than two years after the first model was purchased; and (6) ionic air filter machines for the living room and each bedroom in the house. Let us also not forget to include all of the gifts that Mama's friends and family purchase for her now that they consider her to be a cat person. Probably as many as one in three gifts is cat-related—cat sweaters, cat ornaments, cat plates, cat mugs, cat bowls, cat frames, cat books, catalogs and catalogs of cat-related items!

5. Growing up, growing in

When establishing the pet-owner relationship, most ironing-out of relationship details occur in the first 6 to 12 months—much like the process between two adults entering a live-in relationship. The flurry of consumption behavior in the first year settles into habit in later years. When adopting cats that were rescued or just wandered up, the first year does not necessarily equate with the kitten/juvenile years. In the life cycle of the cat, the growth stage varies by breed. My Sylvester, a Maine Coon, could continue to grow until he is 5 years old. Your standard American shorthaired cat, like Huey, might mature in only one to 2 years.

The growth stage, youth and young adulthood, includes the best years of our friends' lives. No more needle-sharp teeth and claws. The boys are young and healthy and playful rather than needy or puzzling. We understand each other's needs and recognize body language and voice. When Huey wants to go outside, he stretches to reach the doorknob. If I ignore him or do not react quickly enough, he says, "Mama," in his sweet little

voice. Fig. 2 shows that as a kitten, Huey began the practice of reaching for the knob if he wanted to open a door—even if it was just a kitchen cabinet.

Huey does not like to be in the room with shoes if they have people in them, and he likes to smell and lick things to get a sense of what he is dealing with. Sylvester, on the other hand, bites and bats everything with his big forepaw—toys, new objects, Huey's face. Sylvester also has a wider vocabulary including tail switches, purring, chirping, hissing, and growling. When Sylvester is happy, his whiskers stick straight out so that his cheeks get round; his eyes close slightly and his purring is audible. Large, dilated eyes indicate fear or surprise. Both boys will flip over on their backs, like a dog, for chin or tummy rubs if they like you and trust you. Both boys love rolling around in leaves and dirt, climbing the fences, trees, deck furniture, or anything high. And both boys prefer to use the cedar shakes in the flowerbeds rather than the litter boxes.

Birthdays, Christmases and visits to the grandparents' house are special occasions to be enjoyed by all. Some day-to-day preferences are different. Sylvester enjoys new toys and gets high on catnip. On the other hand, catnip does not appeal to nor have any effect on Huey; he is addicted to television.

This year my boys were micro-chipped. The reasons and timing of this action are the result of the convergence of several factors. First, because of their vertical mobility, I don't want to put collars on the boys and then find they have hung themselves. Second, the 2004 and 2005 hurricane seasons were especially destructive and disruptive with many animals becoming displaced, killed, or lost. And finally, Mellow Yellow got chipped, so I had my boys chipped at the same time.

6. Mellow Yellow—my dinner guest

Mellow Yellow showed up in my yard with a nasty injury, and I suspect he stayed because he found a reliable food source. That's too bad for him. Two cats are my limit. First, I tried to put out humane traps because he was injured, he clawed my



Fig. 2. Huey at the door.

furniture, he ate my boys' food, and he sprayed around the house—both outside (my boys' yard) and inside (more cleaning bills). I caught every other cat in the neighborhood (except Mellow and Huey), a possum, a raccoon, and Sylvester (three times). This was about a three-month project. I finally enlisted the aid of others to help me catch and crate the yellow cat so that I could take him to the vet and let him be made owner-ready. After examination, medication, vaccination, neutering, declawing, boarding, and micro-chipping, Mellow Yellow was brought back to my house for recovery and to see if I could find a home for him. After a couple of weeks, he went back to the vet and was eventually adopted-out to a lucky home. *Lucky* because the new family probably had to pay the vet boarding or some nominal fee, say \$10, to take the cat home. My bill for Mellow Yellow was in excess of \$400—not counting food.

Each day I look forward to Sylvester and Huey greeting me and greeting the day. I hope that they continue to be healthy over the next decade or so and that I can provide a sensory-rich, yet secure, environment for my boys.

7. Maturity

Cats are seniors at 7 to 8 years-of-life—kind of like being eligible for AARP at 50 rather than at the Social Security retirement age or at the average life expectancy. As mammals, humans live on borrowed time after 30–35—we enjoy three times the life expectancy we should have as mammals because of our neoteny (Gould, 1981). Why should domestic indoor cats be subjected to the regular mammalian life expectancy? In other words, if cats are considered to be seniors at 7 years old and they can live into their twenties, why label your cat a senior at seven when he may have a dozen or more years left with you?

