

Chapter One

Lessons of Unconditional Love and Friendship

By Mary Key, Ph.D.

“In loving Flora (my cat), I knew I would find a way to love myself as well.”

Susan Chernak McElroy

True power comes from loving unconditionally. Our churches tell us this, proponents of psychological health advocate it, and couched in a mixed message, our society instructs us to love others as we would love ourselves. The difficulty comes in actually doing it.

In contrast, animals have an uncanny ability to release us to love unconditionally without uttering a word. It is often through beloved family pets or strays along the way that we as humans trust enough to let down our guard and love the furry creatures that give to us so freely.

Through our connection with pets we grow spiritually, for it is often an animal’s love that teaches us to love ourselves first. Their friendship offers an opening to see ourselves more gently and more compassionately. As children, many of us would seek the solace of our family dog or cat as our “friends” taunted us. As adults, we understand that not wearing make-up or not having money to spend means little to the cold wet nose or feathered wings brushing up against us.

We can learn how to love ourselves unconditionally through our pet’s example. One of the most profound of what I call “life lessons” is unconditional love. Through our friendship with our companion animals, we discover the essential lesson: that we are all connected through love.

A Second Chance at Love

George's eyes glazed over as he talked about Deacon, or Dec, as he was affectionately known. Dec was a black, fuzzy terrier with round, loving eyes and a knack for warming hearts. He was George's best friend for 12 years, and over those twelve years, they developed many second-nature routines that kept them close, not only physically, but also at heart.

Every night, Dec snuggled up to George for about a half hour as if to say, "I just need a little affection," and once he got his nightly dose, he was satisfied with sleeping at George's feet. Every morning, no matter what, Dec beat George's alarm clock by five minutes for one more dose of nuzzling before they began their daily routines—one of which consisted of Dec waiting outside the bathroom door while George showered. Every once in a while he might let out a little whimper, just to say, "I'm still here." But other than that, he waited—patiently and quietly. Once the waiting was over, he sprung excitedly to his feet when George headed to the kitchen for "their breakfast."

Though the routines George shared with Dec became standard practice, George never took them for granted. In fact, his friendship with Dec sustained George through some hard times in his life and in his marriage. There were times that George felt lonely during these trials—there were even times he felt uneasy about coming home. But every night, rain or shine, dark or light, Dec was outside the door to faithfully welcome George home.

During dinner, if George's wife, Julie, made steak—not one of George's favorites—George would sneak some to Dec when Julie wasn't looking. This was George and Dec's little secret, and Dec was good at keeping it hidden. After dinner, George always took Dec for his nightly walk. This gave George the chance to unwind and think, and though he may not have

spoken aloud to Dec, George knew that Dec understood his thoughts . . . his emotions. He could feel it through Dec's connection.

One day George noticed that Dec was moving a little slower than usual. He didn't seem as enthusiastic about going for a walk. Dec was very lethargic. He didn't want to play, his eyes weren't as bright, and he simply wasn't himself. Julie also observed that Dec was starting to sleep more during the day while George was at work. They both felt that Dec needed to get checked out by the vet ahead of his annual exam. Just as Dec understood George, George knew right away that something was wrong with Dec. The vet wasn't immediately sure what was taking Dec's energy, but he did show concern. He wanted to run some immediate tests and proceed with whatever medical procedures might be necessary. George felt the burning in his heart. Though he didn't want to think the worst, there was an underlying flow of fear that raced through him, uninvited.

The vet called to let George know that the tests "weren't good." George asked, "What do you mean? What's wrong?" The doctor explained that there were some abnormalities in the blood work, x-rays, and physical exam. The doctor didn't want to make a final diagnosis until further research was done. The doctor kept Dec for the rest of the night and scheduled exploratory surgery for the following morning.

That night it was rainy and cold. George and Julie had a fire going as they sat together in the living room reading the newspaper. George was having a hard time concentrating as the wind cried in the background. Suddenly, the fierce wind blew the unlocked front door open and a wet black animal burst into the living room. At first George thought it was a rat, but it turned out to be a young black cat, soaking wet from the downpour.

