

## Creatures of Habit



By Elizabeth Chandler

If I could define the perfect job for me, it would be observing animal behavior. I love to watch the interactions and social (sometimes anti-social) behaviors of my pets. While some people enjoy “people watching,” I find animal watching to be far more interesting and enlightening. For one thing, people carry baggage into almost every interaction, but everything animals do, as Robert Redford said in *Out of Africa*, they do for the first time, even if they’ve done it a million times.

If you have a dog or a cat, you know what I’m talking about -- the way they do one thing or another in exactly the same way they did it every time before. In my home, when I open the sliding glass door to let the dogs out into the yard, they go out in the same configuration every single time; the same dogs turn to the left toward the big oak tree while the others always turn to the right toward the guava berry tree. Why? I couldn’t tell you. But it is as reliable as clockwork!

(By the way, did you know that you can tell if your dog is left or right handed by the direction in which they spin before they lay down? I learned this in my agility class because the *handedness* of a dog has a lot to do with how well they manage an obstacle depending upon the direction of approach. Watch your dog as they spin to lie down and see if you can tell whether they are righties or lefties or even possibly ambidextrous.)

My cats get in on the action of being habitual, too. A few of my cats hang out in my fenced backyard and they have preferred places to lay. What is appealing about these spots is not always entirely evident to me (one of my cats has taken to sleeping in the bottom of an old garbage can!), but for whatever reason, the places they choose seem to bring them comfort and pleasure. Humans do that, too, if you think about it. I’ve never taken a class or seminar where the humans didn’t always take the same seat every time they came into the room.

My dogs have favorite places, too. No matter where in the yard they go to pick up a stick to chew, they always bring it back to what I refer to as the “chewing place.” I have a good sized yard and they could certainly chew their sticks anywhere, but they always bring it to the same place before they settle in to a good chew. Other habitual, and possibly strange, behaviors include my sheltie, Neo, who consistently barks and jumps (sometimes as high as 6 ft. straight up) at a mango tree in my yard. Now, I have lots of trees in my yard, so what is the deal with this particular tree? Apparently, Neo sees something that has eluded my human senses. Or maybe it’s just plain fun to jump that high and bark (it does sort of look like fun). I’ve always appreciated the animals’ ability to have simple, unabashed fun, with no concern for how they might look to others.

When the dogs and cats and I turn in for the night, we all “assume” our positions on the bed (one of my dogs is night-blind, so I must get him up on the bed before I turn out the lights, thereby giving all of the other dogs and cats the opportunity to settle in on the bed, leaving little or no room for me!) and their positions are almost always exactly the same. Cassie, one of my beagles, likes to burrow under the covers and will whine until I find a way to lift the covers (by now weighed down by more than a few dogs and cats well entrenched in their positions of choice) to allow her access. Then she spins, flops down, and makes a sighing sound of happy contentedness. I know then that she is settled, and I can now settle into peaceful sleep, as well.

There must be something that transcends the human/animal boundaries that favors habitual behaviors; maybe it is simply the amount of comfort that comes with familiarity. But it seems to me that in the wild, habitual behaviors just might get you killed (the lion would know exactly where to look for you), so I’m not sure there are survival benefits to this behavior. Evolutionarily speaking, where does this social behavior come from? I don’t know, but I’m going to keep watching my pets until I figure it out!

***Elizabeth Chandler is a loving mom to several furry companions with whom she shares her life.***