

STAYING TOGETHER: QUALITY OF LIFE AND ANIMAL RELATIONSHIPS

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This narrative describes how a three-legged rescue dog and the author's 86-year-old mother moved through the changes that occurred with a diagnosis of late stage ovarian cancer. Told through the eyes of a daughter, this story chronicles the life-changing process of fighting advanced cancer at an older age, coupled with the difficulties of maintaining a pet as abilities decline. Medical transitions, caregiver concerns, insurance challenges, and pet issues are woven into the narrative.

The conversation finally occurred about wanting to get a new dog. "Mom, how about a cat? You grew up with cats and you haven't had one for a long time." But she wanted a dog. Her Border Terrier had died in the fall at age 15 after a long illness. She missed taking him for walks, bringing him with her in the car, and having others lavish attention over him. Spring brought a new longing for four-legged companionship.

Maybe if I didn't bring it up, she would forget all about the dog. That didn't happen, as she persisted in asking for my assistance. I was investigating pet therapy training for my Golden Retriever and discussed my mother's situation with our former obedience trainer. My mother was an 84-year-old woman, still very independent and driving, but with medical needs that continued to mount, who wanted the loving companionship of a dog. "What type of breed do you recommend?" She thought that a smaller breed would be ideal. "This breed has the personality of a Golden Retriever in a 15-pound body. Try looking on their rescue website."

We went on the rescue website, reading the stories and talking about the pluses and minuses of each animal. Many of the dogs were thousands of miles from her home. I thought that maybe now she would be satisfied with having looked at the websites and wouldn't pursue anything further.

"I think I am supposed to have that three-legged dog." She just wasn't giving up on her desire for a dog. Thousands of miles away a dog had been taken from a shelter where he would have been euthanized and was placed in foster care. He wasn't a 15-pound lightweight, but a 30-pound mixed-pedigree. He was estimated to be 10 years of age and had only three legs.

"What do I have to do now?" she asked. I completed the detailed application form with her and hit the send button. I think Mom thought that they would respond right away. We sent follow-up emails indicating continued interest. Finally, someone would be coming for the interview.

I helped her clean up her cottage in a senior community. Indoor cats were allowed in the apartments, but not dogs. She already had an electric fence so I thought that this might really happen. The interview went well and they agreed to place the dog with mom. The rescue agency's network went to work and the following week Champ arrived.

His loving, sweet nature won us all over. His big brown eyes just melted our hearts and all he wanted to do was cuddle and be petted. He and my Golden Retriever got along famously, despite the differences in their ages and his disability. It seemed as if this placement were meant to be.

Crisis

"The doctor told me I had two lumps." Those words changed my life in ways that I never could have imagined. It took about a month before all the testing was completed. The family hung on pins and needles. Then we knew for sure what we all thought would be the case, our 85-year-old mother was diagnosed with stage 4 ovarian cancer.

During this time, except for the testing, doctors' visits, and knowledge of cancer, life continued as usual for my mother. Ovarian cancer has no painful symptoms until the very late stages of the disease. She was still living independently, driving, able to travel, and continued to walk and take care of Champ's needs.

Chemo

My sister came from out-of-state to stay with Mom the week after chemo and Champ would stay with them. My mother's anxiety peaked the night before the procedure and resulted in a hearing aid magically disappearing forever. After taking Champ out for a walk in the morning and arranging for a midday walk, they made their way to the hospital.

The gynecological oncologist had assured my mother that there would be no side effects. I had serious doubts about this statement, but they had indicated that they could manage any issues with medication. Needles are also a source of anxiety, as my mother's small, deep veins and peripheral vascular issues make the "stick" a challenge for even the best nurse. As the toxic substances flowed into her veins, my sister noted changes in Mom's demeanor, particularly issues with memory and fatigue. After the bags drained they were sent home in the afternoon with medication for nausea. They were met by the barking Champ, who let them know that he had missed them and was ready for his dinner.

Changing Life at Home

The chemo brought new physical challenges for my mother and an increasing need for support at home. The oncologist had suggested involving a Cancer Support program and this turned out to be a great blessing.