George and Julie approached the frightened animal and talked to it gently. "Don't be

scared,” they said. Their calming voices eased the animal, as it let them dry it off as best they could with an old blue towel. They fed the young female cat some leftover meatloaf and milk. She seemed content to sleep by the fire, and neither George nor Julie wanted to put her out. The storm was the logical reason, but both enjoyed the presence of an animal that night. They so missed Dec and the cat somehow helped them feel closer to him.

The next morning, the cat jumped on George and Julie’s bed and began to lick George’s hand about five minutes before the alarm. George was so preoccupied with Dec that he hardly noticed as his new friend waited outside the bathroom while he showered.

When the phone rang later that morning, George leapt to answer it. He was hoping it was the vet calling to let him know how Dec was. His hopes were correct. As the doctor calmly explained that surgery revealed that Dec’s body was filled with cancer, George doubled over. The shock of the news was almost too much for him to bear. The doctor then advised euthanizing Dec. Although George knew the doctor’s advice was sound and logical, it was the hardest decision George had to make. He stayed home from work that day. George has his own painting business and has customers within a 50-mile radius of his home. Both he and Julie went to the vet’s office to say good-bye to their little friend. That night they cried as they looked at pictures of Dec and reminisced about their beloved dog.

Before they retired for bed that night, the black cat nuzzled with George for about 30 minutes and then slept at George’s feet. The next morning she again waited patiently outside his shower. George shook his head and thought he must be imagining this coincidence.

George found it incredibly difficult to make it through work that day. Flashes of Dec distracted him as he somberly painted a newly renovated stucco house. He caught himself tearing up as he remembered his faithful friend. Dec’s smiling brown eyes seemed to follow George as

he tried to make it through the day. George longed to pet his loving pal one more time and feel the texture of his black fur between his fingers. “Dec is gone and I won’t see him again,” George thought. George sobbed all the way home.

That evening, George returned home later than usual. His continual thoughts of Dec made the job go slower, so he had to stay later to finish. Plus, the thought of pulling up into the driveway and not seeing Dec made his heart ache even more. When George drove up, however, he was amazed to see the black cat in the carport sitting there on the same spot as Dec used to. Julie served steak that night, and the cat and George shared it.

“This is incredible!” George exclaimed. “Who is this animal?” George and Julie named the cat Spanky. Spanky continues to perform these rituals now for ten years, including the walks.

When I asked George what he learned from this, he said, “I got in touch with God again. First, I learned that Dec loved me unconditionally and he was always there for me. Having Spanky enter our lives was like God and Dec got together to make sure I continued to love and open myself up. The miracle of it all changed my life—and Julie’s too.”

This “life lesson” would seem unlikely were it not absolutely true. George’s dog helped him to love himself more, and the miracle of Spanky’s presence continues to teach George about love. Both George and Julie are closer today because of their pets’ devotion and unconditional love.

The Human/Pet Connection

The latest survey from the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association found that about 59 percent of American households own some kind of pet. In addition, one study of 122

families published in the *Journal of Mental Health Counseling* reported that almost one-third of subjects felt closer to their dog than to any other family member. The human animal bond is such a powerful one and clearly, pets are an essential part of the changing family unit. Just as children learn about love from friendship and their parents, people of all ages are rediscovering this lesson through their furry, scaled or feathered friends.

In his book *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Milan Kundera points out that the love between pets and humans is unconditional and completely selfless. You don't try to make a companion animal over in your own image. You don't say, "If she would just be witty at dinner parties, I could love her." You don't wonder, "Do I love him more than he loves me?"

Animals are a link to happiness and understanding. Our pets don't know hate or jealousy or spite. They don't know the difference between fat or skinny, beauty or ugly, physically fit or disabled. Our pets accept us for who we really are—imperfections, limitations, and all. And that is the true test of love. Being with companion animals satisfies our need for intimacy, nurturance and contact with nature. Most of all it fulfills our desire as humans to be in the presence of a living creature who loves us without stipulations. As a result, the love and friendship animals offer play an important role in our well being.