I have never owned a cat at this stage or age, and I'm looking forward to having the boys with me for a long time. I can't wait to see how this black box opens for us.

8. Decline and death

Boo arrived in his dotage, so naturally I doted on him. Someone had placed him on the iceberg to drift into obscurity, but he allowed me to help him enjoy an extra year-and-a-half of sensory experience. Boo didn't play, he rarely ate, and he never bit or clawed me. Boo only wanted peace, and we enjoyed a lot of quality time together.

Boo was always in decline. I rarely fed him anything but prescription or premium food, and I couldn't leave town for more than a day without someone checking on his status and contacting me. He never played, frisked, or did anything that my boys do on a daily basis (e.g., climb, kill or find a hidey-hole or potty). His favorite toy was a sock.

Every day in the life of a geriatric or terminally ill pet is precious, but most of what you do with him is related to medication, treatment, nutrition or elimination. Boo was my first, and he was a love. As shown in Fig. 3, Boo's picture and box of cremated remains—including his toy sock—occupy a central location on my mantle. On the box is a plaque that reads, "My Boo."



Fig. 3. My Boo.

No matter how long you've had a pet, the decline and death phase is not easy. The last night of Boo's life, he and I slept together on the floor of my bedroom. I put a layer of plastic below a layer of newsprint below my sleeping bag and Boo's towels. After a fitful night, we awoke early the next day. Boo was non-responsive, and he had been totally incontinent in the night; but his heart was beating, and I detected a shallow breath. The hard part for me was getting ready for work, wrapping Boo in a towel and placing him in his travel crate, arriving at the vet with a line of people behind me, having to sign off on his euthanasia, and writing a check for several hundred dollars in front of a bunch of strangers while blinded by my tears. They never allowed me to grieve. Everyone was in a hurry. (These people are no longer in business.)

9. Return to Ellson

In response to Ellson (2008-this issue), this commentary notes several similarities and differences between consumption life-cycles in dog-owner relationships and consumption life-cycles in cat-owner relationships. The life-cycle stages themselves—preparation for acquisition, acquisition/introduction, growth, maturity, decline, and death—and, in particular, the personality development and character revelation of the pet, form a common framework for examining pet-related consumption across species. Most of the observable differences between cats and dogs occur via life-cycle stages.

As with dog owners, cat owners learn to expect certain things about their relationships from actual previous pet ownership as well as from vicarious learning through stories imparted by family and friends. (Ironically, my experience with pets includes female-dog-only homes and male-cat-only homes—other stories.) Preparation for cat ownership differs from preparation for dog ownership. Although many dog lovers adopt strays or pound puppies, more often than not, people choose their dogs and cats choose their people. According to a 2000 APPMA survey (in Christensen, 2002), strays accounted for 29% of single-cat households and 43% of multiple-cat households. Cats know how to find the right homes.

The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals' Website (Salman et al., 1998 in ASCPA, 2006) provides statistics about cats and dogs that support the assertion that people choose dogs and cats choose people:

Less than 2 percent of lost cats and only 15–20 percent of lost dogs are returned to their owners. 15 to 20 percent of dogs are purchased from breeders, ...and two percent of cats and seven to eight percent of dogs are purchased from pet shops.

At least 20 percent of cats are acquired as strays.

Fewer than one in fifty lost cats is sought out, located, and returned to the owner. Fewer than one in fifty cats has been purchased at a pet store. On the other hand, a lost dog has one in five chance of being returned home, and one in five dogs owned has been purchased from a breeder. A dog is more likely to have been chosen and purchased or adopted. A lost cat must be returned, find a new home, become feral, or die. The ability to find a cat-friendly house has become a characteristic of cats' fitness for survival.

Dogs and people are omnivores; cats, carnivores. Dogs are pack animals and will imprint on the master as alpha dog; cats train their owners. The greater physical variation in dogs versus cats probably means they experience different needs, life expectancies and territorial requirements that result in consumption differences. Cats are territorial yet require less maintenance than dogs. They eat less food than most dogs (they are smaller, supplement the diet with hunting, etc.); they know how to but don't have to use a litter box; they don't need to be walked on a leash—regardless of the weather—and even the long-haired varieties of cats are mostly self-grooming. Although Sylvester enjoys the occasional bath and brushing, he doesn't require either.

Most other differences between Ellson's dog experiences and my cat experiences have to do with differences in our households. I don't have children or others living in my

household to consider in making choices for the cats, and I have purposefully limited the number of pets in the household to two of the same species. I became a cat owner by default, but now I don't know how I would live without them.

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