

Ethical, Moral & Spiritual Considerations of Companion Parrot Care
By Pamela Clark, CVT
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My life has been intertwined with the lives of parrots now for over 40 years. I have delighted in them as my companions, and have lived with parrots ranging in size from parrotlets up to the largest of macaws and cockatoos. As a breeder, I watched in wonder as young African Greys claimed themselves in flight and began to discover their surroundings. As a trainer, I felt the accomplishment of teaching parrots to fly freely outdoors and come back when I called. In an informal role as a rehabber, I felt the gratification of taking in neglected parrots, teaching them better living skills, and placing them into better homes.

As a behavior consultant, I assist parrot owners to better understand their birds and resolve successfully the behavior challenges that arise. And now, as a veterinary technician, I help to heal them when they are ill. Not only do I love parrots and their many gifts, but I am fascinated by the relationships that form between people and their companion birds.

These varied experiences have given me not only knowledge of parrot behavior, but an ever-growing desire to help them live happier and healthier lives in captivity. Many things must change in our caregiving practices before we can feel good about the fact that we have taken these birds from the wild, made them our own, and now breed them and keep them for our own purposes. The sad truth is that the majority are living neither happy nor healthy lives in our world. While many individual parrots are well cared for by their owners, the majority live in situations in which their needs are not being met. And, improvement is possible in even the best of homes.

As I have consulted with owners over the years, I've become aware of certain recurrent patterns in both parrot/human relationships and in the choices owners make about the way they care for their birds. It is these patterns that I'll be addressing in this article, for they have a negative impact on the care we provide our birds. If we can become more psychologically visible to ourselves, identify these patterns and better understand how they impact the care we provide, then we will be freer to see our parrots as they really are and provide for them accordingly.

I will address what I see as the primary problems in our common approach to parrot keeping. I will also provide an outline for improvement. It is my deepest wish that readers will come away with a new understanding of themselves and their birds and a renewed conviction regarding improved care. The truth is: *Their quality of life in our world is determined by the manner in which we see ourselves in relationship to them.*

The first patterns I would like to examine today have to do with our motivations for adopting parrots and the ways we develop relationships with them.

First, we must accept the truth that we adopt parrots to meet our own emotional needs. This is largely true of most pet purchases. However, parrots are especially seductive creatures for this purpose. They are truly the stuff of which fairy tales are crafted... magical... brilliantly colored, capable of both flying through the air and speaking to us in our own language. The social structure of their flocks is similar enough to the social structure of human society that they are able to participate in relationships with us in a

most sophisticated and intimate manner. It is no coincidence that so many parrot owners describe their parrot as a soul mate.

A second truth: the vast majority of us reach adulthood with a suitcase of unmet emotional needs. For many, this is a result of having grown up in a dysfunctional family. As Earnie Larsen states in his book *Old Patterns, New Truths*, “To some degree every family is dysfunctional because perfect families and perfect people do not exist.” Less-than-nurturing or dysfunctional parenting techniques produce codependent adults. I have heard it estimated that today about 95% of all families now rest firmly in the “dysfunctional” category.

There are many hallmarks of a dysfunctional family. However, the primary characteristic is that the family lives by a set of dysfunctional rules that are taught to the children. Within this set of rules is the assumption that the child is not 100% acceptable as he or she is. The rules tend to sound like these: *Do not talk about your problems...Do not talk about your feelings...Do not think or feel anything...Do not trust...Do not make mistakes...Do not ask questions...Do not be needy...Do not be selfish...Do not be yourself...Do not rock the boat...Do not have fun...Do not get too close or intimate.*

If the rules we practice are dysfunctional, the relationships we develop will also be dysfunctional. The patterns of relating that we learn as children come to play out in our adult human relationships.

They also play out in our relationships with our parrots. There are many commonly recognized traits of co-dependency, and it is not too difficult to see how they manifest themselves in our relationships with our parrots.

Many of us growing up in dysfunctional families are covertly pressed into being a resource for the very people who should be caring for us. We receive an early and extensive education into how to care for others, often at our own expense. This becomes quite gratifying over time and often leads us into targeting employment as adults in the “helping” professions, such as nursing, teaching, or counseling.

However, for some this tendency becomes a pattern of inappropriate caretaking and rescuing. Those of us who love parrots may begin to rescue parrots or become resources to those in need of help with their parrots. This is only a problem when those doing the rescuing forget, in their compassion and enthusiasm, that there is a limit to their resources. Occasionally, parrots need rescuing from those who rescued them in the first place.

It may be difficult to see at first how rescuing, or taking in, a neglected parrot is being done to meet one’s own emotional needs. However, the proof is in the often-heard announcement, “I *rescued* him!” Owners often announce this with a certain emotional charge in their voice, because the act of rescuing this creature says something good about them. They have a need to help and rescue the wounded and hurt, and in doing so they feel better about themselves.

