

COCO: THE LOVE DOG

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This narrative describes the human-animal bond in its purest form as both human and dog discover their best lives. The lessons taught and learned by the author and one fluffy poodle not only saved their lives, but also had a profound impact on countless others who learned the meaning of love and joy and strength from the Love Dog. Note: Names have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

Thirteen years ago, as I counted the ceiling tiles from my hospital bed, I knew my life was going to change dramatically. Like most Baby Boomers of my generation, I thought I could have it all. Work hard, enjoy the rewards business success brings, and make a difference in the world. I had the perfect career as Vice President of Community Outreach for a global cosmetics company and over 20 years in business built a strong career, professional respect, enduring friendships, and the need to do more. So I spent the week working to pay my bills and the weekends working to pay my soul.

One day in 1995 that all changed when I was cut down with an incredibly sudden, life-threatening illness. Peritonitis and sepsis challenged every aspect of my life. After many months in the hospital and many surgeries to tear open and rewire my body, followed by many months of an extremely difficult open-wound healing, the currency I valued was no longer money or outward success. The only currency that mattered now was *time*. Time to stare at the ceiling and count the tiles endlessly as I lay in one position with nothing but time on my hands. Time to challenge my sense of “self” and time to think, think, think about who I was now and what I may have lost along the way. What if I really did not have “all the time in the world” to do what I planned to do “later on” — would I have the courage to change my life *now* and live the life I was meant to live? Was this detour the opportunity I needed to recreate my life?

I remember thinking that it would be so easy to roll over and just give up. Maybe it was just too hard to exercise, eat differently,

be patient, and deal with pain and discomfort. But I was used to working hard — so I rolled over and started over and did whatever it took to bring joy back into my life. And as I healed, I looked well. My eyes were bright, my step was lively, my mind was sharp. But I had “invisible” challenges. A steady fatigue, a dark mourning for the functions I had lost, a palpable sadness when I thought about the year of my life I had somehow missed. So while everyone told me to take it easy, be patient, take a vacation, lessen my workload, rest...*I got a dog!*

And that’s how I met my best friend and pet partner, Coco. And my life changed forever. Our lives changed forever.

Coco was not the dog I thought I wanted — she was the wrong size, the wrong color, the wrong gender, and she had many health issues...but she was the perfect dog for me.

She was full of patchy spots where she had chewed her hair off due to allergies; she had a hernia and what I later learned was colitis. And that was just the start of her “issues.” But the moment I saw her and she looked into my eyes, I knew I had to have her. This intense puppy with the funny hair crawled into my heart — and never left. Everyone told me I was making a mistake to take in such a “needy” puppy. Would I be able to make such an investment financially, emotionally, and physically to care for her? But a small voice kept telling me that I didn’t need *less* responsibility to move forward — I needed *more*.

Little did I know then that by saving *her* life, she would in turn save *mine*. Coco always knew when I needed a push to be active and

nudged me to take her for a walk. Or when I needed to rest, she would lie down on the street and just wait patiently for us to start moving again. I truly believe that if it weren't for her I would still be sitting on my couch feeling sorry for myself. Through her unconditional love, ability to listen and learn, and desire to please, I had no choice but to get up and back into the world. And this was the start of her career as a therapy dog – for me!

A lifetime overachiever, it was extremely difficult for me to accept recovery time and Coco taught me that it was okay to walk a bit more slowly, to have to rest a bit more, to depend on others, and to have fun again. Coco had so changed *my* life that I wanted to share her boundless love with others, so for the past 11 years we have been a pet-assisted therapy pair registered with the Delta Society, working with special children affiliated with New Alternatives for Children, Lighthouse International, Ronald McDonald House, a long-term care facility for adults living with HIV and AIDS, and several New York City public schools. As I continued to heal, I realized that even the most able-bodied among us have invisible scars and challenges. None of us are perfect; yet, we are all perfect. At the end of Coco's leash, I have been privileged with meeting so many people whose path we would never have crossed otherwise. This little dog whose kisses tickle so profoundly reached the depths of those we met – she was just what the doctored ordered!

I remember so clearly the first facility we visited all those years ago. I had become involved with a social service agency in New York in my role as Vice President of Community Outreach and thought a dog could complement the many therapies they offered the special children and families they served. The Director of New Alternatives for Children loved the idea and asked us to partner with a young girl, seven years old, who had cerebral palsy. We knew that the physical aspects of playing with Coco, brushing her, and holding her leash would be beneficial to enhancing Nina's movement. We had no idea how far beyond physical therapy our involvement would reach.

