

## Ethograms as Ethics

(An excerpt from *Who's a Good Dog? And How to Be a Better Human*, by Jessica Pierce)

In his beautiful guide to the world of birds, *What It's Like to Be A Bird*, David Allen Sibley says, “You will learn faster if you can be an active observer—draw sketches, take notes, write poetry, take photos—whatever will make you look a little more carefully and a little longer . . . The more you notice the more you will learn.” One thing I love about Sibley’s instruction is that he invites us to meld the scientific into the creative, to be both observer and participant, naturalist and story-teller storyteller.

One of the tools used by ethologists as they observe animal behavior is an ethogram, a catalog of behaviors. If you were getting a Ph.D. in animal behavior, there might be good and bad ethograms. But for our purposes here, there is no right or wrong way to do an ethogram. Any ethogram is a good ethogram—and with practice, your ethograms will likely get better and better. Ethograms are exercises in mindfulness, attention, and being present. You can think of an ethogram as an exercise in getting to know your dog and as an exercise in noticing how and what you notice, so that it is an ethogram of yourself, too. Note the shared etymology of ethics and ethogram: Ethics is from Greek *ēthos*, “nature, disposition,” and has come to mean “the characteristic spirit of a culture, era, or community as manifested in its beliefs and aspirations.”

The possibilities for what we can observe and record (with lists, narratives, poems, photos, drawings, dance, etc.) are endless. Here are some ideas for you and your dog:

- Your dog at rest (really sleeping vs. resting but aware; dreaming; when and where does she like to sleep).
- Your dog in solitary play or exploration.
- Your dog interacting with other dogs, whether in dyads or in groups; with familiar dogs/friends and with unfamiliar dogs. Are there some dogs your dog doesn’t seem to like? Why do you suppose?
- Your dog interacting with humans—your dog with you, with other familiar people, and with strangers.
- Your dog’s foraging and scavenging strategies on walks and in the home.
- Your dog’s social circle. Who are the important humans (both liked and disliked); who are the important canine friends, enemies, and frenemies (in the house, in the neighborhood, at the dog park). park)? With which other species does your dog interact (squirrels, birds, cats)?

- Your dog's home range and territory. Make an ethogram of what you think might be territorial behaviors. How does your dog use the space within the home (which spots are for rest, which for being vigilant)?
- Activities to observe: play, rest (deep sleep vs. alert resting, dreaming), eating, drinking, peeing, pooping, patrolling, soliciting attention.
- Parts of the body to observe: nose, ears, eyes, whiskers, hackles, tail, body, legs, jowls.
- Vocalizations to hear (growls, barks, howls, whines, silence, "fft" or sounds that don't fit any of these categories and which only your dog knows how to make, like the "fft" sound made by John Steinbeck's dog Charley).