

In Praise of Dogolatry

Last week Reverend Ned stood on this spot and accused me of dogolatry, on the grounds that he, a nice guy, walks his dog once a day, whereas I, whom you don't know as well and are therefore obliged to be a little more suspicious of, walk mine three times.

I have asked Ned for three minutes to rebut these accusations and he has granted me them. Heck, he said, take three and a half.

It's true, I do walk my dog Beauregard three times per day. Worse, he is a poodle, and he seems to take it all in stride. I believe his attitude is that he is entitled to as much. But I suppose that is how most idols feel.

If I were out in the world doing good works from dawn to dusk, three walks would be hard to fit in. But I stay holed up on the third floor of my house most of every day, with good works playing a small role in my activities.

You see, I am a writer. Instead of doing good things, I think about them. Some of the time. So it's really not fair to compare me to Ned and his dog, who is a good dog.

My dog isn't an especially good dog. He seems to know that he cost me \$600 upfront, and another \$70 every three months for a haircut. He is a very dominant dog, and seems to feel that other dogs have put on earth for him to abuse. I don't help matters much by letting him run loose through the neighborhood, inflicting himself on his ethical betters.

But I ask that you think of all this on a deeper level. I use Beau the way people who have real jobs use coffee breaks. Every three hours or so, they get up and they move around a bit and refresh themselves. When I do this with Beau, it is really more for me than it is for him. But he doesn't know that, and I hope you will not tell him.

Let me take this deeper yet. When I walk my dog I relax and see the actual world I am living in, not the interior of my head, where I spend my workdays. In this sense, walking Beau is an invitation to reflection, meditation and prayer.

We go down to the river in spring to watch the rushing Mississippi pour by. In the summer I pull ticks from his ears, and coax him to stay in, or get out of the tent. We walk in the tall woods in the fall, leaves tumbling like pages of the calendar slipping away. In

the winter I watch big snowflakes land on his black back, and him grinning as he disappears in the gathering white, just like a Cheshire ... dog.

Ned's dog may be named Isaac - "He laughs" - but my dog is just as hilarious in his pomp and solemnity. His pretensions and self-absorption make me laugh a dozen times a day, and maybe ease my own pretensions and self-absorption just a little.

Try this on for size. When I see Beau I sometimes think of him as being my soul, my own inner spirit. Because surely they are similar, being both so full of yearning and devotion, so childlike in the face of their respective masters.

Think of your soul that way, as a dog who yearns to run free, and dwell in the master's yard, and warn imposters away. A soul that is highest fidelity - Fido - and certain of nothing but his alliance with you, an alliance he will defend with his life?

Why would I not want to look such a soul in the eyes three times a day, and remind myself of his everyday beauty and the limitless love he feels - toward me?

Who would not take care to keep such a soul alive and warm, and well-fed, and well walked?

Last spring when I attended the retreat at Camp Courage, I went up and asked for prayer from Marek and Andrew. I was a Christian in my mind then, but very distant from any kind of hope in God. And I stammered out my odd theology to Marek, and I said God seemed like a trillion light years away, but sometimes I could detect a glimmer of God's love in my dog's great joy of being my dog, how his heart soars when I return home to him, how content he is to sleep beside me all day long while I busy myself with my godly chores.

Marek looked at me like I was nuts, and I know the objections. Comparing a dog to God - why, that's just backwards.

And he's not even a very good dog. He has all my faults - he's vain, and presumptuous, and hypercompetitive, and impulsive. He thinks he's better than other dogs, that he's a special case.

He's never spent a night in the cold, or gone a day without a meal. I never have, either.

They say that God finds you where you are, and takes you on those terms. What better opening for me than through this supercilious sibling soul who follows me from room to room through my life, as serious as a king, wagging his tail behind him like a flag?