

The Call of the Wild

Dear Connie,

I recently moved to Montana from Philadelphia to join my fiancé, and we have a problem. I was born and raised in the city, and my life revolved around books, concerts and the theater. I walked in the park, but I never went to camp or spent time in a national park or any kind of wilderness. I've never had a dog or even a cat; my mother wouldn't allow it.

My fiancé, Dan, has always lived in Montana. He wants to spend every available minute outdoors with his two black labs—and me if I'll go. He's upset that I don't care to have a relationship with his dogs or the wilderness. I'm an indoor person, and I don't see what the big deal is about Bozeman and dogs. Being out in nature isn't important to me. Besides, I'm afraid of grizzly bears and mountain lions and whatever else might be out there waiting to get me. How can we resolve this?

Sincerely, —Brittany

Dear Brittany,

It's interesting that you and your fiancé were drawn to one another despite the difference in your feelings and attitudes toward the natural world, including animals. My intuition is that your experience of living in the city, and how that shaped



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Social Work. She went on to graduate from the Barbara Brennan School of Healing, and Society of Souls, a kabalistic school of healing. She is the author of "Gathering the Soul, a True Story of Spiritual Healing." Pathwork (Pathwork.org) and Imago Relationship Therapy (www.GettingTheLoeYouWant.org) are two easily accessible sources for the theories upon which much of this column is based.



you, is part of what attracted Dan to you. And, though you are having a hard time embracing his outdoor lifestyle, there is something in it that appeals to you, or you would have chosen someone with a background more like yours.

Like most relationship challenges, resolution of this conflict will require that you and your fiancé communicate clearly with each other about what makes your different preferences important to you. Ask your fiancé what it means to be outdoors with his dogs—how does he feel when he's hiking in the mountains, or bird hunting if he's a hunter? What does it mean to you to be home rather than joining him? What might you be willing to give to one another, just because it would make the other happy, just because you love one another. For example, if you go hiking or snowshoeing with him on a weekend, he might be willing to attend a musical event, go to a museum, or stay home and play scrabble with you another day. What's important is that you each demonstrate a willingness to understand and develop compassion for one another's different backgrounds and interests, looking for the common ground that will deepen the bond you already have.

I wonder about your lack of relationship to your fiancé's dogs. It sounds like there was a time in your life when you wanted a pet and couldn't have one, and from my perspective that is a real loss. There is

a great deal of research that has examined and validated the importance of the human-animal bond. Petting a friendly dog, brushing a calm horse, even holding a furry guinea pig, all have a soothing, relaxing effect on humans. Dogs, horses, and other animals are routinely used as therapy animals in successful programs around the country. *Reading Education Assistance Dogs (R.E.A.D.)* go with their human partners to libraries and schools where children relax while reading to a dog, and their reading skills improve.

Is there some part of you that would like to be closer to Dan's dogs? To enjoy their company? Would you consider brushing them once or twice a week, playing ball or Frisbee with them, encouraging them to stay near you (treats work wonders!) when you're home reading or watching TV? If you do these things, the labs may begin to bond with you, and you with them. Your relationship with Dan would benefit, too.

Your last sentence intrigues me—it sounds like you have a real fear of being in the wild. This is understandable since you were raised in a big city. However, being outdoors, particularly in a natural, uncrowded environment, does have inherent value for all of us. Spending time in the natural world has many benefits, not least of which is that we get away from the constant stimulation all of us are exposed to every day. We need quiet. We need to listen to the sound of redtail hawks and sandhill cranes. We need to smell wild roses and pines and the pungent forest floor. We need to climb hills and mountains, if we can, to see far beyond our circumscribed communities. We need to be reminded that even if we live busy, productive, "civilized" lives, we are still deeply connected to and dependent upon Mother Earth. When we spend time in the wild, we reconnect with that knowledge, and we connect more deeply with ourselves. If you are afraid of wilderness, ask yourself how much of that is fear

Do you have a relationship question?

E-mail mtlionlady@gmail.com, or call 406-582-7450 and ask! E-mail sent to Connie is read only by Connie Myslik-McFadden, MSS, LCSW, and will be held in strictest confidence. No identities will be published. Disclaimer: The responses to questions in this column are for information only. Never disregard professional advice or delay seeking it because of anything you read here. Working with a skilled professional is highly recommended.

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of the unknown. If you are afraid of wild animals, check to see what part of you mirrors the animals you fear.

To become more comfortable with outer wilderness, you might start by going someplace close to home but still wild enough to take you to the edge of your comfort zone. Notice how you feel, and write about it afterward. There may be something to learn, not only about the wild, but about yourself. If you're in an area where there could be a cougar or bear, be prepared so you don't have to be afraid. Ask your fiancé to explain their habits to you, and carry pepper spray as a common sense precaution.

Once you're more comfortable with the dogs, and have spent some time in wild nature, you might want to consider going on a retreat that focuses on wilderness experience. That would probably be a big step for you, but one that would open a door to enjoying the amazing amount of beauty and rich experience that is available to everyone who spends time outdoors in Montana. ■

Good luck, Brittany! —Connie

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