Those of us who are dog lovers do not understand the fears and anxieties of people who do not like animals. The issue of Champ and the number of people in and out of my mother's home brought this to the forefront. We wanted to keep them both together, but needed to have supplemental support to make staying in the cottage work for my mother. So our in-home support aides had to like dogs. This proved to be challenging for the agency and of great concern to me. Both my mother and Champ needed good care. Champ needed to be walked and fed several times a day and my mother's condition would not allow her to do so all the time. We had to ensure that both of their needs were met.

The Cancer Support agency was able to provide 10 hours per week of assistance in the home. They were able to find people who also provided the necessary walking time for Champ, thus allowing him to continue to live

with my mother. Additional aides were provided by the organization where she lived. With both agencies we often had staff ask to visit first to meet Champ prior to taking the placement. Once they saw that he was loving and non-threatening, they agreed to work with my mother.

The changes impacted me in ways that I had not thought about prior to the chemo treatments. Mom needed assistance with grocery shopping, getting her weekly medication organized in her pill box, and paying bills. Taking on complete responsibility for these necessities demanded a great deal of time and added to the stress of the situation. Champ's needs were also my concern. Making sure that he received his food, regular walks, loving care, medication, and vet visits became my responsibility. The aides were very helpful and told me of changes in his behavior as well as my mother's.

Second Chemo

I was the person to take her to the second chemo treatment and stay with her the following week. I moved into my mom's cottage with my own dog and prepared to stay a week to 10 days following her treatment, taking care of her needs and those of Champ. My mother dragged herself into the appointment exhibiting significant fatigue and the test results indicated anemia. They rescheduled her chemo for the following week and gave her two units of blood. The color was back in her cheeks and we went home.

The next day we headed to the emergency room with shortness of breath as the transfusions had impacted her weak heart. Both Champ and my Golden Retriever were left at the cottage and someone from the local aide agency agreed to feed them and let them out later in the day. She was doing better by the end of the day so they sent her home from the hospital.

The following week I took her to the rescheduled chemo appointment, after which the many challenges of chemo appeared. The nausea was controlled as needed by medication. She began to experience neuropathy, with a tingling sensation in her hands, and we added a supplement to her medication to control this symptom. It was hard to see my mother with her head in her hands

feeling so poorly that she couldn't watch TV or read. She wasn't really hungry, although she tried to eat. Her hair had begun to come out in large clumps. This was not the independent woman I had grown up with. But I greatly admired her strength as she didn't complain about her physical symptoms, but you knew that she was feeling awful. Champ was always there at her feet, giving her his love and attention.

I returned home as she regained her strength, leaving the aides in place for support in the morning and evening. Several days later we were back in the emergency room. This time they kept her overnight and I took Champ home with me until she returned home the next day. About a week later her ulcerated leg sores became infected and they kept her for a week in the hospital on IV antibiotics and did her next chemo on an inpatient basis. So my four-legged family and I again took care of Champ's needs. At my house Champ is able to run around in a large fenced-in yard, play with my Golden Retriever, and interact with the cats. I often wonder if this wouldn't be a better place for him to be living full time. He enjoys when my dog visits him at Mom's cottage and he goes for a ride in the car. I wonder if he realizes how important he is for my mother. She wants Champ to be with her and to provide care for him even if it is through the aides.

When Mom first got Champ, I told her that I would take him upon her passing and that she wouldn't have to worry about his care. He has become a member of our family and I am the closest to him. He has accepted my golden retriever and cats as his family too. Obviously, this has to be approved by the rescue agency but I don't anticipate any problems when the day comes.

My mother was a social worker in her professional life and has always had a wonderful way with people. All the aides who have come into her home are impacted by her quiet, yet direct manner. She doesn't complain, but is able to make her needs known. They all come away with something she gives to them personally. The qualities she possesses and Champ's welcoming personality have made it easier to get and retain the aide support necessary to keep Mom in her home.

Focus of Treatment

The oncologist set a plan of doing six chemo treatments and then surgery. The chemo would shrink the tumors and the surgery would remove as much disease as possible. In May, the oncologist was ready to do the surgery, but only after consultation with her cardiologist. When I spoke to the cardiologist, he said that Mom's chances of surviving the surgery were 50/50 and that her prognosis, because of her heart, was less than a year. When she made her decision to not have the surgery, the emotional burden of the possible immediacy of her dying was lifted. I truly do not know what I would have done with such a difficult decision had I been in her position.

