

# Falling in Love ... with a Dog: How It Changes Our Lives

Risë VanFleet, PhD

**P**aul was raised in a family that kept hunting dogs tied on a chain outdoors in all weather. They were not considered pets. As long as the dogs performed well in the field, the family kept them. If they began to fail, the family disposed of them quickly. It was all about function and nothing about affection. From the age of 14, Paul was expected to work with the dogs, often using forceful methods, and to get rid of them when they outlived their usefulness. He had never felt close to his dogs.

After he married, he tolerated his wife's desire to keep a pet dog in the house. He only paid attention to the dog when they went hunting together. After their first dog died from a serious illness, Paul's wife acquired two Spaniel puppies from a local rescue. They were cute, rambunctious, and inordinately attracted to Paul. They followed him everywhere, sought his attention, and crawled onto his lap when he fell asleep in his chair. Within a short period, Paul's wife noticed a significant change in Paul. He began calling the dogs to him while watching television, giving them extra treats, speaking to them in a high-pitched voice, and telling her and others about their antics, smiling the entire time. She told her friends that Paul seemed to have "fallen in love" with the Spaniels and that he had been transformed.

Paul's story probably resonates with many of us who love dogs. While not all people make such radical changes in their lives, most dog lovers can point to one special dog who changed everything for them. Although I have known and loved dogs my entire life, it was a new experience to "fall in love" with two dogs twenty years ago, and nothing has been the same since. I have now "fallen in love" with nearly every dog in my life since that time. Something different happened in my relationship with those two pups that forever changed my way of seeing and being with dogs.

When I mention "falling in love" with dogs, I am referring to a special, new quality of attachment and relationship that shifts one's attitudes and behaviors from what they were previously. Some people refer to their special dog as a "soul mate," others describe how the dog connected with them—or they connected with the dog—in a qualitatively different way than they had done previously. For some people, this phenomenon starts when they are children; for many, it comes later. For some like Paul, it can be a life-altering experience that brings them from a harsh world to a kinder, gentler place. For others, the change is subtler but significant in some way. In all cases, that single special dog opens our hearts and minds to unique ways of being with other dogs, and sometimes, other animals and people.

There seems to be little written about this phenomenon, although most "dog people" know exactly what I mean when I mention this. Just as with human love, the process of "falling in love" with that one special dog raises many questions. Why did that particular dog connect with us differently than the others who went before? Why

did it happen at this particular point in our lives? Was it something about the dog, something about ourselves, or some of both? Why *this* dog? Why *now*?

## Help with a Brief Survey

It seems that these are questions worthy of some study, so I'd like to invite you to participate in a short survey to see what answers that might provide. The survey is open-ended and is included below. To keep answers confidential, I ask that you send your responses directly to my email address: [Risevanfleet@aol.com](mailto:Risevanfleet@aol.com). At no time will I reveal your identity, and when I report the results in a later issue, I will be reporting information about trends and responses from the group, not any identifying individual information. If I wish to use any of your individual responses that might reveal your identity, I will contact you directly to ask your permission to do so. You can always say "no" to that request if you so choose. Your identity will be known only to me and will never be shared or used for any other purpose than this survey.

In order to have time to review responses and compile them for a future article, I ask that you respond to this survey within two weeks of reading this. You do not need to write the question; simply put the number and your short response into an e-mail to me.

**Instructions:** Please answer the five questions below with just one or two paragraphs each. Please send answers to me directly at [Risevanfleet@aol.com](mailto:Risevanfleet@aol.com).

**A. Please provide your name, e-mail address, full phone number, and state or country where you live (this information will remain confidential and will be used only if I have questions about your responses).**

**B. Please describe your special "fall in love" dog. Include what your relationship was like.**

**C. How long ago did you fall in love with this dog? How old were you?**

**D. Why do you think you had such a special relationship with this dog?**

**E. In what ways has the relationship with this special dog changed your life?**

Thank you for participating in this study! Results will be included in a later issue of *The APDT Chronicle of the Dog*.

*Risë VanFleet, PhD, is a child/family psychologist and positive therapy dog trainer in Boiling Springs, PA. She is the author of many books in the play therapy field, and her book, **Play Therapy with Kids & Canines** won the Planet Dog Foundation's Sit. Speak. Act. Award for best book on service and therapy dogs, as judged in the 2008 DWAA competition. Her series of articles, "Engaging Owners Fully in Dog Training" in the 2009 issues of **The APDT Chronicle of the Dog** recently won the DWAA Award for Best Subject Related Series in a Magazine. She conducts trainings on Canine-Assisted Play Therapy and volunteers as a trainer at a local rescue. She can be reached through her Web site at [www.playfulpooch.org](http://www.playfulpooch.org) or at [Risevanfleet@aol.com](mailto:Risevanfleet@aol.com).*