Boris Levinson, an American child psychiatrist, has conducted some of the more notable research regarding the human-pet relationship. Levinson believed that pets could enhance people's emotional development directly by acting as constant sources of companionship, comfort and security during periods of alienation, rejection or crisis. It was this capacity to offer unconditional affection and support that Levinson saw as the key to the animal's importance and connection with humans.

Among the first to put Levinson's theories to the test were a husband and wife team of

psychiatrists at Ohio State University: Sam and Elizabeth Corson. The doctors selected 50 withdrawn and uncommunicative patients and allowed them to choose a particular dog to interact with. By the end of the study, three patients withdrew from the test. According to the doctors, the pets helped the remaining 47 develop self-respect, independence and self-confidence. The pet acted as a social catalyst, forging positive links between the patient and others, thus creating a widening circle of warmth and approval. The Corsons believed the dogs were able to induce such changes by providing patients with a special kind of non-threatening, non-judgmental affection. [Serpell, 1986] It is this kind of affection that makes pets so valuable and supportive to people.

To better understand how the human-pet bond develops and the sheer strength of it, consider for a moment the quick bond between pets and humans that often takes place. When you get a new puppy, kitten, bird, or hamster, you often feel an immediate intimacy. Many people reveal that they kiss, hug and cuddle their new pet upon the first meeting. Unlike the bond that takes place between humans, the human-animal bond requires little or no courting or “getting to know you” phase. Since there’s no need to impress the pet, people instinctively let their guard down and form a quick and long-lasting bond with the pet. Often, no matter what happens from that day on, the bond doesn’t diminish. It’s as if you have an immediate base of trust that allows you and your pet to communicate on unspoken levels.

Love at First Sight

Skeezers was Kathryn’s best friend. Kathryn adopted the long-haired, gray and white, tiger-striped cat from a friend who was moving to another state. Weighing in at eighteen pounds, Skeezers had long fur that made her look even larger. When Kathryn first saw her, it was “love at first sight.” Her initial instinct was to reach out and touch this gentle giant of a cat. Although

Skeezers' former caretaker thought the cat's constant purring was an annoyance, Kathryn saw it as part of Skeezers' charm.

Kathryn is a single professional woman who has lived with several cats over the years; however, Skeezers was the one that taught her most about unconditional love. She quickly learned just how deep that love could be and how much affection one cat could offer.

When Kathryn would come home from a hard day at work, Skeezers would greet her at the door, acting as if all she lived for was to love her human companion as much as she possibly could. Skeezers would brush up against Kathryn's leg and purr as if to say, "Welcome back. I've missed you." With Skeezers' generous outpouring of love, Kathryn couldn't help but reciprocate the affection to her adoring cat. Kathryn and Skeezers would often sit snuggled up on the peach-colored living room couch together as Kathryn watched a movie or read the newspaper. Remarkably, Skeezers was not discriminating with her affection. All who visited the house received a display of love and enthusiasm. This taught Kathryn the importance of making everyone feel welcome in her life.

Because of the pressures of Kathryn's customer relations position, she often felt as if she had nothing left to give to others outside of work. She would routinely come home stressed and worn-out. She felt that her efforts at work weren't always appreciated. This made her feel alone and drained on many days. Like a lot of us, she sometimes felt her job was thankless. But after cuddling with Skeezers for a few moments or watching the cat roll on the floor, her mood would quickly perk up. Her cat's displays of affection would soon have her asking herself, "Is the tenseness and irritability I'm feeling really worth it?" And on those days that were so stressful that Kathryn would come home crying, Skeezers would come over and attend to her as if to say, "I'm here. No matter how bad things seem right now, they'll be better soon." Her cat's playful

antics and desire to lighten her mood taught her the importance of companionship and loving others. She soon found that no problem was insurmountable as long as she had the caring attention of her practical pet.

