

Learning About Love From A Dog

Pets not only teach us, they "show us the best of ourselves."

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"Animals are such agreeable friends, they ask no questions, they pass no criticisms." -George Eliot

When I first received a three-month-old Maltese puppy, I had no idea what a real gift I had been given. Never having experienced motherhood, and having lived without a pet for my entire adult life, I could not have known the immense responsibility expected of me-or have anticipated all I would come to learn. I mean, this is a tiny four-legged creature. What on earth could he teach me?

I found myself quickly progressing from self-consciousness and squeamishness regarding the details of raising my little puppy to complete selflessness and incessant kissing-even on the mouth! Picking up his poop became second nature, I had no reservations, and when he licked me, I was not grossed out, I laughed!



The little life dependent upon me for its sustenance has caused me to consider just about every move I make in terms of how it affects him. I cannot go out of town without considering him; I cannot even go for a run first thing in the morning without first taking him for his morning walk. There are times often-when his needs take precedence over my desires, needs, and compulsions.

I was living the reality of incredible benefits that I would have missed, if I'd followed my intellectual predilections. Is this what motherhood is all about? I felt silly. I hardly wanted people to know how deeply I felt for "my baby." But my momentary self-consciousness quickly dissipated. I did not care what anyone saw or thought about what they saw or heard. If they did not like it, it was simply because they had not had the great fortune of

falling in love with a dog-or with any animal, I now came to believe.

Socrates, my sweet little pet, has given me more joy than I could have imagined. He has made me laugh more, smile often, and practice patience. To say that I learned to stop and smell the flowers sounds cliched, but I do that, too. I enjoy communing with nature as we go on our daily treks around the neighborhood. In fact, it has made me more "neighborly," as I exchange pleasantries with others walking their dogs or simply enjoying mine.

There is no doubt that I have come to understand more about unconditional love and acceptance, but I have also learned a great deal more about myself. I like that I am a "good mom," that in some small measure I am responsible for Socrates' pleasant disposition. And I consider it a blessing that I look at all animals differently now.

For me, this experience began another journey. Like so many others, I figured that I simply could not be alone in being affected so profoundly as a dog "parent" (I can't call us owners or masters). So I went on a quest to find out.

I turned first to my family, who received my questions with incredulity. None of it was news to them. By the time I began asking friends, most of whom had had pets for years, I became convinced of my good fortune as an unwitting member of a secret society for a tremendous source of love.

We are mothers and fathers, as we secure the services of sitters-albeit with great reluctance and often guilt when we leave our babies for too long. We arrange for exercise and play time, and monitor the health of our beloved animals. We get stressed out about and sometimes obsess over these sweet dependent beings-all the while deriving a tremendous sense of satisfaction and pleasure from them.

One of my new friends, George Rondo, whom I met in Central Park on his daily strolls with his two Jack Russell Terriers, Walter and Harry, told me that he actually knows people not by their names but by the names of their pets. George has low tolerance for those who are not what he calls "dog people," particularly if they

display a "nastiness" concerning dogs. He is retired from work in the theater that "took him all over the world," and now he is happy to be at home enjoying the simplest pleasures with his "two boys." During our talk one day, we met up with Julie and Dobby (whom she adopted from the New York City Herding Dog Rescue) and began to discuss the socialization value that I mentioned earlier. "I've met so many strangers," Julie said. And then she added, "I've spoken to more people in five months than I had in the previous twenty-five years!" We agreed that there is an inevitable sense of community one experiences with having a dog.

I met "Jane," a psychotherapist, with a very animated- jocular even English bulldog with piercing blue eyes. At the time of our encounter, Alexi, two and a half years of age, was entertaining his Mom and a number of other onlookers as he jumped in and out of a fountain of water fetching a ball in Central Park. Jane told me that Alexi was atypically active, had become a local celebrity, and "just makes people smile." She hadn't had children either and said that Alexi has "changed her life," makes her feel alive, and brings out the best in her.

I met so many people who told heartfelt stories of their "rescued dogs." These sweet animals appeared particularly attached to their parents. "Do you think it is because they appreciate their good fortune?" I asked. No one knew, of course, and no one cared. The appreciation was truly mutual.

Most people I interviewed told of how they acquired their dogs in a similar fashion: "It was love at first sight." Antone, who works at the UN, brought his Westie from his home in Greece when he was only one month old. "He stared at me and I decided to take him," he said. Antone gave his dog the name of Hombre because of an incident involving a much larger German Shepherd. When his dog "went after him and barked," he considered his bravery and thought the name befitting his courageous little animal.

My friend David told me that he went reluctantly into a shelter one day and when all the dogs were barking away, there was this little quiet "interesting looking" one in the back who just looked at him a certain way (which David interpreted to be "take me, please"). He turned to one of the caretakers and said "put a leash on him, he's going with me." As he left the place, dog in tow, he questioned how in the heck he was going to care for a pet when he is such a busy person, working out of town often. Today, he says, with what he has received from BuddN; he cannot imagine not having him there to so enthusiastically greet him as he returns home. "Who else is that excited to see you every single day?"

Glen and Dana are in the entertainment business. They never had children, but Lucky, a black longhaired Chihuahua and Daisy, a white and brown colored short hair Chihuahua, have filled whatever void may have been felt by this married couple. "They're my kids!" Dana exclaims, explaining to me how this small dog section of the park is a routine gathering place for others like her and Glen. While Daisy, age 4, was the intentional addition, Lucky, age 5, was adopted at eight months after he had the misfortune of someone "giving him up," causing him to live in nine different homes before the Orensteins added him to their family.

I encountered an enthusiastic professional dog walker by the name of Annick, while visiting Washington Square Park. She was playing catch with Elvis, one of her favorites, a two and a half year old Pembroke Welsh Corgi and assured me that "this little guy will play until he gets heat stroke" (it was a 90 degree summer day). In places like New York City, one can make a living walking dogs, but Annick provides what she calls "solo care." This means that she works with no more than three dogs in each day, booking for thirty to sixty minutes at a time to include a "dog run" and attend to whatever special requests her clients may have. While it is true that these folks are generally able to afford such a luxury, Annick knows that they also love and care enough to provide personal and quality attention for their precious pets. "I love loving my job," says Annick, as she develops close relationships with the dogs she is entrusted with-a trust she appreciates and very takes seriously. From the way it appears, what she gets back from her "dog clients" is at least equal to what she gives.

"I wish I could meet someone who was `just a dog,'" jokes a single mother of three rescue dogs: Mugsy, a petite basset hound griffon and Jack Russell mix; Lucy, a seven month old Brussels griffon mix; and a taciturn five-year old shiatsu named Bogey. Melody teaches web design at Pratt Institute and although she is interested in a relationship, loving her dogs is a prerequisite to winning her heart. She believes strongly that pets not only teach us, they "show us the best of ourselves," and assures me that they rescued her. When I mentioned that I had been thinking about writing a book on the subject, Melody champions this project as she sincerely believes that there is a need "to elevate the consciousness of people to understand how important dogs are." I thought of all I have learned here, how my own experience has enriched my life and given me such awareness, and I could not agree with her more.

People have often questioned me about my baby's name. Why Socrates= They ask, does it have something to do with you being a writer? What a big name for such a little dog. But as it turns out, when I consider all the wisdom I have gained through him. Socrates was the right name.

"Until one has loved an animal, a part of one's soul remains unawakened."

-Anatole France

Dolah Saleh is presently collecting "dog stories" for a book that she would like to have published one day.