Throughout all of the tests, appointments, and decisions, Champ was always with her, an animal to care for and love as best she can. He has been the constant in her life and will want to be petted and loved no matter whether she has hair or not. As she moves about in her cottage, he follows and lies protectively and lovingly at her feet. He seems to sense her declining health and stays near to provide what love he can.

Apartment Discussion

My mother's desire to continue to live with Champ, coupled with the loss of independence that accompanies being unable to drive, decreased her social interactions by isolating her in a cottage away from the main apartment building. The aides and the telephone were her social life, along with the times she was able to go out with me. A move to another living situation in her complex would necessitate her not living with Champ.

Mom did agree to put her name on the list for an apartment and soon she got a notice that one was available. I drove her over to the main building and the marketing staff member discussed the apartment and what would be done to spruce it up for Mom if she chose to move: a new carpet and a fresh coat of paint. We wandered around the two-bedroom unit discussing the relative size of the rooms compared to her cottage.

Champ could not be with her. This little 30-pound dog had captured her heart and she wouldn't let him go. Mom sacrificed her own social needs in order to have the companionship of a three-legged dog. We

talked about a move to assisted living, but again Champ could not stay with her.

Major Changes

Mom's chemo break was over and we headed back to the oncologist. He stated that they would do a maintenance dose of chemo she could take orally at home. Champ continued to stay with Mom with the aides supporting his feeding and walking. He enjoyed everyone's company, always barking a greeting when someone arrived to see Mom. My Golden Retriever and he continued to play and interact when I was visiting.

Several months later she ended up in the hospital for a week on IV antibiotics to clear up an infection of her leg ulcers. The hospital put her on Percocet for the pain and she was finally sleeping, albeit most of the time: not much quality of life.

During this time I had Champ with me. He enjoyed his time in my big yard playing with my dog and did very well away from his home. When she returned home from the hospital, he entered her cottage, barking his greeting and hopping quickly over to her with his tail wagging. The smile on my mother's face supported the decision to keep them together.

Typically, the hospital sent her home with a plan of care, but this time I felt that they significantly overestimated her ability to function at home. I had the aides order a daily meal for her that week and we added 24-hour coverage. Again, any new aides had to be able to provide some support for Champ and we had very good people who worked diligently to make this arrangement work for my mother.

My mother, however, did not think that she needed 24-hour care and was not happy with someone in her home all the time. So we negotiated a two-hour break. The last thing the aide did before leaving at noon was take Champ out and make sure he had fresh water so that my mother wouldn't have to do anything for his care right away. This break seemed to satisfy my mother's needs for some private time and the rest of us felt that she was safe.

24/7 Live-in Care

About six months later while talking to the scheduler, I was told that the onsite agency

had decided to offer 24/7 live-in care. I knew that we had to make the switch, but I didn't relish the conversation with my mother. This was yet another change in care providers and it meant having a person in her home all the time. She didn't like the move but when I talked about some of the financial issues of the cost of aides, she agreed to try it.

In my first conversation with the new onsite agency supervisor who would be interviewing Mom, she said that she could not be left alone and we'd have to figure out something else to do for the dog. Hiring an additional aide for 15 minutes to walk the dog meant paying them for an hour. Having to do this several times a day would be cost prohibitive.

Prior to the interview I spoke to the scheduler and asked her to talk with the new supervisor about my mom's situation with Champ. When she came for the interview, I could tell that the conversation had taken place, as she indicated that the aide could leave Mom briefly to walk Champ. The aide came to be interviewed by us and meet Champ. She agreed to take the position.

The 24/7 live-in aide is a wonderful woman whose Jamaican lilt, positive attitude, strong religious framework, and big smile have added to the quality of my mother's life. An additional advantage of having one person, plus the Cancer Support aide, is that they are able to notice changes in Mom's behavior day-to-day. The consistency of care is important for monitoring her medical as well as personal needs.

Champ has continued as a priority in the living situation. Both aides take care of his walks, food, and additional support needs. They provide me with information about how Mom and Champ are doing. He loves them both and they have become quite attached to him.