Kathryn strove to imitate her pet's approach to life. Skeezers was a cheerful, positive companion who never fussed or showed displeasure of anything, except when she was getting a bath. Skeezers seemed to accept Kathryn for who she was and loved her unconditionally. Thanks to Skeezers' love and personality, Kathryn learned that each day should be enjoyed as if it were her last. Living this way has made her a better friend to both animals and people. It has also made her more appreciative of the inherent gifts each creature on Earth has to offer.

Through caring for Skeezers, Kathryn understood how hung up the human psyche can get on the little things that really don't matter. Her cat's unconditional love helped her let go of the trivial matters that she would routinely dwell on, such as getting cut off in traffic or encountering a rude person at work. Her cat's ultimate message was to focus on what is really important in life, namely to love and be loved.

Skeezers died on June 2 due to kidney failure. Although she is gone, Kathryn still lives her lesson of love every day. Thanks to Skeezers, Kathryn smiles more often and laughs louder than she ever had in the past. Whenever she feels weary, down or like she needs a friend, Kathryn pictures Skeezers curled up beside her and gains strength from her memory. The love she received from Skeezers taught her how to love not only others, but also herself.

The Companionship Factor

The companionship pets offer is often reason enough for their presence in the family. In fact, in one study conducted by *Psychology Today*, eighty percent of the pet owners surveyed

revealed that they receive more companionship from their animals than from friends and neighbors, and they view their pets equal to family members and relatives in importance. Even more remarkable, in every single survey of pet-ownership that has ever been conducted, the vast majority of owners have given “companionship” or “friendship” as their principal reason for keeping a pet.

James Serpell, author of *In the Company of Animals*, believes that companion animals have the capacity to “reconnect people with the outside world by breaking down the vicious circle of nonverbal misunderstandings that surrounds them.” He goes on to explain that pets may be providing people with a special kind of emotional support that is lacking in traditional relationships between people.

I believe this kind of emotional support is a mix between relief and connectiveness. The love and friendship our pets give us relieve the stresses of the everyday world. No matter how bad a day we have at work, how awful traffic is or how insurmountable the pressures of life become, merely being with our pets and knowing they are genuinely happy to see us connects us to a simpler way of life—a way where love and friendship take top priority over deadlines and meetings.

Breaking Down Emotional Walls

Tom always felt that he would be the last person on Earth to have a dog. Tom grew up in Queens, New York, and his wife Jean in Brooklyn. Because of their city lifestyle, neither of them ever had a pet while growing up. The tall skyscrapers and crowded apartments left little room for an animal of any kind. Even as adults and raising kids of their own, pets were never a part of picture because of their hectic schedules and focus on their careers. There were always business

deals to negotiate, meetings to conduct, and school plays to attend.

Growing up, Tom's family was poor and didn't have a lot of resources. This made him envy those who had money, and as he got older, he became more and more determined to succeed. Both Tom and Jean were entrepreneurs and at the time owned a direct marketing business together. As head of the company, Tom would stop at nothing to get his way. If he didn't get what he wanted, he'd be "in your face."

Being very success-driven, Tom was ruthless. He would often reprimand subordinates and was very Machiavellian in his approach toward people in order to get what he wanted. For a good part of his life he had no spirituality, no business morals, and few ethics. He would do whatever it took to be successful, at almost any cost.

An enthusiastic and energetic 12 pounds of unconditional love, Tara was destined to change Tom's life. Tara was a black, "peek-a-poo" (peek for Pekinese and poo for poodle). For his 49th birthday, Tom's youngest daughter Lisa presented Tara to him as a present. But knowing her father, she was smart enough to add, "Dad, this is your birthday present, but if you decide you don't want to keep Tara, I will." After giving it some thought, Tom decided to try life with a pet on a day-to-day basis. The thought of walking, grooming, and feeding a dog seemed an intrusion to his bottom-line oriented life.

