

NO CHRISTMAS PUPPIES, PLEASE!

by Ruth Ginzberg

To many people, a puppy is the perfect symbol of the true spirit of Christmas. A puppy represents wonderment, innocence, exuberant energy, unconditional love, hope for the future. These are the sorts of gifts that many of us wish we were able to give one another. And that is a good thing. In an increasingly violent, horrifying, mind-numbing and impersonal world, Christmas time reminds many that there are more important values, that there is hope and love, that joy comes from giving of oneself more than it does from taking. To many people, these values bring to mind the loyal, loving, uncorrupted, hauntingly simple innocence of a puppy.

Indeed, many advertisers and artists have noticed this connection. Images of cozy family Christmas mornings often include scenes of floppy-eared puppies peering innocently out of a colorful gift box, their eyes wide with wonderment and awe. As the scene continues, the puppy stumbles preciously over mounds of gift wrappings, to the great amusement of delighted children who rush to hug the youngster and receive big wet puppy-slurps in return. Mom and Dad smile knowingly in the background as the true meaning of life is celebrated before their eyes. What could possibly be wrong with this picture?

Nothing. As art, as fiction, or as advertisement, it captures a lot of the symbolic spirit of the Christmas celebration perfectly. The appeal of this scene is like that of Norman Rockwell's paintings. As advertisement, it works. It sells products, even those totally unrelated to dogs or to Christmas. As fiction it warms people's hearts. What's wrong, though, is what happens when real people try to re-enact this warm loving scene in their own homes with a real, living puppy playing the role of a prop in this mythic family life-drama.

I am not against dog ownership. I have two dogs myself, and I think the world would be a lot better place if more people had meaningful relationships with dogs. My concern here is with the future of those living beings, those adorable puppies with child-like eyes who show up as gifts on Christmas morning. While images like the one I described may look irresistibly appealing in pictures, art, advertising or fiction, the future for those real-life puppies who start out under the Christmas tree, in all probability, will turn out to be fairly grim. Groups as diverse as, and often at odds with one another as, the Humane Society of the United States, canine behavior experts, the American Kennel Club, PETA, Animal Rights Activists, breed rescue groups, veterinarians, obedience training instructors, and most reputable breeders of sound, healthy dogs, are in strong agreement that live puppies should not be given as Christmas gifts. Here are some of the reasons:

THE ATMOSPHERE OF CHRISTMAS MORNING FRIGHTENS THE PUPPY. People who study canine development and behavior have found that puppies, like children, go through developmental stages. The first fear/avoidance period in a puppy's development occurs roughly between 7-12 weeks of age. However this is also when the puppy is developmentally best capable of leaving its litter and beginning to form bonds of attachment with its new family. Most breeders agree that this is the right time to send a young puppy home with its adoptive family. However, it is also extremely important not to over-stress or unduly frighten the puppy during this vulnerable time. Fears learned during this first fear/avoidance period can be very, very difficult to overcome later, even with the very best training or behavior modification techniques. In other words, traumatic experiences at this point can have a permanent impact on your puppy's personality as an adult dog. Your puppy's experiences of leaving its mother and litter-mates, and its arrival in its new home and introduction to its new family, can permanently affect its ability to bond with and trust humans. The puppy needs to be introduced to its new home and family during a relaxed and quiet, gentle time, with a minimum of loud noises, flashing lights, and screeching children, ringing phones, visiting company, and other types of general hub-bub. Christmas morning is absolutely the worst time, in terms of the puppy's developmental needs, for introducing this newly-weaned youngster to its new family.

