

It's a dog-eat-dog world out there

Dec 1, 2013 by Daniel J. Bauer

Local writer Giddens Ko, better known perhaps as Jiubadai, has produced a new documentary film on the fate of dogs turned over to public animal shelters here in Taipei. A recent newspaper report described the film as devoid of spoken words, but eloquent in its message, which focuses from various camera angles on the lives of these often pitiful animals. The film attempts to tell the story from the viewpoint of the dogs themselves. The footage includes scenes that occur in the shelters when staffers are off-duty.

The title of the documentary is "Twelve Days." That is an appropriate title, because dogs entering a public shelter that are not adopted within 12 days are routinely put to sleep.

On one level the film urges viewers to appreciate the value of life, including the life of a dog. To adopt a dog from a shelter or to bring one into our lives in another way, and then to tire of the pooch and simply abandon it, may well doom the creature to the "12 day reality" that so many dogs face in Taiwan every year. About 200 dogs are put to death every day in our animal shelters.

The film pushes us to be a bit less cruel, and a bit more humane with our furry friends. Being a betting man, I bet "Twelve Days" spurs many a good thought for us.

Do you or your loved ones have a pet dog? Does that dog add to your quality of life? Do you or people close to you feel affection for the animal, "love" her or him in a certain real way, and make sacrifices for its welfare? If so, I can easily slip into your feelings because I've been there, too.

Nearly a lifetime ago, my sister won a puppy in an elementary school raffle. We called him Sporty, and told ourselves we'd give him a good life. Our parents however had no idea of medical care for a puppy, and knew nothing of a disease called distemper. We didn't get shots for Sporty because we didn't know he needed them. The poor fellow got distemper and went to doggy heaven in a matter of weeks.

Eventually Sporty was replaced by Lucky, a beagle-cocker mutt that we "loved" instantly. Lucky lived till the age of 18. When she came to

our family, my younger brother was 5 years old. By the time died, he was a married man.

Like many, I still treasure the happy images of a dog that we considered a member of our family. Those images are different than some of the images I have of dogs here in Taiwan.

I don't see the cruelty so often anymore, but up until recent years, my daily jogs took me along nearby roads that had large and fearsome watchdogs locked in cages besides factories or homes. The cages resembled shoe-boxes made of wire. In most cases these German Shepherds or Dobermans had to stand bent over in a crouched position, their pens deviously, hellishly confining. No happy image there.

When is the last time you saw someone exercising a dog from the seat of a motorcycle? You know what I mean: the dog is on a leash, running its heart out to keep up with a driver nonchalantly imagining he's doing his pet a favor. The poor mutt must at all costs keep its feet pumping 500 kilometers per hour, lest it get itself strangled to death. No happy image there.

I occasionally spot a dog very unlike the German Shepherds and Co. mentioned above. The creature may be a palm-sized poodle, a chihuahua, or other such miniature. A pretty woman may be sipping coffee at an upscale coffee shop, the chihuahua or poodle perched on her table in a carrying cage. I've seen students do this to dogs, too. Behold the pet cooped and carted from one fashionable place to another like an eye-catching accessory, like a piece of showy costume jewelry. Others may smile at these games of not-so-gentle vanity. I am more inclined to roll my eyes and sigh. If you were a dog, would you want to subjected to this sort of treatment?

I do not believe we should treat dogs better than we treat human beings in our lives. I put "love" in quote marks above because love has a special meaning. We ought to love the people in our lives, and care, care deeply for our pets.

Our dogs deserve our respect, nurture, and protection. Dogs do have some rights of their own. "Twelve Days" is sure to remind viewers of these basic truths. (Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.)

Talking points :

1. This column focuses on a new documentary movie about stray dogs after they are placed in animal shelters in Taipei. What do you know about the treatment of dogs in these shelters? What are the conditions like there?
2. Why do people adopt dogs from shelters or buy dogs and then, after a while, abandon the dogs, no longer wanting to care for them?
3. The column mentions types of human behavior toward dogs that do not treat the animals with respect or care, such as the use of various types of cages or 'exercise routines' for dogs. Have you noticed behavior with dogs that pleases you or perhaps displeases you?

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