Nina would meet us after school and at first she was so shy and quiet. But Coco knew exactly how to bring her out of her shell and encourage her to try new things – as she'd done for me. Through patience, trust, and deep friendship, Nina learned to throw a ball to Coco, clip her leash on and off, dress her in little sweaters, brush her hair, and play hide 'n' seek. Because Coco "couldn't hear very well," Nina had to raise her little voice to be heard. Because Coco had so many "itchies," Nina had to scratch a little harder so that Coco would feel relieved. Nina would do her homework alongside Coco or read a book with her friend on her lap. Each new therapy or game made both child and dog stronger and happier.

As Nina got older, she would take Coco for walks alongside her wheelchair. And as Coco got older, Nina would take her for rides on her wheelchair.

When you choose to be a pet-assisted therapy pair for a specific child such as Nina, you can't help but become a part of each other's lives over the years. And I came to understand that while anyone could see Nina's physical limitations, only those who loved her could see her invisible scars. Nina had spent most of her life living with the most wonderful foster family, as her biological mother could not care for her. Her foster mom even went to school to become her assistance aide so that she could attend school with Nina. They loved her so much and wished to make Nina a permanent member of their family. But of course, Nina only wished that her biological mother would come back for her. Nina would talk to Coco about her family and, as Coco's vehicle, I learned how to relate to this amazingly wise child. With the guidance of the social workers, I learned how to utilize Nina's love for Coco to give her a forum in which to talk and express her emotions. So over the years, her special time with Coco became a time to talk and share and be happy or sad in a safe environment, as well as time for physical therapy. And I came to respect the case workers and support team and was very proud to be a part of Nina's care plan.

So when one day I was called at work and asked if I could bring Coco to the agency the next day for a special meeting with Nina,

of course we went. Nina's biological mother had relinquished her parental rights and they were going to tell Nina, now 13, that her foster family could finally adopt her. While everyone thought this was the dream come true for Nina, they also knew that this meant the end of *her* dream of the fairytale ending with her real mom. They wanted Coco there so that Nina could relax and absorb this life-changing news in the most positive setting. As soon as Nina rolled off the elevator, she knew something was up – she saw Coco! The look that had become so familiar to us upon first meeting – insecurity, shyness, sweetness – broke into a big smile because no matter what else was happening, she was going to have a special visit with her best friend.

We were led into one of the playrooms and with a tired ball of fur on her lap, Nina learned how bittersweet life can be. Warm tears followed big sighs and as Nina stroked Coco, Coco slowly wagged her tail and kissed Nina's hand...her way of saying, "this is a good thing but I understand why you are sad." And when Nina celebrated her adoption at the courthouse, the only gift she wanted from her forever family was a dog of her own!

Over the years Coco and I took on more and more special assignments and with every new child, facility, and relationship, I recognized how the human-animal bond can not only augment traditional therapies, but sometimes surpass them.

Having known the joy of working with Nina and the other children at New Alternatives for Children, we felt that we could take on more and began visiting the children in the Child Development Center at Lighthouse International. These children, who were vision impaired, blind, or multiply challenged, took to Coco immediately and never missed a Friday when Coco was coming to school. And what I loved about our newest assignment was the opportunity for me to learn about new therapies and how to relate to such little children with such big obstacles. On our first visit, we were greeted by a row of "Coco Poodles" on the floor of the hallway— drawings of poodles to which the children had glued cotton balls— leading us to our first classroom. This told me not only that the children were special, but that

the teachers, principal, and therapists were also special, as they had so engaged the students before we even arrived. The children greeted Coco and showed her the picture they had made just for her, so that she would have friends at school and not be afraid.

Coco was quite young still and she liked to "twirl on her tippy toes" for the children. They would ask her to dance and she could twirl forever. Some of the children would get up and take her paw and twirl away with her, or just feel her fur flying by. When the weather was nice, we would play in their outdoor playground. Coco's favorite activity was sliding down the plastic slide. The children would help her up the stairs to the little platform. Then they would line up on either side of the slide and we would position her "catchers" at the bottom. Every child got a turn at being a catcher because that was the most serious job – they had to make sure that Coco didn't fall off as she swooshed down. The pride the children felt when they caught her was palpable. Big smiles filled the air. And then up Coco would go to do it all over again. Of course, some days Coco just didn't feel like going down the slide. And the children learned that they couldn't make her do something she didn't want to do, thereby learning empathy and patience. Yes, Coco was an animal, but she had feelings and moods and days when she just didn't feel right – just like them.

When we didn't go down the slide, the tunnel was a great alternative. The children would position themselves at the open end of the tunnel and sweetly encourage Coco to come to them from the other end. Coco did not like the tunnel at first – it was dark and scary and if she got stuck in the middle, a child would have to crawl through to help her find her way out. But because Coco tried and tried to do something that was not easy for her, the children followed her example. Every child tried to go through the tunnel like Coco. She was the greatest role model.