During the next few months, a transformation occurred. Jean began noticing changes in Tom. She was astounded one day when Tom didn't overreact to a mistake a staff member made that resulted in a customer taking business elsewhere. She watched as Tom, with Tara in his lap, calmly questioned the employee about what happened and offered ways to correct the error in the future. He never raised his voice, surprising everyone in the office, including Tom.

That was the day Tom noticed this difference in himself. Looking back, Tom realized that

Tara made him feel a new kind of love—one that was unselfish and unconditional—and her presence softened his heart. Tara would often lie across his feet, and Tom felt she could sense and read his moods. One time when Tom was very sick with the flu, Tara would lie at his side throughout the day and night. She ate by his bed and refused to leave his side. Tara nuzzled him and licked his burning cheek with soothing wet kisses.

The more Tom experienced Tara's unconditional love, the more sensitive he became toward people and animals. “Thanks to Tara, I opened my heart to God again,” says Tom. “I find myself wanting to thank God for her presence. Not since I was an altar boy did I feel any spirituality in my life.” As a result of Tara’s love, Tom started praying again and connecting with other people in the spiritual community. He asserts that Tara’s love helped him discover a whole new dimension to his life. It is Tara’s unconditional love and acceptance that has taught Tom the importance of love and caring for others.

Today, Tom and Jean have six dogs, two cats, and two miniature donkeys. They routinely adopt older dogs who don't have a home. Rather than striving for financial gains, Tom’s new dream is to start a type of convalescent home for aging dogs. Both he and Jean believe that aging dogs have so much to give and are often overlooked by those seeking loyal companions.

Tara has now passed on, but Tom and Jean have kept her memory alive by donating a run at Best Friends Animal Sanctuary called “Tara's Run,” where dogs at Best Friends can work out and be trained. “Tara’s Run” is a roofed enclosure that also serves as a “get acquainted” area for people who are thinking about adopting a dog. The gift that Tara gave Tom—the ability to love unconditionally—has made animals have a special place in his life forever.

Endless Love

All her life, Fran wanted to be a mom. As a child, she would “mother” her baby dolls and dress them up. She carted them around in their stroller as if they were living, breathing babies. Throughout her teen years and early 20s, the image of being a mom one day stayed with her. By the time Fran was 30 years old, she had dated a lot, but never found “Mr. Right”—the man with whom she wanted to spend the rest of her life and raise children.

Shortly after turning 30, however, Fran met Dennis, a handsome man with brown hair and sparkling blue eyes. Fran immediately fell for Dennis’ warm personality. His sincerity and sense of humor were a welcome addition into Fran’s life. In Dennis’ arms, Fran felt safe and loved. The two had much in common—they both enjoyed the outdoors, cycling, good Italian food, and working out. Fran and Dennis soon fell in love and talked of marriage.

Despite all their similarities, the couple had one important difference. Dennis, who was ten years older than Fran, had been married before and had a son from that marriage. When the two began talking of raising a family of their own, Dennis expressed a lot of doubt about having more children. Even though he loved Fran dearly and wanted to do everything possible to make her happy, he did not want to become a parent again.

Fran had an important decision to make. She could either stay with the man she loved even though he didn’t want to fulfill her lifelong dream of becoming a mom, or she could leave Dennis and continue her search for the man who would one day be the father of her children. Because she loved Dennis so much, she decided to marry him without resolving the issue of whether or not to have children. Luckily, as their marriage progressed, the two were so happy with their life together that they ultimately decided not to pursue having a family together. Fran was content being a step-mom to Dennis’ son Brett, and she didn’t want a baby or anything else

to disrupt the new family they had formed. They had a routine in their lives that worked for them

On Christmas Eve of 1998, however, everything changed. Fran went to the gym and Dennis took a long run. It was a cold afternoon, and as Dennis ran along the sidewalk, about a half-mile from the gym, he noticed a small black dog that was obviously lost. Still a puppy growing into his feet and his tail, he looked like a combination of black lab and Doberman. The puppy had no collar, and he was obviously cold and hungry as he stood there shivering. The desperate look in his eyes begged Dennis to help him.