Most children who grow up in dysfunctional families never get the love they need and become adults constantly seeking relationships that will make them feel loved. Often, disappointed by people, they will seek that same feeling...with a cockatoo. So intense is our desire to have that feeling of closeness that a young affectionate cockatoo can provide, that we look no further than the initial experience...only to be disillusioned completely when that same bird becomes a problem later. Certainly, cockatoos can be difficult companions, but I believe their large population in rescue organizations and

sanctuaries also reflects the number who have been discarded because they were not able to sustain that early ability to make their owners feel loved.

Whether you relate to the above discussion or not, the truth is that we are all looking for love. It appears to be simply human nature to look to companion animals to partially meet this need.

The next truth we need to examine has to do with the manner in which we relate to our parrots and the ways we behave in relationship to them. We have a tendency to set up relationship rules that parrots, but their nature, cannot possibly succeed with.

For example many of us, especially those of us who find ourselves regularly feeling victimized in some way in our relationships, have a tendency to assume as relationships are forming that an unspoken agreement exists. This can be worded simply as “If I be nice to you, you will be nice to me.” If our partner doesn’t keep the unspoken pact, we feel victimized and take it very personally, unable to see that the behavior might not even have anything really to do with us, but manifests only from the other person’s inability to relate on a healthy level.

And then we buy baby parrots and transfer this same silent set of expectations to our relationships with them. We forget that they are essentially wild creatures, that they need training and guidance, and when they bite us for the first time, we are devastated. We don’t say to ourselves, “Gosh! This must reflect a lack of training and exercise.” No, we take it *very* personally. I find the same reaction occurs with screaming parrots. I have consulted with many owners who feel quite victimized by their birds’ screaming. Many times, I have listened to the tearful statement that the bird is trying to “*get to*” them.

Even beyond the business of setting up relationship rules that guarantee future problems in a parrot/human relationship, a deeper problem exists in the way we relate to our parrots. All sentient, intelligent creatures have a wide range of intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and physical needs. Regarding these needs, we must understand one basic, fundamental difference in perspective that divides parrots from humans.

Parrots are not yet domesticated, and focus on the daily meeting of these needs in the same way that wild parrots do...largely through instinct. They have a primary focus still on the meeting of physical, or survival, needs. Further, they live, eat and breathe with the instinctive knowledge that their environment has the capacity to deliver either life or death each day.

However, humans divorced themselves from nature thousands of years ago. Living apart from nature in a very “domesticated” lifestyle, we are no longer primarily concerned with meeting our survival needs. It has been quite some time since the meeting of these needs had to be our primary focus, as it did when back living close to the earth, depending upon her for food and shelter. Then, just maintaining the assurance of a food supply was a full time job.

My hunch is that meeting love, or relationship, needs probably did not loom quite as large in the human consciousness back then. In those times, too heavy a focus on getting love needs met might result in leaving a relationship. Leaving a relationship might result in an insufficient supply of food or lack of shelter or protection.

Now however, most of us have a lifestyle that allows us the luxury of focusing more on our emotional, spiritual, and intellectual needs. Of the three areas, the need for love and relationship looms largest for most people, in terms of preoccupying our thoughts. I don’t know anyone who doesn’t have a need to feel loved. In our society, feelings of

loneliness, isolation, and being misunderstood rattle us all. Some of us experience them fleetingly, and some of us live with them daily.

This relates directly back to my statement that many people acquire parrots to help meet their own emotional needs. It is our need to fill our longing for love that often is at the forefront of our motivations when a young parrot is purchased. Couple this longing for love with a need to nurture, and you have the basis for every impulse purchase of a baby parrot from a pet store that's ever been made. Sadly however, whereas baby parrots may seem to us especially well suited to fill these needs, the same parrot five years later has usually "moved on," in terms of his developmental needs, while the owner has not.

This mindset we have when acquiring the young parrot, and our focus on "relationship needs," then often leads to problems. It dictates in large part our expectations of our new companion. It colors our observations and our interpretations of his behavior. Such misinterpretations of his behavior then too often serve as the basis for the decisions we make about his care. And then we truly cannot see the parrot for what he really is. Unlike us, the parrot is an undomesticated creature, still concerned primarily with "survival" and physical needs.

As Henry Beston wrote in The Outermost House, "*Remote from universal nature, and living by complicated artifice, man in civilization surveys the creature through the glass of his knowledge and sees thereby a feather magnified and the whole image in distortion. We patronize them for their incompleteness, for their tragic fate of having taken form so far below ourselves. And therein we err, and greatly err. For the animal shall not be measured by man. In a world older and more complete than ours, they move finished and complete, gifted with extensions of the senses we have lost or never attained, living by voices we shall never hear. They are not brethren, they are not underlings; they are other nations, caught with ourselves in the net of life and time, fellow prisoners of the splendour and travail of the earth.*"

Truly, in our present practice of keeping parrots as pets, we see only *the feather magnified*...and the whole image in distortion. We assume them to be brethren. We see them as underlings. What we must learn to see is their autonomy, their presence in our world as *other nations*. Then, and only then, will we do our best work with them.

