

Editorial: Aging Pets and Homeless Pets

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Sometimes I envy my friends who have children instead of pets. No, not because of the tax deductions, but because—God willing—in most cases, their children will outlive them. But my “children” will die long before I do. And it never gets any easier when they go.

After every loss, there is that period of shocked disbelief—of reaching, dreaming, even calling your pet’s name, wanting to forget you’ll never see him again. I read once that people who love their pets can find their loss the hardest to take because that pet is so key in their lives and others don’t often understand this.



Lately, I’ve seen signs that old age is going to take more of my companions.

Sylvia, the black cat I found in 1986 in a mall bathroom, barely big enough to contain the

squeaks coming out of her kitten body, sprouted her first gray whisker this week. And a few nights ago, Eb, my old black lab, did something he’s only done once before in his life, and it broke my heart. Because I knew what it represents.

What he did was, he struggled his arthritic body off the bed, got down on the floor, went into the closet, and urinated on the floor.

Training Eb and Woody: A Study in Contrasts

Eb only did that once before, when he was a silly little black puppy who first came home to live with me 10 years ago. He “tinkled” on the floor, I said no, picked him up, carried him outside, and explained that this is where he was going to go from now on. Now, most puppies require further convincing—my other pup Woody took about 4 months to agree with me on this outside thing—but Eb saw my point immediately.

I decided Eb was a genius, while Woody—although pure love—was a little slow. Take the command “shake” for example. Woody kept forgetting even though he desperately wanted to remember because he loved the treats involved in this confusing game. But

Eb—he was a dog trainer’s miracle. One time for everything: shake, sit, lie, come. And only one “accident.” Until now.

The Shock of Old Age’s Effects

So the other night, I was shocked and he was shocked.

We looked at each other embarrassed after it happened.



It seems unfair that he grows old so much quicker than I. His body—and perhaps a little bit of his mind—is breaking down while mine is still building up (although Christmas candy will no-doubt build it up in ways I don’t quite intend).

I pulled myself together, “No, Eb, you go outside for that!” I started to lead him to the door, but he panicked and ran back to the bedroom. I thought about it as I cleaned up, and how my initial feeling was how could he be so bad and how he should be TOLD he was bad, and

then I thought, of course he knows he wasn't supposed to do that, and he's as confused and scared as I am over this.

So I hugged him and talked to him about it and assured him it's okay and that I love him and will do everything I can for him through this tough old age. Slowly he relaxed and managed to jump on the bed (which gets harder for him every day), and snored himself to sleep.

It hasn't happened since, and I have vowed to try to be more careful about taking him outside more frequently—for very short periods since, like many dogs, the only time he enjoys going out is when I go along, on a walk together. He wants to be with me as much as possible, especially now that he is growing older and weaker.

Bad Pet Owners Who Think They're Good

Then I started thinking about some people who wouldn't try to see this all from the dog's point of view. There are those who would actually punish a dog for this little mistake. How will they handle it when their parents or grandparents make a similar mistake?

I remember listening to Robert telling me about his old dog who suffered a slow death. He bragged what a caring pet owner he was because he took

his dog to the vet a few times and put fresh straw in the dog house.

"Your dog lived in a dog house?"

"Yes, my wife wouldn't let him in the house."

For 11 years his dog lived out back on a chain, except for the rare occasions when Robert took him on walks. Robert could afford a \$300,000 house but not a fence for his poor dog. And he certainly couldn't afford the time it would take to vacuum up dog hairs once a week--so why let the dog inside?

As I listened to him, I wondered how Robert even felt he had an ethical right to have a dog. Then he said he missed him and wanted another. Despite my discouragements, he did get another dog—and the lucky pup even gets to spend her days and nights inside—in the garage.

One day Robert came to work and said the puppy chewed on his car and his sheet rock and made messes in the garage at night. I said, "Wouldn't you if you were locked in a garage?" He didn't get it.

How Can Good Pet Owners Handle the Pain?

A lot of people don't get it, but a lot of people do. I have received some wonderful calls and e-mails regarding the first issue of this newsletter.

Alaska has some terrific animal-loving, caring people.

I think of another co-worker, Bill, who clearly loves dogs. He was so hurt by the death of his Golden Retriever, whom he'd shared life with for well over a decade, that he won't get another dog. I understand that hurt, but I also think of this sadly, because here is a perfect dog owner who could make an unwanted dog so beloved. Bill says he can't go through the pain of losing a dog again, but, even as Eb gets weaker and Sylvia gets gray, I try to remember that the most loving, kindest thing I can do is to make room in my heart and home for someone who needs me. As frightening as it is to see pets age so quickly, we must keep in mind all the happiness and love we have given them and they have given us.

So if you are like Bill, perhaps you can find a way to rescue one of the homeless animals listed in this month's newsletter. But if you're like Robert (and you probably aren't or you wouldn't be reading this), keep your garage for your car, your wife happy, and your dog house empty.

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