

Bill Rea ? Rediscovering pet ownership

Having never fathered a child, I can only imagine what the demands are.

I know enough parents to grasp some of the challenges, and I have some appreciation of what I might have put my folks through, although I think there's some justification in saying my mother and father had a lot of it coming. I mean, allowing TV only Friday and Saturday nights in the mid '60s was right out of line, especially when Batman was on in the middle of the week.

I have, over the years, come to the realization that the closest I'm ever going to get to parenthood is being a pet owner.

I grew up in a house with at least one dog. My dad was away from home a lot on business trips, and with an assertiveness that fathers could get away with in those days, he decreed there was going to be an unfriendly and aggressive dog on the premises if he was going to be away that much. The dogs, especially the last one we had, were spunky and ready to go to any length to defend their meal ticket. They were also very lovable sucks, which my old man was aware of, and he even admitted on occasion.

Since the early days of our marriage, my wife and I have had cats. It was one of the early results I learned about marrying a cat lover.

Sidney graciously (or grudgingly) shared our house with us for almost 10 years, but she sadly took ill over the last year and left us in November.

I knew Beth wanted another cat, and I was agreeable, if for no other reason than I appreciate living in a happy domestic situation. On the other hand, I knew Sidney's passing, combined with other difficulties around the same time, left some wounds that needed to heal. Accordingly, I did not try to push any action. I figured we'd get cat when Beth was ready.

I guess she got ready last Saturday. I woke up anticipating a rather quiet day and went to bed being referred to as 'Daddy' again. The new addition to the family is a barn cat, born (we are told) on or about Oct. 1 (she shares a birthday with Jimmy Carter, for the benefit of those of you who care about such things), and I understand Beth was advised that if we didn't get her out of the barn soon, litter box training was going to get a little dicey (you cat owners reading this will immediately understand what I'm getting at).

We took the precaution of consulting with a vet for a few tips, and then went to collect Guess Who.

As I have already indicated, my knowledge when it comes to cats is basically limited to what Beth has told me, so I went into this next stage of our life willing to let her take charge. Having been around cats most of her life, I naturally relied on her expertise.

So I asked her what steps were required, on our part, to facilitate training a kitten to use the litter box. Beth replied that it had been many years since she had to deal with such issues. Most of the cats she had had in the past had come to her already trained in that regard.

Now she tells me!

Okay, so I was pressed into service trying to teach a cat how to deal with her bodily functions in a socially-acceptable fashion. I know it can be done, because I've lived with cats that have accomplished the task. I realized I wasn't being called upon to do the impossible, like trying to teach brevity to politicians.

So we persevered.

It seemed to me that the best way to get a pussycat or a politician used to a litter box is to put them in it as often as possible. It is a fact that were I to try such a strategy with a politician (at least most of the politicians I know), criminal charges would probably result (and I could probably forget about them returning my phone calls too). But felines aren't likely to rat me out to the fuzz, and I have no pressing urge to talk to one on the phone either.

So into the litter box she went, as frequently as I could get her in there.

Somewhat to my astonishment, it worked (I think picturesque descriptions are neither required or appropriate).

'It can't be this easy,' I remarked to Beth, and she indicated that I might have been speaking a bit too soon.

As things have since developed, it seems to have been that easy. I must stress, however, that this is by no means meant to be a manual for training cats. I think we lucked out, but the fact is this is still very much a work in progress.

We also had to think up a name for the new member of the family. Cassie, Lacey and Lucy were among the names in the running, but Beth woke up Sunday morning and announced that the name came to her, almost as if it had come in a dream.

For the record, the cat's name is Ella.

I sent my brother an email later that morning, bringing him up to date. In his reply, he asked if her middle name was going to be Mentary ? positive proof that wit and humour don't run in families.

But things have been progressing well, even beyond the litter box (forgive me if I have appeared a little obsessed, but there are certain things I don't expect to step into as I traverse the floors of my home). A trip to the vet a couple of days after she moved in told us that fleas and other potential worries were well in hand.

That doesn't mean everything is tickety-boo. Like any new addition to any household, there's a lot of getting used to that needs to be addressed.

Like any mobile infant, Ella is very adept at getting herself into the places where she has no business being. As of this writing, both Beth and I have been put to the chore of gathering up papers on which we had been working from the floor, courtesy of Ella. There have been a couple of times when I've had to drag her out of the pantry cupboard, and she's even tried to hop into the refrigerator. She's also found a way to get on the kitchen counter. That wouldn't bother me too much, except it gets her too close to the stove. Is it a matter of good parenting to let her get too close to the stove while it's in operation and learn the hard way that it's not a good idea, or does that qualify as animal cruelty?

She has also found where the main bed in the house is, meaning the place where I normally sleep. Since she is so tiny and light, and since we also have carpeting throughout much of our house, Ella can get around without making much noise. And since I also spend roughly half of my sleeping time facing the bedroom door, I have found that it's not an awful lot of fun to be awakened at 3 in the morning by a facefull of hurtling pussycat. She also likes to explore the bed, probing with her well-developed claws. That's not much fun either.

So while I have resigned myself to the fact that I will probably never be a parent, I am working on raising a substitute daughter. I do understand what you other fathers of infant daughters are thinking about. Ella is going to be an indoor cat, meaning I'll never have to worry about her going out on dates.

I guess I'm getting the best of both worlds here