Dennis stopped, and the dog immediately came to him. As Dennis began to walk, the dog followed, and by the time he got to the gym, he and this black dog with loving eyes had bonded. Dennis knocked on the gym's glass window to get Fran's attention. When she noticed him outside knocking, she walked over to where he was. Dennis then held the dog up so Fran could see. When she saw her husband's new companion, she came running out.

"Who is this?" was Fran's first question. Dennis explained how he met the dog and said that he wanted to keep it. Fran was against the idea. Having a dog was never part of her plan. They had decided not to have children because they both liked their freedom, and Fran didn't want to be saddled down to any responsibilities. She tried making those points to Dennis, but he still insisted on keeping the dog.

Finally Fran said, "I know that I'm going to wind up caring for this dog, Dennis. This is simply too much responsibility now." Dennis said nothing. Fran could see the disappointment in his eyes. The look he gave her tugged at her heartstrings and she gave in to a compromise. Fran agreed to take the dog home to find its owner. Dennis was pleased.

Just as they were leaving the gym, a little boy came up to them and said they should name the dog "Lucky." Dennis agreed, and he and Fran brought Lucky home. They immediately

called the humane society to see if anyone had inquired about a little lost black dog. They also posted flyers and put a lost and found notice in the paper. Despite all their attempts, no one claimed the little dog.

During this time Fran became accustomed to having Lucky in the house. She found herself actually looking forward to seeing him, and she started to thoroughly enjoy their daily walks and playtime sessions. She soon found that thoughts of Lucky occupied her mind constantly and the dog began to fulfill those then dormant maternal instincts. In fact, the more she began caring for Lucky and receiving his love in return, the more she wanted to make him a permanent part of her life. Two months after bringing Lucky home as a temporary guest, Fran and Dennis made the decision to keep him with them permanently.

What caring for Lucky helped Fran understand was that all along she simply wanted an opportunity to love, on a different level, and Lucky had become the recipient of her loving intentions. Fran started to plan her days so that the time she spent with Dennis and Lucky was as fun-filled and loving as possible. Today, the three of them go for long walks and play ball together. Each evening, after Dennis and Lucky share some frozen yogurt, Lucky nuzzles with Fran and sleeps by her side. Lucky's love, affection, and companionship filled a void in Fran's life and allowed her to exercise her previously untapped maternal instincts.

A New Feather to the Nest

Neal and Carolyn were devoted parents who always supported and nurtured their two children, Jay and Krista. Because their children were close in age, they had a strong bond and always strove to do things together. Their closeness filled their parents with relief, because they knew the siblings would always look after one another when they weren't present.

After the oldest child left home and went off to college, Neal and Carolyn began anticipating the fun they'd have as a couple again. They envisioned a quiet house without all the hustle and bustle of high school teenagers running in and out, vacations for just the two of them, and romantic evenings on the back porch. After the youngest left for college, Neal and Carolyn were ready for "empty nest" life. What they failed to anticipate, though, were the feelings of loneliness that soon predominated their thoughts.

After raising and nurturing their children for 21 years, they suddenly felt empty and they questioned their past joyful view of post child-rearing life. The once lively house filled with after school study groups and weekend slumber parties was now a silent reminder of the importance their children played in their lives. As each day passed, they felt more and more disconnected from their lives and yearned for a way to make things "normal" again.

The two talked about their feelings and decided that they simply needed a little time to get used to the now quiet house. As time passed, though, the emptiness didn't go away. Instead, the silence became even more deafening than the music their children used to blare on the stereo. After a couple of years, Neal and Carolyn knew they had to do something.

As Carolyn thought hard about a solution, she remembered that right after she and Neal married, they loved to play with her father's German Shepherd. They had a lot of fun visiting Sammy and they felt that on some level, the animal added to their lives. When Carolyn shared this idea with Neal, he immediately responded, "What would we do with a dog now?" Neal and Carolyn discussed the topic openly and often after that, and they finally decided on an English Springer Spaniel. It was apparent to them that a dog was what they needed to fill the void in their life.

