

Not Always Man's Best Friend

by [Jeff Plude](#) (December 2019)



White Dog, Franz Marc, 1912

I do not hate dogs. Let me clarify that: I do not hate *good* dogs. In fact, I even like good dogs, though I have managed to live without one, hard as that may be for some people to imagine, for more than half a century now.

I can hear a big sigh from the dog lovers, as if I've perversely denied myself one of life's most sublime pleasures, or maybe they think I'm some hopeless crank. A decade ago I remember a friend of mine quoting his thirtysomething daughter who had just gotten remarried and inherited a few kids in addition to her own: "A home is not a home without a dog." (Apparently she'd never been to Babylons like San Francisco, where even the homeless have dogs!) I've always thought a home is where the heart is. A human heart, that is.

But I do hate bad dogs—and there are indeed bad dogs. Or I should say I dislike them, since hating an animal, which is not acting intentionally *per se*, is not rational. Or more precisely I should say I dislike their owners, or at least the way they handle (or don't handle) their dogs. In many cases, I think, it's simply that the owners are unwilling to control or train them. Dog extremists even seem to believe that restraining their dogs with a leash or even an invisible fence is cruel. They either don't consider or care how cruel it is for their dog to charge or frighten or bite a person, or even to maim or kill one.

I won't go so far, however, to say that all owners of problem dogs are irresponsible. For instance, a dog trainer in California recently [posted](#) on Facebook about having her dog euthanized five years ago after he'd been aggressive toward a

three-year-old girl. The trainer said that she'd done everything in her power to tame Tanner, including consulting with experts, but that she feared he would kill another animal or injure somebody. Some praised her, but she was also accused of murder. One commenter summed up the "no-kill" cult:

"What if you had a child with behavioral problems, would you euthanize them too?"

Dogs may feel like family, but in reality they are not. They are indeed amazing animals and often perform noble feats, which the press dutifully recounts and readers greedily gobble up. They've rescued their owners from fires; chased off intruders; guided the blind; sniffed out drug dealers; served honorably in battle; cared for other animals in need; even refused to leave their dead master's side (a widely published photo shows George Bush Sr.'s service dog, a yellow Lab named Sully, lying in front of the president's coffin as he lay in state). But I think it should be kept in mind that even with all their admirable attributes, dogs are not and never will be human. And though they should be treated humanely and affectionately, I don't believe they should be exalted to a degree that their Creator (or nature, if you prefer) never intended.

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Some are starting to rethink the *carte blanche* often given to dogs. For instance, [airlines](#) are seeking to curb many fliers

who are now allowed to travel with service dogs and other animals (that perhaps are not), some of which have been running amok during flights. But we still have a long way to go before more objective human minds prevail. The closeted dog dissenters or abstainers like myself are sometimes outed and dog-shamed. "Don't you like dogs?" an electrician working on a light pole outside the townhouse development where I used to live shot back at me once. What had I done to deserve that? I'd ask him to move his large poodle that he'd tied to the light pole and was blocking the sidewalk I was about to walk down. It was not a question but an accusation. "Why do you have to bring your dog to work with you?" I might've shot back.

Among the many charges against our current president is that he's a dog hater. The irrefutable evidence of this, according to the high-minded press, is that he's the first president in recent history not to bring a family dog with him into the White House; of great national and political import, this warranted a full-length article in *Newsweek* and a column in the *New York Times*. Forget that there are photos of President Trump holding the champions of a dog show, and testimony of the show officials saying how comfortable he was with them, and that his first wife Ivana wrote in her memoir that he agreed to let her bring a dog into the house and even sleep with them in their bed. All we can hope for in the end, it seems, is that the press treats their own dogs better than they do their readers, or at least what's left of them.

Making things worse is the current proliferation of dangerous dogs and their apologists, who I sometimes think are misanthropes. What kinds of dogs are those? Though even a Collie or a Golden Retriever will fight back, pit bulls have been bred to fight. I've been collecting dog-mauling stories

for a while, and most of them are committed by pit bulls. Pit bulls are now so fashionable that I think that if a new American mascot were chosen by referendum, the pit bull would eat the eagle for lunch. I think of it as the pit-bulling of America. Though these snarling brutes are not the only aggressive breed of dogs, they are the most notorious. It seems like everywhere I turn, along with death skulls and hideous tattoos, I see the ghastly snout, which often glower at you and nearly choke themselves with their leash as they pull toward you and growl. And calling such an animal a "rescue" doesn't seem to tame its menacing aura and innate savagery.