I first saw this with the greatest clarity when rearing African Greys. In the beginning, I knew of them only by what others had said. They were described as "nervous," "sensitive," "clumsy," "neurotic." The first year of breeding, I allowed them two weeks of fledging and flight before clipping their wings so that they could go to new homes. With each successive year, I allowed longer periods of flight, until in my last year, I did not clip wings at all. I sent all babies home that year fully flighted, having never experienced a wing clip, and trained to fly to their owners on cue.

That experience was a revelation. I saw with clarity that most of what is written about parrot behavior applies only to clipped birds, and is not valid at all when it comes to describing true parrot behavior. I realized that almost nothing written to date about African Greys was true at all. Today, living with a flock of flighted African Greys, I can describe them as bold, curious, opportunistic, loving, funny, determined, playful, investigative, destructive, clever, quick...and extremely coordinated. Truly, they are "other nations"...creatures with a wealth of intelligence and resources. Living with these resourceful, energetic, brilliant creatures has given me a clear understanding of just how

inadequate are the generally accepted assumptions about parrot needs and how to provide for them.

Let us return now to my assertion that we err when we purchase a parrot with our own emotional needs in hand, and proceed to focus on our “relationship” with him when caring for him. Such a focus often leads directly to the day when the parrot loses his home.

I will give you an extreme example. As mentioned earlier, more than one individual has commented to me that her bird was her “soul mate.” While this is often announced with pride, it is a statement that makes me squirm. *Soul mate*. That’s a term that carries a heavy burden, if applied to an undomesticated species relatively new to captivity. Parrots are not exactly well-suited to this role, in my opinion, and I suspect that a single parrot could be profoundly unaware of his “job” in such a relationship. I get nervous when we expect a parrot to meet our own emotional needs. A parrot given this weighty job is almost sure to fail.

Consider, for example, the all-too-common phenomenon I often describe as the “lover’s triangle.” This occurs primarily in homes with cockatoos, although sometimes Amazons are the unwitting victims.

Many are drawn into cockatoo ownership when they first meet the baby Moluccan. It is gratifying to hold such an exotic animal, have him place his huge, peach-colored head on our shoulder, and relax into our human chest as we stroke those soft feathers. Such possession of the wild...of the exotic...is quite beyond anything ever visualized or previously experienced. It makes us feel very special. For those of us who might be a little lonely or a little needy, the experience is intoxicating and compelling. For some, it may even be enough for us to regard this creature as a soul mate. We hold him on our lap while at the computer. He sits on our shoulder as we fold laundry...a soft, exquisite, reassuring feathered presence, reminding us we are loved.

However, it is the very differences in paradigms held by parrot and human, which we examined earlier, that leads to later problems. The owner may have come to regard the parrot as a “soul mate.” The parrot, meanwhile, has become sexually mature and has formed an inappropriately strong and dependent pair bond with the owner. He often begins to display resource guarding behavior towards other family members.

Most of us know intellectually that a young parrot behaves quite differently than an adult, sexually mature parrot. However, this knowledge seems not to prepare the owner, for the day when the beak attached to the peach-colored head suddenly and unexpectedly bites deeply into the flesh of the forearm in response to the mere entrance into the room of the other person who lives there. It’s a shock. It hurts our feelings. We search our thoughts for some reason. What did we do to deserve that? Nothing, we are fairly sure.

This behavior often then escalates to the point where the cockatoo attacks and bites the other partner. Unfortunately, in the majority of cases the “other” human was not the one fondest of the parrot in the first case. Sometimes, not fond at all. Now, having to endure surprise attacks in one’s own home from a creature of whom you are not fond seems to be more than many people want to deal with. Very sadly, this situation usually results in the bird’s losing his home.

If we are to be successful with parrots in captivity, and prevent the frequent relinquishment of companion parrots, we must realize the folly of placing relationship expectations upon them. It is time to take a step back and review our thinking in many

areas related to parrots. We must again revisit and take to heart the truth that they are not domesticated, while we are, and explore the full ramifications of that. For, other problems also exist in the way we see and relate to our parrots.

I have observed that, once proof of an exotic species' intelligence is irrefutable, we then proceed to sentimentalize that species and immediately want to "possess" the experience of being close to it. This has happened with dolphins and the latter are now subjected to having to "swim" with humans. I doubt a little if this was what dolphins had in mind for themselves as their next evolutionary step. They get no choice in the matter, however. They are ours for training and entertainment.

And so it is with parrots now. Parrots are dynamic and exciting pets, offering us a previously unexplored companion animal experience. We sentimentalize them, attributing our own emotions to them. We expect them to be "in relationship" with us, and to behave in ways that are consistent with the unspoken relationship rules we set up for them. Further, because of our unrecognized differences in perspective, we misunderstand their needs, misinterpret their behavior, and focus on *pleasing* them. This leads us to stray far from good parrot keeping standards, which leads directly to the development of behavior problems.

