

# DANCING WITH GRACE: EVOLUTION OF A PET PARTNER TEAM

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*This is a story of a social worker and her dream of having a therapy dog in service to others. The reader is taken along on the journey as this dream unfolds. Woven into the narrative are practice concepts, the use of animals as therapeutic mediums, and the animal-human bond which transforms partners in the dance. It is story of how animals enrich our lives and spirit while teaching us how to live on our planet and with each other.*



Nan with Gracie.  
Photograph by Les Coover.

## Genesis of a Dream

Destiny unfolds in its own time. From conception to realization it was 17 years before Gracie came into my life in the form of a frightened, Standard Poodle puppy. The dream emerged in 1985 when I was a social worker practicing clinical therapy at the Northeast Kansas Mental Health Center in Leavenworth, Kansas. In order to reach out to more rural families, we opened a branch office in Tonganoxie, a small farming community of 2,000. Our office was situated on top of a hill across from the school. We were restricted to only two rooms and many clients were children in need of more space to move and play. The grassy field outside was frequently our "therapy room." During this time my desire to have a therapeutic dog took form. Most of the children talked about their pets—rabbits, turtles, birds, and cats—and country life. For some children who were placed in foster care or with relatives, there was a grief-like sorrow because of being separated from their cherished pets. These longings were readily evident in their play and art therapy.

The idea of animals as adjuncts to therapy, however, was nourished long before in my own childhood. My father, a professor of life sciences, lived with an abiding reverence for nature. Well remembered were family outings—peering inquisitively into the Pacific Ocean tide pools or gazing up at the redwoods reaching forever into the sky. My mother worked with Mexican and other Latino families in Southern California. She taught me the value of learning a second language as a means of honoring

and connecting with diverse populations. Through these experiences I had a sense of something powerful far beyond myself. My love for animals was enriched with our first dog, a rescued soul we named Toby. As a small child I felt such great enchantment with this marvelous English Pointer who so patiently tolerated and responded to our exuberant play. Toby was an interesting family member—a well-trained dog as well as a resourceful rogue who would jump a six-foot fence for a trip to the local butcher shop. Toby's feats were tempered with our compassion while he trembled his way through Fourth of July celebrations. In his presence I learned that living things have their strengths as well as challenges to overcome, a concept I later understood to be an essential part of social work practice.

These childhood memories threaded their way into my clinical work. I identified with this ache I felt for the children and families who not only had been traumatized but were also distressed at the separation from their beloved animal companions. Over the years, as I developed expertise in working with child and adult survivors of trauma, I more fully understood the power of the animal-human bond. Research (Allen, 2001) confirms that people who experience trauma, particularly of an interpersonal nature, may be more likely to form attachments with pets as a secure base. Stein, Allen, Allen, Koontz, and Wiseman (2000) likewise noted this phenomenon in their research.

## Nurturing the Dream

Over the years the idea of a "therapeutic" dog never left me. It followed me around like



a shadow, always in the background, always moving with me along my path like some scene from a Fred Astaire movie. I had the opportunity to work on sabbatical at the Menninger Foundation with the CECA (Childhood Experiences of Care and Abuse) team, facilitated by Dr. Helen Stein. After this experience I was even more convinced of the importance of animal therapy as an adjunct to clinical practice. Their research included pet attachment as part of data collection. The work by the CECA team fueled my imagination and hope.

### **Formative Years**

After a dozen years of teaching and serving as department chair, I was eager to return to full-time teaching and finally take action on my dream. Her name would be *Gracie*. I had her name picked out before I found her. Although the first time I saw Gracie was on the computer screen, I knew that she was just for me. It was destiny. I devoted extended time talking to the breeder in California. It was much like doing a social history in practice. Given my awareness of the importance of bonding and attachment as essential to all mammalian life, I was impressed with the philosophy of having the mother naturally wean her puppies and socialize them. My sense was that Gracie was off to a great start. That is, until fate intervened along the way. Tragically, the airline delivering Gracie to me mistakenly flew her to the wrong destination. Her initial six-hour trip turned into a harrowing 24-hour journey.

Some moments are indelible, carved through trauma or exhilaration. Lying flat on the floor by her shipping cage, I called her name, "Gracie." Slowly, cautiously, she ventured out and licked the tears on my face. Gracie was in my arms at last, four months old, all 20 pounds of her. A photo of that moment is telling—a fusion of terror still in her eyes and of relief as she folded into me. I felt the same thing too. In social work practice we speak repeatedly of the core conditions: warmth, genuineness, and empathy. I believed that I had all the core qualities I needed to be a good "mom," trainer, and pet partner. The warmth and genuineness were there, but

empathy, the ability to understand her world from her perspective, would take on a different meaning when I adopted Gracie. I had much to learn.