Then I began to notice life's ultimate lesson of all. While the children grew up, Coco grew older. While the children got more confident and quicker in their mobility, Coco got slower and more hesitant. And when we discovered three years ago that Coco has

diabetes, it was our friends we visit who allowed me to be fearful and hopeful, scared and empowered, worried and optimistic, and while stuck in grief for my Coco, able to move on and learn how to care for her. For, as they kept telling me over and over, I am a great mommy and *Coco doesn't have to be perfect.*

It was now time for me to watch for signs of Coco's fatigue and make sure that she ate well and had her insulin. It was now time to encourage her to play and get out into the world. Coco has been our greatest teacher, and now all the lessons she has taught us about patience and determination and unselfish love are enabling us to care for her.

Now the special dog shows her special children how to live their lives with strength and joy and hope and dignity. As Coco's own sight is failing due to double cataracts, the children at Lighthouse take her by the leash and guide her through the hallway, telling her not to be afraid and to use her nose to find her way.

As her illnesses started to take a toll on her energy, she stopped twirling and dancing, chasing after balls, and playing hide 'n' seek. The children would simply show her the slide and let her smell the stairs and gently help me lift her to the platform – where she promptly laid down for a nap!

I asked the children if we should find other games that Coco could play and one sweet little girl told me, "Coco doesn't have to *do* anything; she just has to love us because she's the Love Dog." And when Coco could no longer see with her eyes, one gentle child told me not to be sad because Coco now "...sees with her heart."

So when you ask me what impact this one little dog has made on the lives she has touched, it is the pure love and hope she generates. That day, she became Coco the Love Dog.

Through the years at the other end of Coco's leash, I have been witness to many breakthroughs and learned from children who cannot see that Coco feels like cotton balls and that her kisses tickle. I learned from adults living with AIDS or catastrophic illness that we may be their only link to the outside world.

I learned from teens who feel invisible that Coco never forgets them, and that every being is important and deserves to be remembered. I learned from children that "...Coco licks so much because she has so much love it oozes out in her kisses." I learned from adults who may not remember their own family members that Coco is memorable. And I learned that as Coco gets older, she depends on me to know when it's time to slow down and to love her for who she is *now*, and not for who she was years ago in her youth. Thus, she has taught me the greatest lessons in her senior years: Never look back, only forward. Never dwell on what you cannot do but relish in what you can.

As Coco retires from regular pet therapy visits, we continue to give presentations at schools and facilities and meet with clients of every age, able-bodied and challenged. We discuss living with adversity, overcoming challenges and fears, creating a life of balance and joy. I share my story with the students, as well as Coco's journey. I share with them Coco's daily routine. As I bring out the bag filled with her medications, needles, lotions, eye drops, and salves, they begin to understand what it means to make a commitment and the responsibility of pet guardianship (and parenthood). I am often asked if I knew she was so sick when I adopted her and I tell them yes; then they begin to understand empathy and selflessness and that for every helping hand you give out, you get back tenfold.

Having spent over 30 years as a corporate executive, Coco has so inspired me that I not only changed the focus of my life by devoting so much time to our volunteer efforts together, but I also joined the Board of Directors of the visiting program with which we work. Additionally, I joined the advisory boards of the facilities we visit. We serve as the "spokespair" for the Visiting Pet Program, for which we attend numerous fundraisers and events throughout the year. I leverage Coco's birthday each year as a fundraiser for a chosen non-profit. I wrote a children's book *Coco the Love Dog* and produced the *Coco the Love Dog* doll so that Coco can share her love with many more children than we could ever visit. I developed Coco's website so that children

could e-mail her and have a special pen pal (www.cocothe_lovedog.com), and, as Coco herself is now a philanthropist, we've donated over 2,500 books and toys. I changed my schedule completely when Coco was diagnosed with diabetes in order to maintain her insulin regimen, and now this summer we are both retiring from our hectic lives in New York and moving to Las Vegas to enjoy the beautiful weather and mountains – and spread the Love Dog message to children there.

I never imagined 13 years ago that I would not only get my life back, but that it would be even richer. I am taking early retirement because now it is *my* turn to take care of Coco as she has cared for me, and time is an even stronger currency for us both. With every shot of insulin I give Coco, I am reminded of how much she has given to others and how much she entrusts me with keeping her strong and healthy so that she can continue her mission.

Our relationship has come full circle and there is nothing I would not do to ensure her living a peaceful and meaningful life...as she has done for me and hundreds of others her whole life.

As Coco continues to live her life with love and strength, she exemplifies the healing power of pets...and how one very special fluffy poodle can change lives at both ends of the leash.

Sue Grundfest has recently retired from 24 years as the Vice President of a major cosmetics company in New York to devote full-time to promoting the human-animal bond. She and Coco the Love Dog now live in Las Vegas and have partnered with several organizations to develop pet-assisted therapy programs in their new home. Comments regarding this article can be sent to: suegrundfest@aol.com



Coco at Work. Photograph by Sue Grundfest.

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