In examining how we often misinterpret parrot needs, I can use a typical consultation I did this past year with a wonderful woman. She and her husband have three parrots, all of whom were having problems of one sort or another. Her macaw engaged in repetitive behaviors that were loud and disturbed the family dog. This same bird would not come out of her cage. Both the cockatoo and the grey showed aggression through biting and engaged in feather destructive behaviors.

She contacted me because she could see that her parrots were not happy and was thinking about giving them up. She believed that she did not have enough time, because of her job, to care for them properly. We proceeded with the understanding that I would help her to examine her caregiving practices, advise her in ways to improve them, and then help her place the birds if she found that their care was beyond her capabilities. My hunch when she first contacted me was that she felt the care of her birds was beyond her simply because she did not fully understand what those needs really are.

Before we started, I asked her to tell me what she would do for her parrots to make them happy if she had all the time she needed. Her response was revealing and consistent with what I have said above. She told me that, if she had the time to take really good care of them, she would spend between one and two hours a day with each of them.

She was focusing only upon their social needs, and this had allowed her to remain unaware of the manner in which their other needs were not being met. Together, we made changes in diet, environmental enrichment, and learning opportunities. Three months later, she reported significant improvement in all problem areas. Further, the changes we made demand of this client *much* less time spent on a daily basis than she had envisioned. She has no further thoughts of giving them up and no longer feels guilty when she looks at them.

This tendency to focus solely on relationship and our lack of true understanding of parrots...the tendency to see only *the feather magnified*...leads us to misinterpret their behavior as well. An example: the owner who described to me the ways in which her parrot helps her clean. She reported that, when she scrubs the carpet, her African Grey also gets down on the floor and digs with one foot. When she wipes down the cage, he

rubs his beak up and down the bars. He mimics her cleaning efforts because he is her “soul mate.” My own interpretation of these observations would be different.

For example, many greys dig with their feet. This is instinctive behavior and is seen in both baby Greys, as well as adults who are exhibiting breeding behaviors. It has nothing to do with wanting to help us clean. This is a harmless example, but this misinterpretation of motive and behavior often contributes to a lower quality of life for the parrot, and in some severe cases, the loss of the home.

The biggest problem I see, however, is the way we strive to *please* our parrots and make husbandry decisions accordingly. Many owners demonstrate caregiving decisions that are strongly centered around the owners’ perceptions of what the bird likes. If he doesn’t seem to *like* vegetables, we stop offering those. But, if he really *likes* peanut butter-filled pretzels, he gets eight a day and good nutrition is sacrificed in our need to make the bird happy. The majority of parrots in captivity suffer from malnutrition, and this is one of the reasons why. Further, owners are reluctant to introduce any new foods or experiences that their parrot doesn’t seem to like. This often results in a parrot profoundly lacking in living skills.

I believe this need to please stems from two sources. First, children who grow up in dysfunctional homes must stay safe by learning to anticipate the needs of others and by doing whatever it takes to make those others happy and content. Second, any of us will, sooner or later, begin to feel guilty about having parrots. The simple truth is that they should not be here with us. Some of us allow this truth to creep into our consciousness, and others manage to keep it at arm’s length. Let’s stop and explore this idea further before going on.

In most areas of the United States, capturing a wild bird and keeping it in a cage is illegal. For any who might have tried it, the distress demonstrated on the part of the bird is horrifying and heartrending. Even without the firsthand experience of trying to cage a wild bird, even the thought makes us shrink. We know that this would be very wrong. And, yet keeping parrots in cages with clipped wings has become quite acceptable. It is my assertion that this is only because we are able to distance ourselves not only from their true natures, but from the fact of their origins.

It is not much different, I think, than the subject of eating meat. Many of us are quite able to eat a steak as long as we purchase it from the grocery store in a white, sanitary, plastic wrapped package. Sold to us in this manner, it is quite a distance from the cow at the time of slaughter. Should we witness the slaughter and the butchering of the same cow, there are those among us who might not want to eat a steak that night.

Parrots, when sold as babies from store personnel or breeders who appear caring individuals, are a distance away from the reality of the manner in which many breeding pairs are kept in captivity, or from the way in which thousands of parrots are still brutally captured in the wild. Since we sentimentalize them anyway, it is easy to convince ourselves that the baby parrot needs us.

I believe it is really this sense of guilt that only occasionally creeps into our consciousness that causes owners to be so overly-concerned with what their parrot *likes*. If the parrot doesn’t eat his breakfast, they make him another. If he screams, they immediately run to him to receive information about what they must do...to see what he wants. A large cockatoo is allowed the run of the house, and the fact that he bites the feet and ankles of visitors is tolerated. Never would we behave this way with a human

toddler, and yet we tolerate out of control behavior from parrots, afraid to set limits and boundaries for them, which would easily be accomplished by teaching acceptable behaviors.

I hope that these examples are enough to elucidate the problems and convince readers of the fact that we have taken a rather profound wrong turn when it comes to providing for our parrots in the home. It is essential that we take a step back and view our parrots a bit more dispassionately. We must recognize and acknowledge that we should not have them. They don't belong here. They have a set of needs that is most difficult to provide for when we keep them in captivity. Further, *all* of these needs must be met if they are to have an adequate quality of life. Their need for social relationship is only one of those needs and it must be provided for in good balance with their other needs.

