



Biophilia: A 90-Year-Old Artist and a Dog Named Joe

By Melissa McMath Hatfield, M.S., CBCC-KA, CDBC

Quickly into the phone call, it was clear that the caller was a senior; yet while the voice was still strong, there was a definite emotional undercurrent. She talked about her black and tan eight-year-old adopted dog named Joe. He had withdrawn from their daily routine. Instead of Joe being the center of her world, he was just orbiting it. Norma described it as a self-imposed exile. Listening to her describe his behavior was heartbreaking. The sense of loss for this relationship was tangible; add the isolation of COVID, and the situation was serious. This relationship needed to be repaired and fast...and by phone.

We were dealing with a dog that had acutely changed not only his routine, but his interactions with his owner. They had been a team, with him sitting in her lap while she watched TV or being her companion in her art studio—a 90-year-old artist living alone with a dog named Joe. They had had a system that worked for both, a loving and positive relationship.

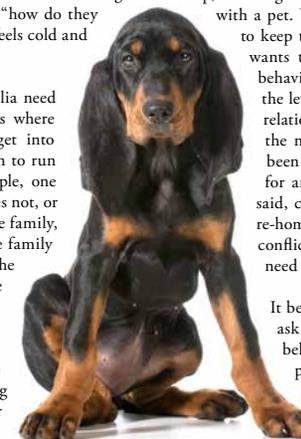
Why Joe's behavior changed so suddenly was secondary to the primary problem of the loss of the companionship; the need to repair and reestablish their emotional and physical connection was the primary concern. Exploring what happened to Joe and why his behavior changed should come readily enough. Addressing this issue from the relationship perspective was going to be the starting point. Biophilia was the underlying reason for the phone call for help.

Biophilia is “a hypothetical human tendency to interact or be closely associated with other forms of life in nature: a desire or tendency to commune with nature” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). It is defined as “a love of life and the living world; the affinity of human beings for other life forms” (Dictionary.com, n.d.). According to Maria McCain, “Biophilia is more than just a philosophy—biophilic design has been found to support cognitive function, physical health, and psychological well-being” (McCain, 2020).

Biophilia is the engine that drives the train of the canine-human relationship from the human's perspective; it is an innate need for companionship, to be surrounded by living things. We all know about the studies that have determined people who live alone with a pet have a better quality of life than those who do not. There is solid research about lowered blood pressure, reduced heart attacks, and reduced depression and anxiety. We know having a pet can increase physical activity as well as increase social connections.

The need to care for something alive, be it a cat, parrot, dog, fish, or plant, is a natural human trait. However, it is individual and personal. Although it is considered an innate need, it thrives on positive early experiences, the environment, and individual temperament. The intensity of this need varies among individuals. We have heard the stories or perhaps have known of a situation where a senior refused to go into residential care because they would not leave their pet. Or the family who takes their dogs with them whenever possible, regardless of the logistics and cost, overriding any thought of leaving their beloved pet behind. Conversely, for those of us who have devoted our lives to the study and training of dogs, we find it strange, almost surreal, to walk into a house with no pets. The sense that something is wrong is prevalent; we ask ourselves, “how do they live without a living entity?” The house feels cold and barren...at least to us.

When one person has a stronger biophilia need than another, conflicts can arise. That's where families, and especially couples, can get into trouble. In this field it is not uncommon to run across this tension routinely. For example, one pet parent wants a dog, but the other does not, or they can agree on bringing a dog into the family, but each has different expectations. One family member says yes, it can come inside; the other says no, it has to stay outside. One says yes, it can sleep with us; the other says no, it has to sleep in the laundry room. One says yes, it can go on the family vacation; the other no, it has to be boarded. And...the coup de grace, the dog has to go!...with the resounding counter



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response of, “over my dead body!” How do you, as a trainer or behavior consultant, reconcile these opposite feelings, needs, or attitudes?

Everyone has varying degrees of tolerance living with a pet and different frustration levels. The accident on the rug can send one person over the edge while the other just calmly cleans it up, chalking it up to one of the issues that comes with living with a pet. When behavior problems arise, does the desire to keep the dog still exist? If so, which family member wants to, and which one does not? As a trainer or behavior consultant, it would be important to assess the level of the desire to maintain the human-canine relationship. Is it still strong, or is it waning? When the need is no longer there or the relationship has been damaged beyond repair, a dire situation exists for any dog. The two R words, if not out and out said, certainly are floating around under the surface: re-homing or relinquishment. How do you reduce the conflict for one family member while supporting the need to keep Fido for the other?

It behooves us to be aware of this phenomenon and ask the questions on the biophilia questionnaire below; this can help you and your client sort out priorities and expectations of living with a dog and the responsibilities that go with being a pet parent. Many times, the trigger for

Biophilia Questionnaire

Biophilia is the human's innate desire to be around, live with, and care for other living things—in this case, dogs. This questionnaire is helpful for those who are considering bringing a dog into their family or for whom living with a dog is causing problems. It can help identify the root of potential conflict between family members. The phrase, "It's me or the dog!" comes to mind. This can open a dialogue for those who are at a stalemate; for example, one person is adamant that the dog has to go and the other wants to keep Fido. Although only 10 questions long, this questionnaire can quickly target and address problems or conflict between family members. Each family member must complete the questionnaire.