THE TIMING TEACHES CHILDREN THE WRONG VALUES. Many families who value pet ownership do so at least partly because of what children can learn from the family pets in terms of care and responsibility, love and loyalty, and respect for other living beings. But think of what happens to the rest of the toys and gifts that start out under the Christmas tree. By Valentine's Day, most of them have been shelved or broken or traded or forgotten. The excitement inevitably wears off, and the once compelling toy becomes something to use, use up, and then discard in favor of something newer. A living puppy should not be thought of in the same category as a Christmas toy. Children need to learn that a living puppy is being adopted into the family - as a living family member who will contribute much, but who will also have needs of its own, which the rest of the family is making a commitment to try to meet. A puppy who makes its first appearance as a gift item under the Christmas tree is more likely to be thought of by children as an object, as a thing-like toy rather than as a family member. This will not teach one of the most valuable lessons there is to learn from a puppy, which is respect for living beings and concern for others in the form of attention to their needs.

A GOOD BREEDER WILL NOT SEND A PUPPY HOME ON CHRISTMAS MORNING. Responsible breeders - those who guarantee the health and temperament of their puppies, and who are abreast of current knowledge about canine health, genetics, socialization and development - already know these things and will not send a puppy home with its new owner on Christmas morning. If you were to be able to obtain a puppy from someone who actually let you have it on Christmas Eve so that it could appear under the tree on Christmas morning, that should tell you something. It should warn you that you would be getting your puppy from someone who does not know enough about canine behavior and development to be in the business of breeding or selling puppies. You would be much better off acquiring your newest family addition from a breeder who knows enough about dogs, and who cares enough about the particular puppies that he breeds and places, to insist that you take the puppy home under conditions which would be best for the puppy. If your breeder does not insist on this, you are purchasing a puppy from a breeder who does not know or care enough about his "product," to be in that business, and you should acquire your pup from someone else instead.

THE PUPPY GROWS UP AND HAS NEEDS. Many people have a somewhat romantic view of what dog-ownership is like. This romanticism can become exaggerated by the warmth and loving kindness associated with the Christmas season. People who have not had dogs before, or who have not had dogs since they were themselves children, or who have recently had a dog but one who was a canine senior citizen trained and socialized to the family's ways long ago, often are completely unaware of how much work it is to raise a puppy from infancy into a good adult canine companion. They may have mental images of happy times romping with the dog on the beach, or curling up in front of the fireplace, of playing frisbee in the park or of hunting with a loyal companion. All these are things they might well eventually enjoy with their canine companions. But they may have temporarily forgotten, or perhaps not ever really have known, how incredibly much work it takes to raise and socialize a dog from puppyhood to that point of mature canine companionship. Unlike cats, who generally do not need extensive training and socialization, dogs require a huge commitment from at least one person who is prepared to teach the dog what behaviors are expected of him, under a wide variety of circumstances. Adults may believe that they remember a Faithful Fido from their youth who seemed never to need training; Faithful Fido always seemed to "just know" what was expected of him. But those adults were children at the time, and they did not necessarily see all the work that their parents and others put into training and socializing Fido.

Professionals who deal with dogs regularly, call this common fantasy the "Lassie Syndrome." That is, everyone hopes for that imaginary dog who has E.S.P. and who automatically knows how to behave in human company without needing any training. In other words, they want a dog like "Lassie." But "Lassie" was a fictional character. "Lassie" actually was owned and trained by Rudd Weatherwax, one of the most hardworking and successful professional trainers of dogs in the history of US television and film. Rudd Weatherwax spent his entire lifetime training "Lassie" to do those things which looked spontaneous in the fictional story lines. No real, non-fictional dog is actually like that. Real dogs not only must be housetrained - most owners are aware of that need; they also must be taught not to chew the furniture, taught not to jump on their owners, taught not to play-bite, taught not to bowl over the toddler, taught not to dig holes in the yard, taught to come when they are called, taught not to eat the homework or the woodwork, taught not to swipe food off the table, taught not to growl at strangers or bark at the mail carrier, taught to walk on a leash without dragging their owner down the block, taught to allow their toenails to be cut and their coats to be groomed without biting the groomer, taught not to

shred feather pillows and down comforters, taught not to steal the baby's toys, taught not to growl at their owner's mother-in-law, taught to sit, stay, and to lay down when and where the owner tells them to, and to wait there until the owner says they may get up (absolutely essential commands for the dog's own safety), taught not to escape out the front door or out of the yard or out of the car when the owner looks away for just a second ... all of these things and many more are not "natural" canine behaviors; they must be taught by owners who are willing to spend the time and the effort doing so.