What are a parrot's basic needs? I will assert that, since they are only a few generations out of the wild at most, parrots still have a primary focus on basic survival and physical needs – the need for a high quality, appropriate diet that insures optimal health, the need to forage for food, the need to be busy, destroying things with their beaks, the need for social interaction and expression on multiple levels, the need to bathe, the need to exercise, the need for adequate rest, the need for safety, the need for fresh air and sunshine, the need for medical care, and the need to learn new things.

I encourage all who live with parrots to adopt what I have come to think of as a *zookeeper's approach* to providing for them. I'm sure that any good zookeeper working with parrots enjoys them and even loves them. However, he recognizes that his responsibility to them is the most important thing, more important than any relationship he might have with any one of them. If we place ourselves in relationship to our parrots in this manner, then we don't worry so much about what our parrots "like." We don't worry so much about being rejected by them and we don't get our feelings hurt by their behavior. Instead we focus on our responsibility to understand and provide for their needs in the most excellent way we can. This, I will point out, is a *selfless* endeavor.

Many years of consulting has shown me that the majority of behavior problems are the result of unmet needs, coupled with a lack of training. In almost every consultation I do, I simply improve the diet, make recommendations for a better environment and stress reduction that will result in a greater sense of safety for the bird, and then explain how and what to train. If all owners focused more on providing an exceptional diet and environment, and then trained their birds, there would be very few behavior problems, except those caused by medical problems. Let's go on to examine in more detail psittacine needs and how best to provide for them.

First, parrots have a need to forage for their food, in addition to their need for appropriate nutrition. This need is not addressed by the widely-accepted, recommendation that we feed a pellet-only diet. Certainly, pellet-based diets are a vast improvement over seed-based diets, in terms of nutritional content. Each of my parrots has a dish of pellets, and I consider them invaluable in terms of achieving optimal nutrition for my birds. While many have been resistant to eating pellets, I have found ways over the years to get them into the diet of each of my parrots in one way or another. I consider eating a good quality pellet to be a desirable living skill.

However, they do not address a parrot's need to forage and make food decisions. I believe it essential that the parrot in captivity be provided daily with a chopped "salad" of fresh, raw foods that provides variety and food making decisions, as well as appropriate

nutrition. In order to do this without too much trouble, I have long used a layered salad recipe for feeding my birds that requires chopping vegetables and fruits only once a week. This recipe can be found in the article “Feeding the Companion Parrot” and is also posted on this site as a single recipe as well.

Other foraging activities can be provided also. Parrots have an instinctive drive to discover what is inside of things. Thus, the more we can hide foods for them, in toys made for that purpose or in ways of our own devising, the more entertained they will be.

Next, is the need for excellent and appropriate nutrition. Each parrot species comes from a different area of the world and has a specific set of nutritional needs. Therefore, I question whether a pellet-only diet offers *appropriate* nutrition in all cases. Pellets, especially the more processed varieties, lack certain classes of nutrients, including essential fatty acids, enzymes, and phytonutrients.

Further, some adult individuals do not thrive when fed such nutrient-dense fare 365 days a year. Having such a high-protein, high-fat diet in front of them each day sometimes leads to louder, more aggressive, behavior, especially in large cockatoos and macaws. It can also lead to increased production of reproductive hormones. (Please refer to my article on hormonal behavior.

Jamie Gilardi, director of the World Parrot Trust, at the 2002 *Companion Parrot Quarterly* convention reported that studies of large macaws in the wild reveal that their diet contains approximately 29% fiber. Undoubtedly, this is true for most species in the wild, since they forage on plant materials as the basis of their diets. Parrots in captivity eating a wide variety of fresh, live, raw foods, in addition to pellets, not only reveal feather color and quality that is superior, but they also demonstrate steadier, calmer behavior. They reveal excitement when receiving their salad dishes and engage themselves throughout the day in important foraging activities. Such provisions go a long way toward meeting the standard of environmental enrichment that a good zookeeper strives for.

Parrots have an intense need to be busy, and it is the beak that is most often the tool they use for this. They must have a steady supply of “destroyables” in the cage. I have read repeatedly the often-quoted advice that owners should rotate toys. In my experience, I can rotate toys every day and it does not encourage my birds to be busy. My parrots take one look at the newly-rotated toy and play with it for about five minutes before returning to ignoring it.

However, they will spend an hour tearing apart a well-constructed food skewer. My African Grey feather-picker, Catherine Sophia, never learned to play with toys in her first home, but she will spend all day shredding the pages of a paperback book I have placed through her cage bars. Every parrot should be patterned, i.e. trained, to expect a new project every morning and they should receive one that will keep them busy for at least a portion of the day. There are some wonderful websites now, which can be found on my “Resources” page, that provide ideas for creating toys and daily projects.