### **Dance Class 101**

Aware that I had to educate myself, I eagerly read and tried to absorb the writings of such experienced trainers as Paul Owens (1999), author of *The Dog Whisperer*, and later, Dr. Patricia McConnell (2002), certified Applied Animal Behaviorist. She illustrated the challenges of communication among different species as she explained how to get your dog to come by acting less like a primate and more like a canine. My approach was similar to what I would do as a practitioner learning about a new client or field of practice, i.e., reading the literature, observing, asking an endless parade of questions, and accomplishing a field practicum in the process. Yet, unlike practice in which one is trained to take an objective look at the client and situation, I was soon to experience painful lessons from my very personal involvement that make such objectivity difficult to live out. It was a sobering discovery to learn that my vision of being part of a therapy dog team might not have been one my Gracie shared. As I reflect on this, I think about the mantra in social work practice of self-determination in working with clients. Whose plan is it? What have been the client's perspective and vision? In what way might we as practitioners subtly or not so subtly thrust our desires and determination on the client, thinking all the while that we know best? These questions gave me pause.

Gracie's reserved personality, along with her traumatic journey, was a challenge for her and for me. Perry and Szalavitz (2006), for example, studied rats and through brain research discovered that stress-reactive rats had over-activity in the adrenaline and noradrenalin systems. Ultimately, I could not know what effects, if any, were due to her prolonged journey to me. However, I was aware of how people experienced interpersonal trauma and would put this knowledge to use. For example, it did not seem to be Gracie's nature to like being cuddled or touched. She also displayed a pronounced



startle response. Children and adults who have experienced sexual assault or violence may display similar behaviors. I had to be careful not to over-apply my understanding of clinical work to this situation. Gracie loved to be near me, often quietly lying with her elegant legs stretched out and crossed, giving her a very spiritual presence. Wherever I went she was there. At the time I was unaware that I was putting my primate expectations on her rather than fully understanding her particular nature as a dog. For example, Grandin and Johnson (2005) utilized their own personal experiences with autism to further our understanding of animals, observing that "a lot of normal people don't realize that you have to *stroke* animals, not pet them" much like the way a mother's tongue licks them (p. 115).

Not fully educated in the ways of dogs, I did not understand that Gracie was highly tactile and very sensitive to touch. She was also very sensitive to "personal space": that is, as a pack animal her skills in negotiation and deference to others when needed were well-developed. The very skills and attributes, the strengths and gifts she used to survive, were a puzzling challenge to me. I had a second language to learn in the skill and art of communication. In retrospect, I see this situation much like the invisible mantle of *white privilege* about which McIntosh (2002) so powerfully wrote. In essence, I had the privilege of being human and was overlaying my expectation of Gracie according to human primate terms, not her own. In this regard I strayed from the social work practice wisdom that would have guided me so well.

Watching Gracie respond to me in her gentle and elegant manner nourished my confidence as we trained together. After her initial puppy training, I elected to work with experienced dog trainers and Pet Partner teams who were well-versed in the standards of the Delta Society. Delta is an international organization that sets high standards for skills and aptitudes in Pet Partner teams. In meeting these standards and all other requirements, a Pet Partner team is also insured for liability, a benefit few organizations or trainers actually provide for "therapy dogs." The terms AAT (Animal-Assisted Therapy), which is goal

directed and is overseen by a healthcare provider (e.g., in individual or group therapy), and AAA (Animal-Assisted Activity), which is non-goal directed (e.g., visiting children and adults in hospitals), more accurately describe Pet Partner activities rather than references to a *therapy dog*. The latter term is used in this narrative since it is a term more conceptually familiar to readers. Service animals are of a different category, trained to assist their owners with daily living activities.

### The Gift of "Failure"

My dream to have a therapy dog was compelling, so much so that I pushed us onward. Believing that my Gracie was ready to take the Delta Society (2007) evaluation tests through her consistent obedience of "sit," "stay," and the like, I arranged a practice run with trainers experienced in Delta standards as part of testing our progress in engaging with people unfamiliar to her. When these strangers attempted to handle and pet Gracie, she pulled away showing anxiety and stress. Feeling embarrassed and very much that I had failed, my dreams were shattered in an instant. This discovery was distressing since some of the skills a Pet Partner team must demonstrate include accepting petting; tolerating examination of ears and body; and such aptitudes as managing exuberant clumsy petting, a restraining hug, and crowded petting by several people. I believed that I had failed in my efforts, failed to understand more clearly all that is needed and required for a visiting Pet Partner team. And most agonizing of all, I failed my Gracie. The experience left me with profound doubts and soul-searching questions about myself. Had I imposed my desires on Gracie? Were we not suited as a Pet Partner team? Some animals, as well as people, are not suited for this role. Did I compromise the trust she had in me as her protector and source of nurturing? The parallel to practice was not lost on me. I thought of my developmental years as a clinician and of those of my students. I reflected on our efforts to be good and wise practitioners who would do no harm and be helpful. Weick (1983) keenly observed that practitioners may inadvertently expect clients to respond to good efforts and assume that



they are competent only when the client changes or improves. I felt undone. I grieved the imagined loss of my dream perhaps much like a beginning practitioner may feel a sense of incompetence and failure when a client does not make progress or behaves in some unexpected manner.