When I was a kid, the most common dangerous dogs in the small town I grew up in were German Shepherds. As a first-grader I was repeatedly harassed by one that was probably as big or bigger than I was at the time. Day after day on my way to school, it charged me and jumped in my face and barked at me and snapped at me and chased me. A German Shepherd was as much a symbol of the Nazis to me as a swastika. Even Hitler himself owned several German Shepherds over the years, which he was said to be fond of, but they were also easy propaganda, showing the Führer's love for animals. His last one, named Blondi, ended up another in a long list of his master's countless victims: with the war about to end in defeat, Hitler fed Blondi a sample of cyanide capsules to see if they were the real deal. They were.

Dobermans were another brutal breed of yesteryear, and just the sight of their pointed ears and wiry bodies was enough to make your heart pump faster. My wife's aunt owned a couple of them, and she used to barricade them in the garage when anyone visited. Many years ago a Doberman chased my wife as she was walking along the edge of a small park in downtown

Charlottesville, Virginia—she was petrified until the owner called him back. My wife grew up with dogs, one of which was a much beloved Dachshund named Fritz.

But pit bulls are now the alpha dogs in America. Overall they make German Shepherds and Dobermans, which I rarely see anymore, seem like Lassie. Until about two decades ago, I don't recall hardly ever seeing at home or in my travels an American Pit Bull Terrier, as it's officially known. It seems to me that the pit-bull explosion was part of the rise to power of gangsta rap. (There's even a rapper named Pitbull.) I see it as just another plank in the gallows of the civilized world, another part of the reinstitution of the law of the jungle.

I myself have never been attacked by a pit bull, and I haven't personally known anybody who has. I do know, however, an old friend who told me that he started carrying a loaded handgun after being regularly followed by a roaming pit bull during his early morning walks. (I'm with him on this; for those who still prefer ground and sky to treadmill and screen, territory shouldn't be surrendered to the enemy.) But lacking such firepower, I usually just make myself scarce or change my route. It seems I read this Chinese proverb somewhere, but if it isn't one it should be: When you see a dangerous dog, cross to the other side of the street. One time my wife and I were going to tour a house we were considering buying but before we even got out of the car we saw a pack of pit bulls in the back yard behind a metal fence, hurtling themselves against it and barking. The young owner, who looked like she was in her early thirties, seemed stunned that we no longer wanted to come in the house, let alone buy it. We didn't even get out of the car.

Two summers ago my wife and I were walking near our suburban townhouse when suddenly and seemingly out of nowhere a pit bull charged us from a house we were passing. Only a skimpy strap tied to a short fence kept the snarling beast from sinking its iron jaws into our goosepimpled flesh. Meanwhile, his middle-aged owner blithely dug in her flower garden and barely looked up to mutter: "Oh, stop that . . . leave them alone."

But I don't want to suggest that it's pit bulls alone that attack people. I myself have been attacked by dogs several times over the past decade, and none of them were pit bulls. However, the police and animal control officers don't consider it an "attack" unless you're bitten or injured, which I haven't been. But if a human, or more like a gang of humans, rushed at you again and again with knives brandished, i.e. long sharp cuspids that would make a vampire blush and a front row of incisors that might tear you apart if you didn't fight back or flee, I think a reasonable person would conclude that this was a physical attack of the most blatant kind, analogous to attempted assault. But as I said, when it comes to dogs, society in general is anything but rational.

About twenty years ago I began taking walks every day to get some exercise and fresh air. I was living in San Francisco at the time, and there's no better way to see and learn about a big city than covering it by foot. But it wasn't until I moved to the suburbs that what I've come to think of as "the dog wars" began in earnest.

One of the worst dog attacks I fended off was a bulldog that

came careening out of the door of a townhouse (one that cost about a half million dollars), bounded down the sidewalk and rounded a corner like a Formula One driver, and dived at me as I sauntered along the road in the development. Momentarily frozen, I instinctively crouched into a boxing stance and braced to punch it. I cocked my right fist and fired into the air. The dog flinched back a few steps, then flung itself again at me with its white fangs flashing. This happened a half dozen or so times. At some point the owner, a young thin blonde, tottered out on black stilettos and yelled "Stella!" If only she'd been Stanley Kowalski—then Stella might've obeyed. But alas the two Stellas were species apart, so the bulldog charged me again and again. Still in fighting stance and unleashing my right fist into the air, I yelled at her: "Control your dog!" I should've saved my breath. The crazed bulldog kept scrambling away from her when she grabbed it by the collar and it charged me again, like a slobbering malevolent furry cannonball that kept firing back at me.

When I said I was going to call the animal control officer, she said: "My dog didn't attack you."

When the police showed up at my door a while later, one of them smiled when I said the dog's name: "Oh yes, we've met Stella."

