Opinion
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The author's Siberian husky, Rahner, is named for the Jesuit theologian Fr. Karl Rahner. (Courtesy of Daniel P. Horan)



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While attending the recent 14th meeting of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland in Salisbury, England, I learned of a book that immediately caught my attention. During his paper presentation, a colleague mentioned in passing philosopher Mark Rowlands's 2024 book *The Happiness of Dogs: Why the Unexamined Life Is Most Worth Living*. At the first break in panel presentations, I headed straight for the bookstore in the heart of the Medieval British town, found the book, and purchased it immediately.

I was not disappointed. And I devoured the text over the next 48 hours.

Rowlands, a Welsh native who is on faculty at the University of Miami, had previously written several books bringing together his lifelong love of dogs and his professional expertise in contemporary philosophy. These include his 2021 memoir *The Philosopher and the Wolf: Lessons from the Wild on Love, Death and Happiness*.

But The Happiness of Dogs is something special, especially for those who share those two interests of Rowlands. Drawing on the insights of philosophers across millennia as diverse as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Heidegger, Camus, Sartre, Wittgenstein and others, he passionately makes the case that dogs are conscious, loving, emotional, even reflective and moral creatures, whose lives are meaningful and who live their lives almost always in the present.

So far, so good.

Much of what Rowlands lays out, both from personal experience and from academic studies in philosophy and ethology, I was already poised to affirm. Over the years, I have spent a lot of time studying and reflecting on the ways anthropocentrism has distorted our ability to see the profound depth and agency of nonhuman creatures. I have written academic books, scholarly articles and popular articles in the pages of NCR and elsewhere making similar arguments.

But one thing Rowlands does that inspired me in a new way is emphasize the many ways that dogs (and other nonhuman creatures) can be guides for us, helping us to be better homo sapiens as we accompany and are accompanied by our four-legged friends. He writes:

> We share our lives with these creatures and are, therefore, well placed to learn from them. We might even regard them as instructors, although they are peculiar ones since they don't understand the lessons they impart. They have no need of such lessons. But I suspect we do. These creatures are a guide to a type of existence that is alien to ours, but in some ways better. This, I believe, is a learning opportunity that we cannot afford to ignore.

As I was reading the book, I thought a lot about my own dog Rahner (yes, she's named after the great 20th-century Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner), who is an almost 4-year-old Siberian husky. It feels cliché to say, but Rahner is much more than a pet and she is as unique as any human person is in temperament, personality, preferences and behavior. She is sweet and affectionate, can be stubborn and grumpy, loves meeting other dogs but loves meeting other people even more. She likes routines but can go with the flow when changes to her schedule are necessary.

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One thing Rowlands doesn't address directly in his book is the spiritual life (this is likely because he identifies as an atheist). But many of the themes he engages in terms of what dogs can teach us about the good life have direct ties to spirituality. And so, I found myself thinking about how dogs in general, and Rahner in particular, might be a spiritual instructor for us humans. I believe there are at least four things that surface in Rowlands's book worth considering.

First, Rowlands highlights the ways that dogs can demonstrate forms of empathy, which leads to moral action. He tells the story of how his two dogs, upon hearing his infant son crying in the night, would both wake him in order to get help for the baby. Drawing on animal studies, he explains, "This shows that they were not simply distressed *because* my son was distressed. They were distressed *that* my son was distressed."

This phenomenon of dogs assisting humans in distress has long been a staple in literature and popular culture (TV's "Lassie," for example), which is bolstered by the working dogs who aid the visually impaired or work with first responders. If you view dogs as mere machines, then these things seem like rote trained behaviors. But anyone who has lived with a dog, and experienced what Rowlands and others have, know better.

In this way, dogs can remind us to be more other-centered and attentive to the needs of our fellow community members, human and otherwise. Jesus calls his followers to love their neighbors, as well as their enemies, and to do so demands empathy and compassion. Our canine neighbors remind us of the ethical imperative to care for one another without hesitation or prejudice.

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The second point worth considering is how dogs have evolved from independent wolves to be interdependent canines. Over tens of thousands of years, this transformation meant that the animals now known as dogs surrendered some forms of control and independence in order to embrace a communitarian spirit. Dogs teach us that it's not simply laziness that leads to their dependence on us for food, shelter, care, and affection, but a sacrifice on their part (over evolutionary history) to enter more deeply into relationship with others, including human others.

We live in a time and society in which independence and selfishness are hailed as personal virtues. This flies in the face of the kingdom of God as described by Jesus in the Gospels. Dogs model for us what it means to rely on others, to risk vulnerability instead of demand autonomy, to prioritize relationship over self-sufficiency.

The third insight arises from the way that dogs have a keen ability to stay focused on and live in the present. Rowlands notes that "Unlike dogs, we humans are not just livers of lives, we are also watchers of those same lives. In our lives, we are not only actors, we are also spectators. As actors, we are immersed in our lives. But as spectators, we stand apart from them, watching, appraising, evaluating."

By contrast, dogs are in the here and now, not distracted by the vicissitudes of life or concerns about eventualities that may or may not pass. Dogs are not judging the quality of their life or worrying about what others think of them, they are here in the moment. And we can learn a lot from them.

The whole purpose of prayer, especially contemplative prayer and meditation, is to center oneself and attend to the presence of God in the moment—not in the future or in some place "out there." We are often too easily distracted and that takes a toll on us mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Even Jesus reminds us to not worry about tomorrow (Matthew 6:34).

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Finally, Rowlands emphasizes the amount of love present in the lives of dogs. They live their lives to the fullest: present, attentive to those around them, aware of others' feelings and needs, and expressive, in doglike ways, of affection and love.

This may be the most self-evident point when it comes to dogs. Anyone who lives with dogs knows their near-infinite capacity to love, regardless of our sometimes selfish behavior, inconsideration, or occasional disregard for their presence or feelings. They remind us to attend to and live the central teaching of Christianity: *Love* one another. Rahner's seeming unconditional love for me (and for those I love) is inspiring and she reminds me to love better. This is, after all, the key to a meaningful life.

Near the end of his book, Rowlands makes an insightful observation, writing, "Many think that only human lives can be meaningful. Those who think this are invariably human." He adds, "I am convinced the opposite is true. Meaning comes effortlessly to the lives of dogs. For us it is hard work, seldom achieved with any sort of resounding satisfaction." But there's always a chance for change, or what the Christian tradition calls conversion.

Maybe it's actually less a matter of being a better *human* and more about becoming a better *member of the community of creation*. And perhaps, dogs (and other nonhuman animals) are already ahead of us in terms of their relationships with other members of the divine community of creation and with God, too. We still have a lot to learn about being good creatures in this world.