A short time later we watched on the sidelines while our canine "play pack" that grew up together went through the Delta evaluation with ease. Admittedly, my ego was wounded and my confidence waned. It was demoralizing at the time, yet the experience later became a cherished gift when I would understand that I had not "failed," we had not "failed"—we were simply not ready. (The Delta Society has since changed *pass/fail* to *not ready* or *not appropriate* on their evaluation form.)

The process of becoming a team is one of education and evolution. At the time I was approaching working with Gracie as two separate entities rather than as partners in a dance. This metaphor serves to illuminate the idea that as in dancing, while one may lead, there is an exquisite trust and agreement between both parties to move as one unit. Social work practice teaches us that the process of moving forward must be mutual. Our transition to balancing both our styles and perspectives was imperceptible as we worked. Fortunately, through the expert observation of my teacher, I learned that Gracie was more *reticent* than *frightened* of touch. She helped me understand that Gracie was being "respectful" of strangers "pawing" on her head and giving them space, much as she would a strange dog. From Gracie's perspective she did not understand accepting what would be considered intrusive behavior had a dog behaved in a similar fashion. Further education enabled me to understand that Gracie was highly sensitive to touch. In keeping with the work of Grandin and Johnson (2005) regarding stroking rather than petting, my trainers introduced me to Tellington Touch (Clothier, 2007), a method of helping animals that are highly sensitive become more comfortable with touching and handling. The process was one of communication and learning to *ground* both Gracie and me. In

addition, I used hand signals and behavioral methods through food reward and clicker (sound) training to mark desired behaviors. Gracie learned her job of visitation, including allowing strangers to intrude and pet her irresistible fluffy head and shake her paws in human or primate fashion. Much like social work practice, in the process we developed bridges between our two cultures using her language and mine. We possessed a strong work ethic and transformed from working as two separate entities into a synchronized unit of harmony and trust. On October 2, 2004, we danced our way through the Pet Partner evaluation with great success.

### **The Dream at Last**

During our training I took the time to make field observations shadowing experienced Pet Partner teams, much like students would do with a field instructor in practicum. It was time to move from observation to action, venturing out on our own. In social work we champion the need to be open to the world and perceptions of our clients. The very qualities that Gracie and I had that challenged us became gifts to others. She was especially suited to visiting the frail, elderly, and seriously ill. Her respectful way of giving space to others was essential. The way Gracie would gently place her muzzle on the arm of a resident or staff was endearing to them, frequently acknowledged with an "ahhh" or softly whispered "ohhh, how sweet." One resident decided that Gracie, because of her larger size, should be a male. He offered this suggestion, "He's beautiful and should have a regal name like Napoleon." Far from being offended, I realized that this gentleman was fully invested in our visits. We relished our work and savored our experiences.

Over time we became a familiar sight for many of the clients and staff at a number of facilities. In Animal-Assisted Activity, visits are spontaneous and may last from a few minutes to more than half an hour. The aim is comfort, support, and care. These are times of engagement and exchange in the present. Stroking a pet, reminiscing about departed animal friends, or talking about separation from loved ones, both human and animal, was for



clients a time of experiencing a little relief or putting some part of life in another perspective. The essence of these encounters is most often subtle. To be sure, there are countless instances of an animal lying quietly on someone's bed in the last transition of life and of a comatose or severely depressed person responding. These very dramatic things do happen and serve to fuel our intrigue with the animal-human bond. For the most part, however, we may not know the magnitude of a single brief encounter. For example, we have been visiting at the Cotton O'Neil Cancer Center, an innovative treatment facility that includes art therapy and music therapy as well as visitation with Pet Partner teams from the Prairieland Visiting Animal Association. As part of our routine, we visit with people (those who want to) in the waiting area and in the medical treatment wing where people are undergoing chemotherapy. We visit with the staff as well. In a health care facility where there is a daily struggle for life and death, it is essential for staff to also have support and respite as well. As we make the rounds, many staff look forward to giving Gracie a special treat that was brought just for her. Their generosity and support for us always touches my heart. On one particular visit we encountered an elderly gentleman being wheeled down the hall by a staff member. His physical discomfort was noticeable, yet his eyes took on an instant "sparkle" when he saw Gracie. With his permission we spent some time visiting with him, saying little. Talk was not necessary. The conversation unfolded in its own way. On our return visit, the staff told me that the gentleman had died shortly thereafter, but before his passing he talked repeatedly about Gracie. Animals can guide people to being fully present and for a few moments someone may feel a brief respite from illness, worry, or fatigue. As in social work practice, one never really knows the depth and lingering power of contact. So it is with visiting animals. Through interaction with animals we are brought back to our connections with nature, to the wonder of life and pathos of death that all living things experience. In many respects these encounters mirror our need as practitioners to be fully present with our clients, to be mindful and

aware of teaching moments for them and for ourselves.