So much for my case.

Since I hadn't been bitten and no police officer or animal control officer had witnessed the attack, it was as if nothing had happened. And though there was a leash law in town (and in

the development), after that incident Stella's owners, the black-spike-heeled blonde and her pharmaceutical-salesman husband, defiantly let Stella run free in the common green area where I usually walked. They flouted the law because they knew, in the law's eyes and everybody else's, that Stella could do no wrong.

A similar incident just happened to me recently. This time my combatant was dark brown and medium-sized, maybe a mixed breed like a Labradoodle (it was a little hard to tell, since I was busy trying not to get bitten). I dropped into my stance and after a few sallies by my opponent I eventually managed to pull out a Swiss Army-type knife that I now carry with me. The dog's owner, who has a big Harley in his garage and a matching orange mailbox with his name on it in black letters, called the dog to him again and again. But again and again the dog charged me. Just like with Stella. When I said I was going to call the animal control officer, the owner claimed that his dog never attacked me.

Never apologize seems to be the wayward dog owner's *modus operandi*.

The animal control officer asked me if I'd been injured and I said no. Case closed. Though he said he'd talk to the owner, check the dog's license and shots, and document it all: if there were other complaints against the same dog, the animal could be declared "dangerous." I told him that's why I had called. I mentioned that there was a school bus dropping kids off just across the cul-de-sac as the owner and I yelled back and forth, ten to fifteen yards away from where I was attacked, and that a little kid wouldn't have been able to defend himself the way I did. The animal control officer, a

quiet guy in his thirties with a full brown beard, said nothing to confirm my concern.

My canine clashes are not even a nip compared to what some very unfortunate people have suffered. Of the endless death-by-dog maulings, many of which involve children, one of the most horrific I know of occurred when my wife and I were living in San Francisco just after the turn of the millennium, only a dozen or so blocks from where we lived. Diane Whipple, a thirty-three-year-old world-class lacrosse and track athlete and coach, was attacked and killed in the hallway outside her apartment in Pacific Heights, one of the city's wealthiest neighborhoods, by a pair of Presa Canarios. A male and female, they reportedly weighed more than a hundred pounds each. They broke free from Marjorie Knoller, who with her husband, Robert Noel, both middle-aged attorneys, lived down the hall and owned these monsters, which they'd acquired from two white supremacist inmates they met at a trial. The beasts savaged Ms. Whipple—she ended up with seventy-seven wounds, from the top of her head to the soles of her feet. I followed the case in *The Chronicle* and I remember that Ms. Knoller and Mr. Noel tried to blame Ms. Whipple, claiming that her perfume had aroused Bane and Hera. Others had complained to the owners about their hellhounds, and to the management of the condo building too, to no avail. Ms. Knoller and Mr. Noel were eventually convicted of murder and disbarred, and the dogs were destroyed. But it was all much too late for Ms. Whipple, whose young life was literally ripped to pieces by two animals that were anything but pets.

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The truth is that such breeds can never be true pets, I strongly believe, and should never be allowed to be kept as such. They are too much of a threat to others, both people and legitimate pets. I think they belong in the zoo or in the wild with wolves and coyotes. In fact, in 1993 the Smithsonian and the American Association of Mammologists reclassified domestic dogs as *Canis lupus familiaris*, adding the middle term because of the dog's close relation to the wolf. Jack London apparently knew as much more than a hundred years ago when he wrote *The Call of the Wild*.

So I think that dogs are not always man's best friend. But let me also say that I too, at times, have felt the primordial kinship of a man and his dog.

When I was a kid the family across the street, whose father and five sons were rabid hunters, bought a puppy who grew into a beautiful sleek black Lab and became the matriarch of a dog-breeding business. I used to watch them train Echo in the back yard, and I went along with them to the fish and game club when they started advanced instruction in retrieving faux ducks on an actual pond. It was a fascinating process to watch as a boy. I wanted a dog myself back then, but my father didn't want the expense or the bother. To me, half the enjoyment of owning one would be to train it so that it obeyed my benevolent commands. It's a relationship not of a master and his slave, but of a master and his ward.

More recently I've become friends with a Chihuahua-Pekingese who was abandoned and roaming the streets when one of my wife's sisters took him in. Whenever we visit her in Florida,

Freddie usually comes over to me. Since I don't speak Chinese, I say to him: "*Buenos días, Don Federico. ¿Cómo estás, amigo?*" But Freddie never says anything. He usually doesn't even bark. I usually go on a bit in Spanish, then I finally shut up and pet him. Now we're both happy.

«[Previous Article](#) [Table of Contents](#) [Next Article](#)»

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