The reason I mention this is because lack of owner knowledge about the amount of work required to socialize, raise, and train a puppy, is one of the main factors contributing to a huge national problem: the problem of adolescent and young adult dogs being "given up" by owners within the first year or so of having acquired the animal. Untrained, unsocialized puppies might be "cute" and "natural" but they are tolerable only for a few weeks, if even that. Then they start to be nuisances. Then they start to be major problems. Sooner or later they become downright dangerous to themselves or to their families and neighbors. It is often between the ages of 7-14 months that the dog (sadly, reluctantly) is brought to the pound or to the vet for euthanasia by a frustrated owner as an "uncontrollable" dog, or as a dog with "behavior problems." Or perhaps it is taken to a shelter in the faint hope that it will be adopted by someone else. (Chances are almost certain that it won't; nobody else wants an untrained, unsocialized dog's behavior problems either.) By that age the untrained dog is a full-grown and unruly adolescent. It might have bitten a family member, or threatened a neighbor's child, necessitating the involvement of a town animal control officer. Or the dog may have run away and been hit by a car. Or it may be adopted into a series of homes, one after another, none of which can adequately control it, until it finally winds up on death row at the pound. These tragic dogs, those wonderful canines known to generations as "Man's Best Friend," never had a chance. According to statistics kept by the Humane Society of the United States, the majority of puppies and kittens born in the United States never reach their second birthdays, even though their natural lifespans should be many times that length. They die from being hit by cars, euthanized by owners, starving or being fatally injured in fights with other animals - including wild animals, some rabid in many areas - after having run away from their owners, or being taken to shelters, pounds or vets, where they are "put to sleep," usually before the age of two. In other words, many, many canine deaths are squarely the responsibility of owners who did not understand what it would involve properly to train and socialize their puppy, or who did understand, but did not do the necessary work. "Christmas puppies" often are impulse purchases, in a spirit of love and giving and generosity that goes with the season, but without the hard self-assessment that goes into asking oneself if one has the time and the energy and the inclination to give the necessary commitment to raising and socializing and educating that puppy. Better to get that new puppy at a less emotionally charged time of the year, when the decision to add a dog to the family is a less impulsive and more carefully considered one, uninfluenced by seasonal generosity of spirit, which might just fade a bit after the tree comes down and the lights are put away.

If you are absolutely set upon getting your family a puppy for Christmas, consider this alternative instead: Purchase a leash, a collar, a good book on raising a puppy, a gift certificate for a veterinary checkup, a gift certificate for puppy socialization classes from one of the local obedience instructors, a book or video tape on the topic of how to select the right dog for your family (there are several, including even a computer program that purports to help you do this), or a gift subscription to one of the dog-oriented magazines. Wrap these up and put them under the tree. As family members unwrap the various pieces of the "puzzle", their delight and anticipation will grow. They will gradually understand what this present is! Then, after the Christmas tree is taken down and the frenzy of the holiday season is behind, the family can once again enjoy together the anticipation and excitement of discussing and selecting a breed, selecting a breeder, selecting an individual pup, and so on. This will increase the family's mutual commitment to, and investment in, the well-being of the newest family member. It will be a project the family has done together, which is a wonderful way for any adoption to commence. This will not decrease the enjoyment of your new puppy; I guarantee it. It will increase it by many fold. And it will be a better start both for the puppy, and for the long-term relationship between dog and owner(s). A dog with a good introduction to its adoptive family is much more likely to become a long term companion rather than just another tragic statistic.