Parrots are exquisitely social creatures and benefit from having a variety of relationships on many different levels. The quality of their most-enjoyed daily interactions has gone largely misunderstood, however. The majority of owners with whom I talk assume, as did the client mentioned earlier, that parrots want large blocks of time close to us or in direct communication with us. This misunderstanding has occurred

because of our practice of keeping our parrots with clipped wings. A clipped parrot truly cannot relate socially in a typically avian way.

When you observe a flock of flighted parrots, you will see that they enjoy most engaging in very brief social interactions. Trickery often plays a large part in them and the tone of these interactions is playful. If we strive to replicate this sort of interaction with our birds, we can keep them happier than if we carry them around on our shoulders all day or have them sit on our laps for hours.

Now that my parrots are flighted, they take equal initiative in instigating social interactions. My grey, Marko, will fly to my shoulder, flip upside down yelling “whee!” and then fly off again. Zorba will fly over to Harpo and they will briefly “beak tussle” before one of them leaves to find another perch. This is very typical behavior for parrots. Parrots do not usually spend large amounts of time sitting next to one another unless they are engaged in breeding and rearing young.

Even with clipped parrots, owners can focus on providing social interactions that have the same quality to them. Frequent, small bits of attention are greatly appreciated by companion parrots and go a long way to insuring more balanced relationships with them.

Another aspect of the social needs of parrots is the need to engage in parallel activities. They find it very satisfying to have their flock around them. Not only do they enjoy having the family flock around for this reason, but it contributes to a sense of security. I find bird rooms to sometimes be a problem. They are convenient for the owner who wants to contain the mess, but they do not meet the needs of parrots to be around the human flock members.

Parrots can’t enjoy good health without frequent bathing opportunities. This area of care, next to diet, is the one that seems to distress owners the most, in that they are reluctant to inflict upon their birds an experience that appears not to be enjoyed. However, parrots can and should be *taught* to at least tolerate bathing. Different parrots enjoy different bathing styles. My Goffin’s Cockatoo, Topper, does not enjoy a shower in the house. However, he will hang upside down and flap happily when outdoors in an aviary in the rain. It is the responsibility of all owners to find ways to bathe their parrots that work for them. It is not okay to “wimp out” in this area. This is merely a training issue.

Parrots need to exercise and it is critical that owners really appreciate what constitutes exercise. When I ask clients to describe how their parrot exercises, I often receive the explanation that he climbs around his cage. This is equivalent to saying that I exercise when I walk down the hall. Parrots need *aerobic* exercise to insure the greatest emotional and physical health.

Allowing flight is the most obvious way to provide for this need. This is not possible in many homes, but should be considered at least as a possibility. For a complete discussion of this topic, please refer to the article “*Feathers, Flight and Parrot Keeping.*” For those who cannot allow flight, there are other ways to exercise a parrot aerobically. I taught my Blue and Gold Macaw to step onto a yard-long rope, stretched between two hands, which I would then swing from one hand causing him to flap his wings. Also, many parrots will be more athletic when outdoors in a larger enclosure.

Parrots, as prey animals, have a fundamental need to feel safe in their environment. Many things that *we* take for granted will startle or scare our birds. We need to take their reactions seriously and find ways to make them comfortable in our homes. Cages should

not be placed directly in front of windows, allowing the greatest visibility and exposure. Raptors *will* stare at companion parrots through windows.

Keep the helium balloons *out* of the house – no birthday celebration is worth badly scaring your bird. Make your friend take *off* the baseball hat before walking into the room. Leave a nightlight on at night and close the blinds so that headlights won't sweep the room when least expected. Be considerate of the fact that these *captive* parrots of ours have no choices when clipped and kept in a cage.

I often observe one of two different inappropriate reactions in owners to their parrot's fear. Some owners do not take the parrot's discomfort seriously, and do nothing to accommodate the bird's reaction. Others, however, see their bird afraid and use the social relationship to reassure the bird. As soon as the bird shows nervousness, he is placed on the shoulder with the message "I'll keep you safe." While this is not a problem in some circumstances, if the parrot is a very nervous individual and the owner has a tendency to be overprotective, the bird will spend way too much time sheltered on the shoulder from the world at large and will never learn better living skills. Moreover, by rewarding the fearful behavior by putting the bird on the shoulder, we are actually teaching him to feel afraid more often. While we want to reassure our birds, we must also teach them that the world around them is safe. The more you train a parrot to accept new things, the safer he will feel in the world.

Parrots need fresh air and sunshine outdoors in an enclosure *that provides for physical safety*. This is not optional and it is not refutable. Think how you would feel if told that you had to spend the rest of your life indoors ...that you could never go outside and look at a tree, hear the sound of running water, or feel the sunshine on your skin or the wind in your hair...ever again. And yet, the vast majority of parrot owners do not ever consider seriously the expense of providing a large outdoor enclosure that also allows the bird to feel physically safe. Many companies now offer outdoors aviaries for parrots. To insure safety, the aviary wire spacing should be no larger than ½ inch by 3 inches. At least one-half of the roof should be covered by a material that provides shade, in addition to protection from the eyes of predators.