Life Continues

The story is ongoing and I have no idea how it will end. At the time of this writing, we are into the fall. Mom has outlived her prognosis of last May. She is continuing chemo treatments but has increasing symptoms of "chemo brain," fatigue, and sometimes loss of taste. Champ celebrated his estimated 13th birthday this past spring. (You never are quite

sure of the age of rescued animals.) He shows some signs of slowing down. His hearing is not what it used to be and he sometimes sleeps through my arrival, not barking with his usual zest. If I look at him closely, I notice the cataracts on both eyes. Sometimes he doesn't react to a request until I move to the side where he seems to see a bit better. Every once in a while, he loses his balance and slips on his front leg.

All of us have worked diligently to keep Champ and Mom together until she passes and we will continue to do the best for both of them. Around the corner will be additional twists and turns, but we are presently at a plateau in terms of medical issues and home care.

Champ is very important to my mother and her desire to have him with her has taken precedence over her own need for social interaction. It is, however, very important to respect my mother's wishes and to have Champ provide comfort. This is difficult to do at times within the regulations set for living arrangements for the elderly. A move to an apartment situation may have assisted her in continuing to maintain friends and make new acquaintances; however, the rules against Champ's presence prevented this from happening. Facilities need to recognize and treat each situation individually, creating regulations that allow animals to stay with their owners when it is safe, rather than based on specific housing types.

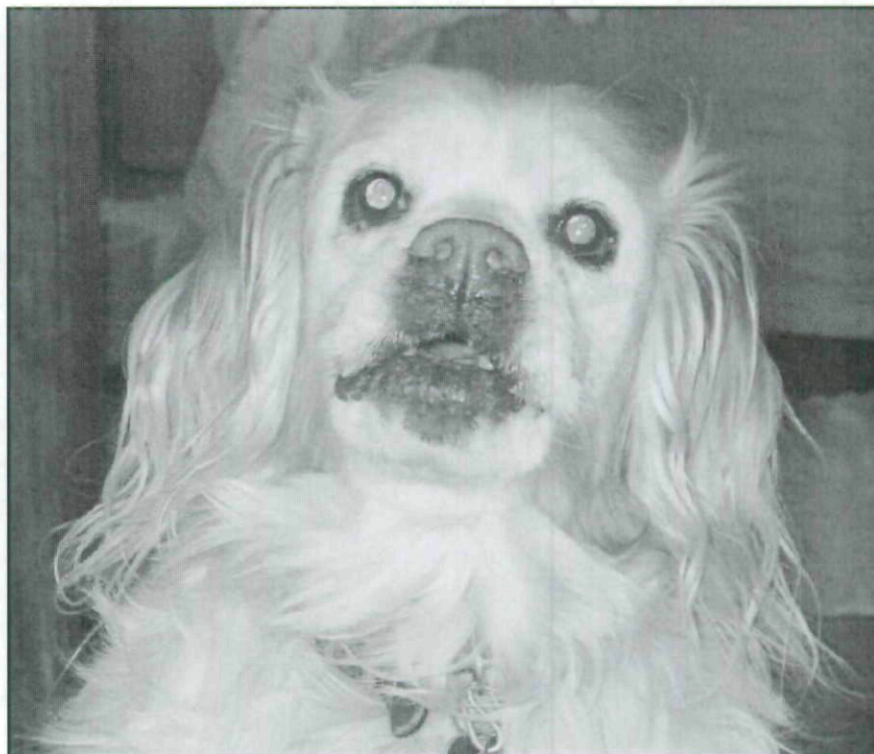
Those of us who love animals cannot imagine being without these very special members of our family. Yet we do not allow these crucial relationships to continue for the elderly at a time when they may provide the most important gift of all. As part of a pet therapy team with my Golden Retriever, I have heard the responses of residents of a nursing home and an assisted-living facility about the animals of their past, and about those animals they had to leave upon admission. I have seen the love and caring that they have shown my dog and that they must have given to their animals in the past. I will continue to work for Champ and Mom to be together for as long as is possible and positive for both of them.

Epilogue

My mother's spirit lives on in and through us following her passing at the end of September. Her final weekend was spent at her beloved cottage on the lake with Champ and she spent only 24 hours in the hospital. Champ is now living a reenergized life full-time with Cody, my Golden Retriever, and Squirt, my cat. He has a large yard to wander around in and continues to be a love.

Acknowledgement: Many thanks to all of the caregivers who worked with my mother.

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Champ. Photograph by Marilyn Mather.

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