

THE DOG CLOCK

Gives a licking and keeps on ticking

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It's part of the speech I give anyone new to dogs who wants to get into the industry:

Dogs don't take days off. They don't observe holidays, they don't care if you've got a cold, they don't care if you're preoccupied with your taxes. They never take a day off from being dogs, so you can't take a day off from being dog caretakers.

But this rule is true for dog owners, too. In this day and age, when we've become slaves to our technological taskmasters, online social networks and things that go "beep", our canine wetware still needs us to drop a food bowl twice a day. As we scramble around the micro-managed-to-the-minute schedules of the kids' sports and meetings at work and the gym and the supermarket and church and every other human obligation, our dogs are still hoping that they will go for that morning walk. Every morning. Still operating on the ancient system of rise-eat-go out-sleep-wake up-play-eat-go out-sleep, the simple timeclock of the dog ticks onward.

Humans still insist on having dogs in our lives: we are honoring some primordial need for the beast by the fire to guard the tribe, even if the fire is one of those fake gas dealios, the tribe consists of Mommy, Mommy's Friend Bill and two little savages named Britney and Eliot, and the beast is a Bichon Frise with a wheat allergy. So, to accommodate this desire to have dogs in our crowded existences, we have daycares and petsitters and dog doors and automatic feeders. We try as hard as we can on the weekends to make up to our dogs for our weekday absence and flood the parks, the pet supply stores and the city streets with our presence. Pundits in the dog world discuss the disturbing trend of dogs becoming surrogate children for people who don't have the time or emotional stamina to have actual children; and dog owners spend a fortune every year trying to make their "furbids" happy. And why? I think it's because dogs keep us real. As a matter of fact, I *know* that's why.

Almost twenty years ago, I had a brilliant and difficult rescued Dobe named Saul. He was what we would call a "hard" dog by any definition, but a suitable one for a single woman living in a sometimes dicey area. One day in April I got the most devastating phone call of my life: someone far away in

distance, but the closest companion of my heart, had died in an accident. Young and impervious to the concept of loss, I had recently fought with him and hadn't spoken to him in weeks. There would always be a tomorrow for reconciliation, reunion, for laughing about how stupid we were. Hearing the news, and realizing that it wasn't a sick joke or a ploy for my thawing out, all of my youthful arrogance fled the scene like the worst kind of battlefield coward and in the cold light of reality, I realized that I was alone in the truest sense of the word. I don't know how I got back to my apartment that afternoon. I only remember the darkest futility, and that the only thing that literally kept me alive was Saul. I didn't eat for days, and sleep was something that would ambush me at odd hours and torture me with confused dreams. Friends I barely knew offered awkward assistance and were relieved when I didn't take them up on it. Understandably, no one wanted to be near me. Except for Saul. He needed to eat, to go out, to work. He stared, dumbfounded, as I stormed and sobbed, and then gently poked me with his muzzle, his stub tail wagging slowly, as if to say, "That's all well and good, but can we maybe play ball now?" Saul made me get up and walk him, feed him, connect with him. Although Spring was an insult to me that year, its buds and blossoms making me think only of graveside flowers and sympathy bouquets, Saul forced me out into it. He made me participate in his own enjoyment as he galloped through the marshes, scaring up redwings and returning to me covered in cattail fuzz. He didn't say things like "If there's anything you need," or "Believe it or not, you'll feel better someday". Instead, he would stand and stare at his dumbbell or his leash or his toy and remind me that there was still a life that needed tending, even if I wouldn't tend my own.

Several years afterwards, that life had improved dramatically. The man who would become my husband and I bought a beautiful old Victorian in yet another dicey part of Boston. We had acquired his first dog, a sweet, neurotic tiny female Dobe named Tilly, and we had a busy and rewarding life together. When Saul, my rock, suddenly became ill and his condition plummeted into an irreversible tailspin, I felt the familiar heartache begin again. He died in my arms on the floor of the ICU; I found the strength to comfort my husband as we left Saul's once magnificent shell there in the room, and then began my own descent into bereavement. But Tilly, who howled for Saul as if mourning him herself, needed us. And it was Tilly, whose Dog Clock seemed to hiccup a bit at the loss of her mentor, Saul, who prompted us to bring a new canine life into ours. Thus Luther, a chubby bundle of Dobe pup, found his way into the household.

And so it's gone on: through all of the gains and losses and joys and depressions, there is a continuous string of dogs to mark the years and changes: I picture them as black pearls, sometimes broken up by a glimmer of red or blue or sable. Like prayer beads, I meditate on each one sometimes,

and think of what I learned from him and what lessons I missed and wish I could repeat with the surety of hindsight.

Today, as April approaches again, I sit at my desk and stress about a deadline, a dozen phone calls that need to be made, a full schedule of Boarding School dogs and the purchase of a new house that only exists in theory. A pile of bills sits to my right, radiating pressure. Intermittent pings sound from my computer as emails arrive, inquiring about training, each one demanding and deserving my total attention. A favorite student stresses about an upcoming obedience trial, a friend leaves a message on my answering machine, wondering why I haven't called him. There is so much to do that I don't know what to do.

Then Gretsche, not quite ten months old and the newest black bead on the string, approaches, pokes me hard in the arm with his muzzle, and stands back to watch my reaction.

"Would you like to Stretch?" I ask ("Stretching" being such an important part of his day that it must be capitalized).

I roll my chair back from the desk and invite him up. He gently climbs his front end onto my lap, puts his forelegs over my shoulders and extends his body to the tips of his toes, groaning. Then he relaxes and drops his head, sideways, onto my neck as I squeeze him back. Satisfied, he climbs back down and walks over to his spot on the floor, where he resumes his morning siesta.

I am a dog trainer, and a pretty cynical one. I refuse to clutter my understanding of dogs with anthropomorphic wishful thinking or emotional projection. I don't know if Gretsche needs a hug, or if he knows I need one. Some wet-behind-the-ears wannabe behaviorist would read dominance in the act. Another would demand to know how I could allow him to enter my space in this manner. But I don't care about any of that. I only know that on Gretsche's Dog Clock, Stretching is a necessity, and I will make time for it. In the brief seconds of warmth and connection, my own relentless timer stops, and I live, like a dog, in the moment.

Written in loving memory of Doc de Brucelee, BH Jan 2, 1998-Feb 4, 2008

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