In addition to physical protection, parrots have a need to move about when outdoors, so the size of the enclosure is important. They need the freedom to move in or out of the sun, to be visible or to hide. Parrots will flap and move about more in a larger enclosure. Any outdoor aviary should be at least six feet wide. One of my favorites is six feet wide, four feet high and three feet deep. It stands up on legs and allows for plenty of room for even my large macaw to bathe and move around. There are many styles available and every parrot owner should budget for this expense as a necessity and research the many types available before selecting one that best meets his needs and those of his parrot.

Parrots need adequate rest. This has been widely written about, but still I find it discounted among owners. The standard recommendation is 12 hours of uninterrupted darkness a night. I have found that this actually varies from species to species. New World parrots, such as Amazons and macaws, often do need this much. Greys, who have been observed flying after dark in the wild, often can do with nine or ten hours of sleep a night. However, the quality of that rest is important; it is best if the room where they sleep is quiet and without disruption.

Next, parrots need preventive veterinary care. Many owners do not take their parrots in for annual exams. Reasons include distance, lack of funds, and a reluctance to stress

the bird by exposing it to the experience. Sadly, many veterinarians report a disinclination to see parrots *because all their patients die*. This is because owners wait until the bird is so ill that it is showing symptoms before they take it in. We know that, as prey animals, parrots will conceal symptoms of illness until the last minute. Such symptoms, however, can be as subtle as simply a decrease in vocalizations. They can be easy to miss. Every parrot should have an annual exam with an avian vet and have some laboratory testing done. Instead of trying to protect your parrot from the stress of a vet visit, work instead to teach the skills necessary to the experience – such as going into a carrier on cue, riding happily in the car, and allowing restraint in a towel.

Lastly, but critically important, parrots have a profound need for learning opportunities, as any intelligent creature does. The behavior of most adult parrots reflects a lack of learning experiences in their juvenile years. The best and truest statement I ever heard spoken is, “*Parrots are what you make of them.*” If a young parrot is fed a diet of variety that includes fresh foods and pellets, then he will *like* those things when he gets older. If he is provided with destroyable objects when young, he will keep himself busy when older. If he is bathed when young, he will not resist the experience when an adult. If he has been allowed to enjoy the outdoors when young, he will continue to embrace the experience without fear when he grows up. If he is allowed flight when young, he will learn to avoid dangers in the house and will exercise freely and joyfully when older.

Because of their genetic programming, parrots have a drive to learn everything they can about their environment in their early developmental periods before maturity sets in. After they reach adulthood, they automatically react with suspicion to anything new because of their status as prey animals. Thus, the learning opportunities afforded to a young parrot will directly determine the quality of his life during his entire captive existence. The length of this developmental period differs according to the size of the parrot. For smaller birds, such as cockatiels and conures, it lasts approximately a year to 18 months. For Amazons and African Greys, it lasts between two and five years. For larger macaws and cockatoos, it can last between four and seven years. I oppose the purchase of a baby parrot by anyone who is gone from the house for more than nine hours a day and cannot allow the parrot at least three to four hours out of the cage each day.

An older parrot that shuns fresh foods, displays fear of being outdoors, cringes when bathed, sits in one place all day, and avoids new things placed in the cage simply never had enough appropriate learning opportunities when young. However, that older parrot still *needs* learning activities. It is not acceptable to acquiesce and maintain the parrot’s status quo, offering the excuse that he doesn’t *like* those things. Instead, the owner should learn more about training techniques and work with the parrot to teach him to accept these experiences and enjoy them. It is not as hard as it might seem at first glance.

Further, even parrots with good living skills need training and learning experiences. As mentioned earlier, the majority of behavior problems will improve when the owner steps into the role of trainer or teacher, and increases learning opportunities. I encourage any parrot owner to learn about and implement positive reinforcement training with his bird, teaching perhaps some simple tricks, in addition to core husbandry skills. Such learning contributes hugely to a parrot’s quality of life.

I have been doing some research lately into the quality of life for animals, and read an interesting article, titled *Maximizing Quality of Life in Ill Animals* in the May/June 2003

issue of the *Journal of the American Animal Hospital Association*. The author, Franklin D. McMillan, DVM listed the major contributing factors to quality of life for all animals, ill or not. These included social relationships, mental stimulation, health, food consumption, stress, and control. I was interested, but not surprised, to see that *control* was listed as necessary to quality of life.

Dr. McMillan states, “A large body of research in animals and humans has demonstrated that a sense of control over one’s life and circumstances, especially the unpleasant feelings and events, is one of the most reliable predictors of positive feelings of well-being and health.” He goes on to explain that animals deprived of any control over their own circumstances, especially under persistent or repetitive aversive conditions, may develop severe emotional distress in the form of helplessness and hopelessness.

Herein lies the challenge of successful parrot-keeping. How do we afford a companion parrot, who lives the majority of time in a cage, and has clipped wings preventing freedom of movement, any sense of control? This is a difficult problem to solve, and will take the creativity and dedication that we all have if our parrots are going to have excellent quality of life.