We approach visiting with the understanding that not all people are enamored with dogs, cats, or other animals and in fact may have been harmed by them. The social work practice skills of reading non-verbal behavior along with verbal communication are critical not only for Gracie and me as a team but for visitors as well. I had numerous instances in serving as a Pet Partner facilitator in a clinical therapy group at a psychiatric facility where a member wanted to be in the room but more comfortably protected behind a chair. Much like Gracie had been in cautiously emerging from her shipping crate, participants would become so moved by her gentleness and responsiveness that they too wanted to reach out to her. As a facilitator of these group therapy encounters, I would teach the members Gracie's sign language and signals so that she would be able to interact with them. When Gracie would sit up, sit down, or back up at a few movements of a group member's hand, it was powerful. People who have been hurt and terrified at the hands of humans frequently do not view themselves as powerful. A key element in the experience of trauma is not having control over events or another person such that assault, pain, and injury occur. Here then was an alternative encounter in which the survivor could experience a sense of self-efficacy, if only for brief moments. Clinical staff shared with me that Gracie's visits would help clients open up or become more engaged with others. The group experience itself helped to forge a common thread of communication among them.

Social work is about creating a *goodness of fit* between natural resources, clients, and practitioner. Pet Partner teams would do well to have this as a guide. We will never be a team that goes into disaster zones or the like, and groups of loud, animated children are still a challenge. That is all right with us. We will keep growing in ways that build on our strengths and are best suited for us. In her quiet way and mine, Gracie and I hope to make a difference by just being present and saying, "We care and you are important."



Finally, lest I get too enchanted with my Pet Partner venture, Gracie brings me to the reality of her ancestry with wolves. Her enthusiastic presentation of a squirrel or other catch of the day serves to remind me that she is on loan, a gift from what I hold to be a Divine Universe. I believe that in allowing herself to be domesticated, I am forever committed to keeping this sacred trust of my animal companion and Pet Partner. It is a privilege and honor I cherish.

### Epilogue

Writing this narrative has been a difficult and yet inviting experience. Because so much of our work is in the moment, getting a sense of it all somewhat eludes me. I asked my mother, Jean Palmer, Ph.D., age 90, if she would be comfortable giving me a few impressions based on our frequent visits. This is what she wrote:

*Gracie and I have a lot in common. We got moved around a lot under scary circumstances at an early age. She was shifted around by plane—literally all over the country. Loud noises, vibrations, strange people, strange voices, strange smells, and strange sights. I was shifted by horse and buggy and primitive cars to different places but with the same kinds of strange sensations. Although we have both had a lot of training/education during the years, we still have the same lurking anticipation: What comes next? How will we manage? What is going to happen?*

*We meet lots of people. Most have good manners. A few do not. We have learned to tolerate unpleasantness or “jump ship” when it gets to be too much. But now we have families and will go to great lengths to please them. However, we are both loners and enjoy solitude at times. I guess you*

*could call us “mixed bags.” We get along just fine because we both need lots of elbow room, and when we have a job, we do it.*

I have contemplated this message many times. I was puzzled and intrigued because her comments were not what I expected. Understanding only came with time and a passage I encountered in the book *Merle's Door*. Kerasote (2007) shares with his readers the work of Barry Lopez recounting the answer of an old Numaiut man who was asked at the end of his life who knew more about the mountains: the old man or the wolf. The old man is said to have replied, “The same. They know the same” (p. 89). Therein lies the quintessential message. Our ancestry is inextricably woven together. It is what I believe to be the oneness of the universe. All other distinctions seem artificial. Many times, making such distinctions puts people, animals, and the environment in a hierarchy and creates disharmony and dissonance. As a Pet Partner team, Gracie and I are honored to be of service. I am, however, mindful that we may someday be the ones in need. It isn't whether we are the practitioner or client, we get caught up in playing out these differences in our minds. Perhaps living well and nurturing our own and next generations and planet depend on our understanding that ultimately we are the same in this universe. It is this essence of nature that my mother so wisely understands, just like the Numaiut man. They have come full circle in the dance. It is our opportunity to join them.

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Jean Palmer, Ph.D., with Gracie. Photograph by Nan Palmer.

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