

A Message to Wayne: On Pet Loss

By Lori Jo Oswald

I saw you there many mornings, and some afternoons. We had both discovered a secret place, a private parking lot surrounded by woods, where we could let our dogs out of our respective vehicles.

For a long time we hardly spoke to each other. It's as if we were afraid. I know what I was thinking, Is this going to be one of them? One of those dog owners that I'd only recently started encountering the last couple years, who didn't want any other dog near theirs, who screamed angrily at those whose pets ran off-leash even though theirs were often off-leash?

But you were not one of them. In passing, those mornings, we would nod at each other, maybe say hello, little more.

But over time, we came to trust the common bond we held, and talked a bit more.

The common bond was our old labs. Your chocolate brown one--his face now splattered with rich gray and white hairs--slowly eased himself beside you, his tail wagging as slowly as the rest of his body. He was a gentleman, it was clear, just as you were. I loved to watch the two of you; you'd obviously shared many years and much love between you. You had that human-animal bond that bespeaks true friendship and trust and devotion, of a quality so rarely found in life.

I had an old dog too, not nearly as old as yours but aging quicker due to permanent internal injuries inflicted by a moose kick in 1994. Plus his arthritis and hip dysplasia troubled him from time to time. Still, Eb expected his walks, no matter that they got shorter and shorter.

We looked at each other--you and I--with the eyes that said volumes: We each have an old dog, a dog we love fiercely, a dog who is losing his grip on this life more and more each day, a dog we value so much that we bring him at least once a day to this place--this parking lot--this little spot of freedom

where no one will yell at us, or cite us, or tell us to put a leash on our old friend, or report us. Here, in our hideaway, we can just walk our friend like in the "old days," up to a couple years ago, when people weren't afraid of an old dog, and new laws weren't preventing walks like these.

And so now, Eb is gone.

And just this summer I have learned, Wayne, that your old friend is gone too.

I miss him, even though I never really knew his name. What I knew was enough--he had the old Labrador soul: faithful, grateful, and full of love for you. You gave him a good life, a beautiful life, and a glorious dignified old age. Don't you ever feel bad about his leaving. In my humane society work I have seen too many old dogs left to die in animal controls--"pounds"--or taken to a vet for a quick shot long before their time, just because the dog could no longer run with a bicycle or needed a few hundred dollars of vet care.

You and I, we know differently. We know that an old dog--no matter how expensive, no matter how much "trouble"--is the most glorious of creatures. We watched our old dogs age away, and it broke our hearts, but it strengthened us too. We learned from their courage and faith and devotion.

I was so lucky to meet you, to see you those mornings in the parking lot. And your old friend, he was luckiest of all, to have an owner who so cared about him as to drive him every day to a place where he could ramble about, sniffing the trees and grasses, put his eyes and head up into the wind, and feel the freedom in his bones of his youth.

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