Please check one:

- | | |
|--|--|
| <p>1.] I have never owned a dog and have no intentions of ever doing so:
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> Unsure <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>2.] I have never owned a dog, but my significant other or child[ren] want one, so I will comply with that desire:
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> Unsure <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>3.] I had a dog as a child and enjoyed that experience but will not or cannot have a dog now:
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> Unsure <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>4.] I have always wanted a dog, and when the time is right, I will get one:
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> Unsure <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>5.] I have a dog, but when the time comes, I will not replace him or her:
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> Unsure <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>6.] I have owned dogs all of my life, and I cannot imagine living without one:
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> Unsure <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> | <p>7.] Dogs should have basic care, but their emotional needs are not necessarily a priority:
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> Unsure <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>8.] Dogs are considered a pet within the household, with their basic needs met; however, developing a strong relationship is not necessarily a priority:
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> Unsure <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>9.] Dogs should be considered a member of the family and be included in the daily activities:
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> Unsure <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>10.] Because of the capacity for a strong emotional attachment, dogs can be considered a friend, companion, and/or member of the family:
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> Unsure <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> |
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conflict or frustrations can be identified quickly by asking a few simple questions (see sidebar).

Case Study

During the initial phone call it became apparent that Norma was an experienced and intelligent pet parent. She was born in 1930 and received her first dog, Mitzie, a Rat Terrier during the depression era at the age of four and a half. After her first words of mommy and daddy, came pony. Clearly biophilia was established and nurtured early in her childhood development.

Dolly was Norma's first pony, followed by a lifetime of horses and canine companions. A puppy named Jill, a Toy Manchester given to her by her husband at great financial sacrifice, was a true gift. Later, Barnaby, a German Shepherd Dog, wandered into her family's life by arriving at her farm skinny, hungry, thirsty, and

badly in need of a home. And what a home he got. He lived the rest of his life with them and was loved and cherished. Barnaby died in Norma's arms. Next came Queenie, an injured Australian Cattle dog. There was Butch, the year-and-a-half old Boxer and Great Dane mix, who had been shot three times at close range; she described him as "a true gentleman." She nursed him back with the help of lamb's broth.

When she was three, Norma's parents gave her a two-sided blackboard on an easel where she began a life-long passion for drawing and creating. Parallel to her love of and care for both horses and dogs, she was a gardener, poet, painter, and sculptor. She is still actively pursuing these interests. Now, at age 90, she is still creating and sculpting with Joe at her side...or at least he was... until three significant events happened at the same time, which changed his life.

What happened to Joe? What was threatening their relationship? Why did he withdraw from his world?

Joe experienced three significant events close together. First, the carpet was taken out of the bedroom where he and Norma slept, and secondly, Annie, the other family dog, died. Lastly, an overnight stay at the hospital for Norma put Joe over the edge and in a downward cycle. He refused to leave his crate in the bedroom. No amount of coaching was able to budge him. It was a lucky arrangement that Norma had a door to the outside from her bedroom so he could come and go. Otherwise, he would have just spent the entire day in his crate. He had lived this way for approximately three months.

Joe was adopted from a shelter in 2013 at one year of age when Norma had an impulse to go to the animal shelter. In her unpublished autobiography, "A Good Ride," Norma writes, "A small black and tan generic dog, came over to the wire and pressed against it, so he could touch me...and began to tell me with his facial expression how terrible it was to be in a prison like that. He truly cried." This statement struck a chord as I have a phrase I teach my clients, "to listen with their eyes." This is obviously what Norma did. She responded immediately to the eye contact and listened.

Norma continued to describe in her autobiography that soon after adopting Joe they "took him away from home and brought him back. He'd never been taken away from a place before and brought back. To realize that this was home, and he could go away and return was a wonderful thing, and a great relief. In his doggie mind he thought, oh! This really is home. I can relax."

Protocol

Joe's rehabilitation protocol was simple and straightforward. It did not take much to identify the trigger for the acute change in his behavior. However, as with most traumatized and/or fearful dogs, even though the protocol was simple, it is not necessarily easy to do—to do nothing and let them recover at their own pace can be difficult. To do nothing is easier said than done.

Although Norma was prepared to let Joe heal at his own pace, we did manage his environment where he had to do something other than to just lie in his crate all day. Disengaged from the world, it had been months since he had left his crate and Norma was feeling the emotional pangs of missing her companion.

The plan was for Norma to move his food bowl topped with yummy slices of hot dogs away from his crate toward the door into the hallway every few days but only by a few inches. This was to be done slowly, very slowly. The goal was to keep him below threshold—don't make him feel pressured and again let him set his own pace. If she thought it was too much, she was to move the bowl back to a place closer to his crate where he felt more comfortable. This took about three months. Her patience and

diligence paid off. Once his food bowl was over the bedroom threshold and into the hall, Norma said he seemed to say, "the heck with it" and went into the kitchen and the living room. Over time he slowly worked up to being in Norma's lap but only when her daughter and her dog were there. Finally, he was into Norma's lap and back to their companionable routine. Everything was back to normal, the human-canine relationship re-established and thriving for them both!

Happy ending

Learning of Joe's self-imposed exile was heartbreaking. But having an experienced dog owner, with patience and dedication, Joe was able to be rehabilitated by following a simple and straightforward protocol. Norma closes her autobiography with a quote she loves by James Herriot. "Haven't I made a difference to this dog?" Yes, Norma, I believe you did. You are an excellent example of what miracles can happen when we are aware of and honor our innate feelings to care and nurture other living things. Biophilia at work! What are your clients' biophilia levels?



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