Dr. McMillan goes on, however, to point out that “having choices imparts control and permits the animal to increase pleasurable experiences, as the animal can select certain activities or stimuli over other less desirable options.” You will notice that many of the recommendations above offer just that – the ability to make choices and weigh options. A wide variety of healthful foods allows for choice-making. Being flighted contributes hugely to this.

It is time that those of us who enjoy the presence of parrots in our homes stop placing relationship expectations upon them and instead treat them like the *other nations* that they are. Let’s just enjoy them and provide well for them and let that be enough. See it as a way of honoring the parrots in the wild...as well as “the wild” itself. Stop requiring that parrots always show us affection and never react with less than that. Accept the truth that our own feelings of affection for our birds will come and go throughout a long life with them. The same will be true for them. This does not dispel our responsibility *to* them.

This recognition of our responsibility to provide *selflessly* for *all* of the needs our captive parrots have mirrors the same responsibility we have to wild parrots, of which we must remain cognizant. Our experiences with our companion dogs and cats do not call us to consider a higher level of responsibility, due to the fact that their link with the wild has long since been erased by centuries of domestication. However, parrots are not domesticated and their habitat is being destroyed with each passing day.

I assert that it is critical to our spiritual development as humans that we work to honor *the wild* in any way we are able. We are lucky to have our parrots to provide us with a daily reminder of the magic of that wild world.

Barbara Kingsolver wrote, in her collection of short essays titled Small Wonder, about some friends who had visited Cancun. They were dismayed at the devastation of the forested area that was becoming evident. Kingsolver reports that her friends, wanting to preserve something of that remarkable place, brought back with them some orchids they had collected.

Kingsolver comments, *“I admired their enterprise and empathized with their heartbreak at seeing delicate, rare lives crushed. And yet if it had been my choice to make, I think I’d have felt uneasy at the prospect of profiting in any way – even just aesthetically – from the destruction of a sacred place. Maybe I’m wrong about this, or maybe there really is no right way to look at it, but my heart tells me it’s better to grieve the whole loss than to save a handful of orchids. Better to devote oneself to anger and bereavement, to confront the real possibility that soon there will be nowhere left to go, anywhere, to see an orchid in the wild, than to derive a single iota of pleasure from these small, doomed relics of a home that’s forever gone. Anger and bereavement, throughout history, have provided the engine for relentless struggles for change. In a greenhouse these orchids will flourish awhile and then, after a few years or many, die. A jungle is a form of eternal life, as ephemeral and enduring as the concept of love or mystery. It cannot be collected.”*

And yet...that is just what we have done. We have collected our prizes... our greys and Amazons and cockatoos. We keep parrots, who naturally have the exuberance and energy of sentient, flighted creatures, in cages with their wings clipped to inhibit their movement...for nothing more than our own pleasure. As Kingsolver states, perhaps there is no right way to look at this. And certainly, I am not suggesting that we return our parrots to the wild. Nor am I suggesting it is wrong to keep them in cages and enjoy them. I am suggesting, however, that we do so consciously and with compassion and with respect.

As Sandra Ingerman writes in Medicine for the Earth, “Life is a spiritual practice. You must concentrate your efforts on living a life infused with spirit.” This requires that we face squarely the truth that our parrots do not belong here with us...that we accept this without squirming and make some decisions based upon this.

First, be the very best zookeepers we can be and provide selflessly for our birds.

Second, let’s work to see that all parrots have a better existence in captivity. Perhaps we should not spend our money in stores that don’t care well for their birds...or perhaps stores that sell parrots at all. Each of us must decide where to draw the line. Each of us can choose daily to speak up when we see a bird being inadequately cared for or mistreated. We do not have to be silently complicit with any neglectful conditions. We can learn to educate others kindly and clearly.

Third, we each have the power to both help parrots in captivity and those in the wild by contributing to organizations whose work is well-known and reliable. We can support organizations like Phoenix Landing and the Parrot Education and Adoption Center with our dollars or our volunteer hours. We can make a contribution to the World Parrot Trust or other cause each year. Such a contribution might be made on your parrot’s birthday. If we look, we will each find ways to contribute that are within our means.

Years ago I wrote the following: *Parrots are only recently out of the wild. Essentially, we have in our hands the interface between the wild and man in civilization. What we allow ourselves to learn from them could have far-reaching implications. Sometimes I allow myself to wonder if they could conceivably have the power, by virtue of their place with us in space and time and their great beauty and intelligence, to finally convince man of the need to preserve what is natural and most precious. They can touch us where we live.*

Let's enjoy and provide for our companion parrots with full recognition of the fact that we owe a debt to parrots...those in our homes...and those in the wild. Accepting this and taking action upon this truth will make us better caregivers in captivity. It will serve to prevent us from taking for granted the feathers in our homes and help us also to remain aware of the need to ever search for better ways to provide for them in captivity, as well as preserve them in the wild.