

It's a cold, rainy day and I'm feeling a little philosophical.

A recent visit to an old friend set off today's reflections. I went to see a fellow breeder a few weeks ago, a well-respected, successful old-timer who knows more about dogs than I can ever hope to. We had a wonderful time, laughing and gossiping and looking at dogs, sitting in the sunshine and talking about everything from politics to pet owners, breeding and breed trends....just an all-round fun "dog day afternoon."

But I left a little unsettled. It took most of the drive home for me to sort out my feelings and I'm still working on it. It mostly came down to differences in our dog management practices.

My dogs are pets. We have nine right now, and they're all housedogs. We "run two packs," as a friend of mine puts it. About half, the youngsters, live mostly in the office/dog room with me. It opens into the yard and all day they're in and out of the house, on and off my lap. The older dogs live in the kitchen/dining room/living room where Walt is most of the day. They're walked on leash, and spend their time on the sofa or curled up on the dog bed under Walt's computer.

In other words, all nine don't have the run of the house together, but they all have a fairly normal "pet dog" lifestyle.

My breeder friend has about twice the number of dogs we do, one or two housedogs and the others are kenneled. They are well-fed, cared for, affectionate and happy, but they don't have the soft beds, treats, rides in the car, hourly hugs, etc that mine have. They're crated at night and spend days outside in paddocks. The animal rights crowd would consider that mistreatment, although the dogs have shelter, water, food, and exercise.

I'm as far from an animal rightist as you can get, but I had to admit to myself that I left feeling

sad for them and I thought all the way home about why, and whether I should. They don't know any other life, and as I said, they certainly love their owner and receive adequate care. And this breeder knows much more than I do about dogs, dog behavior, and breeding. These dogs would leap up to be petted and then run off to wrestle and play with each other...pretty much the way my dogs act when they're out in the yard.

So why am I left with this sanctimonious feeling that I could do better by those dogs? If I had 20 instead of nine, would I run things the same way I do with nine? If I were 25 years older than I am now, would I manage even as well as the other breeder does? *Are* my dogs really "happier" and what does that mean? Those dogs certainly seemed every bit as happy as mine.

Anyone who has ever seen a retriever or pointer hunt, a terrier dig for vermin, a sighthound run, or a Border collie herd knows that instinct runs deep. One of the strongest instincts in all dogs is the pack instinct. If dogs have other dogs, they're generally content. Sure, most of them like affection and attention from us, but let's face it, the "spoiling" we do is to satisfy our own needs.

The three of my dogs who are stretched out on the sofa right now would happily stretch out on a wooden pallet in the sun. Yes, they get \$35/bag high quality dog food, but they'd just as eagerly eat the lowest priced generic brand. They like their soft beds but would be pretty happy with a burlap bag or an old quilt with holes in it. Dogs don't have self-pity and they don't worry about "keeping up with Fido next door."

If our dogs have food, water, shelter, and some company - dog or human - they're pretty darn happy. Once they're accustomed to living inside, getting pot roast for dinner, being carried in a purse...well, then it's difficult for them to adjust to a more Spartan life. But for a dog whose had a simple life, a simple life isn't so bad.

Sharyn

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Timbreblue Jesse, Jodi, Padi and Timbreblue Little Bit O' Joker