Within a few weeks, Neal and Carolyn found Mille—a beautiful two-year-old black and

white Irish Springer Spaniel. The couple fell in love with her the moment they saw her and eagerly welcomed the dog into their home. Because both Neal and Carolyn work full-time outside the home, Carolyn as a schoolteacher and Neal as an administrator, Neal was secretly hesitant about bringing Millie into their lives. Neither Neal nor Carolyn had an indoor dog before. *What if we can't give her the attention she needs?* Neal thought. *What if she becomes too much of a responsibility? What if her presence only makes us miss the children more?*

Neal and Carolyn soon discovered that his fears were unfounded. In fact, the love Millie so freely gives comforts both Neal and Carolyn in times of need and loneliness. At a time when they would both normally feel empty and depressed, Millie's presence fills them with a new love. Her tender kisses, happy bark, and wagging tail warm Neal and Carolyn's hearts each day. And while they still miss their children dearly, Millie is helping them bridge the gap and realize that they can direct their attention to others for the love and companionship they desire. By touching, rubbing, petting, and talking to Millie, they both find themselves once again fulfilled and comforted that someone still depends on them for nurturance.

Millie's presence has helped them so much that less than three years after her arrival, Neal and Carolyn decided to bring another dog into their lives. The second dog—an eight-month-old brown and white English Springer Spaniel—is called Annie. Carolyn enjoys talking to both dogs and receiving their unconditional love and support. Since having the dogs as part of their family, Neal has noticed that Carolyn is more relaxed and less emotional and reactive. Both Neal and Carolyn believe that Annie's presence has helped them become a closer family by allowing them all to feel needed and loved. "Annie is keeping us all young," says Neal "even Millie."

The Mirror to Our Souls

Very often our pets are a reflection of us. The love and friendship we receive so willingly from our furry, scaled or feathered friends is what we wish we could show to others on a consistent basis. We live through the animal's affection vicariously, soaking up the wisdom they offer and attempting to put it to good use. We want to believe we can give of ourselves unselfishly as they do, but the sad reality is that many of us simply don't. It's a lesson we need to learn if we want to live more meaningful and connected lives.

How can we love unconditionally in a society that places so much emphasis on what distinguishes us from others? It's often the ways we separate ourselves from others that brings us external rewards like celebrity status and money. Unconditional love requires that we accept others and ourselves without judgment. This means that we offer others the freedom to be who they are in that moment and fully accept where they are in their unique process. Our pets are masters who teach us the significance of real friendship and the courage of loving fully.

Pet Lesson #1: Lessons of Unconditional Love and Friendship

Exercises: How to Use This Lesson in Your Everyday Life

1. As in the story of Dec, look past people's shortcomings. It's not what people don't have that matters; it's the special talents they possess and how they use their gifts that's important.

Celebrate the beautiful gifts each of us brings to the world in order to foster a loving and caring environment.

2. The stress in today's society is sometimes overwhelming. Instead of drowning your sorrows with alcohol or some other harmful substance, seek the counsel of a friend. Likewise, if you

sense someone has growing problems, offer your companionship and support willingly and unconditionally. Be like Skeezer and show your support no matter what and take time to listen from the heart.

3. One of the times you're the most natural is when you're with your pet. Remember the way you feel when you're in your pet's company. Like Tom when he was with Tara, let your heart soften and open up. Keep that feeling with you all day to foster positive mental energy and promote self-assurance and self-love. Picture yourself basking in your pet's love and friendship. Ask, how would _____ see this situation?

4. When have you been accepted unconditionally? What was the situation? How did it feel? How can you extend this to others?

5. What is it that your companion animal does to make you feel friendship and caring? List the behaviors. How can you apply these to your life? In dealing with others?

6. Did you ever have a memorable experience with a companion animal? What do you remember? What do you feel the lesson was in that interaction? Are you living your life now in a way that shows you've learned from this life lesson?