

# LESSONS LEARNED FROM AGING DOGS ABOUT MEANING AND CONTINUITY IN OUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIVES

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*This narrative is about the integration of the author's personal and professional life as told through the stories of her aging dogs. Each dog's unique contribution has given the author and her husband lessons learned about meaning and continuity in their personal relationship as a couple, in their individual predispositions toward dealing with life and loss, and in how the communication link of telling animal stories bonds them to colleagues who have their own stories to tell.*

Karl and I met in 1967. I was entering as a freshman in a small United Methodist college, and he was a senior. He was a member of the football team, and the football team had agreed to help the freshmen women move into their dorms. I suspect there were more reasons for this set-up than just helping us get our things carried from cars into the building, but all I know is that I fell in love at first sight. I turned to a friend and declared, "I don't know who he is, but I plan to marry him!" She studied me for a moment and replied, "That's Karl Netting. Everyone knows him. Don't get your hopes up." I knew I had to act fast. Karl would be graduating in May and it was already September. We were friendly all during the fall, we began dating in January, and the rest is history. A year and a half later we were married. I transferred as a junior sociology major to Duke University, where Karl was in his second year of seminary.

As we dated I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that Karl was an animal lover. He showed me pictures of beloved childhood pets named Ralphie (a Welsh corgi mix) and Rascal (lineage unknown). A pet skunk had followed him on his paper route until she developed a bad disposition. He had incubated eggs, which precipitated his father's going to court for disturbing the peace when one cracked open to reveal a gamecock that grew up to crow before dawn in Arlington, Virginia. Arlington was not a farming community!

I told him that when I was in the second grade, my first dog Bert had been hit by a car (my first experience with death). During my

teen years, Petey (a silver poodle) was my steadfast companion. A favorite story was about Lover, my Easter duck, who had grown up to move to Uncle Mac's farm but who never liked to go near water.

The first spring that we were dating, we purchased a rabbit who lived a secret life in my dorm room until it was discovered by an unsuspecting housemother. Wherever we went we stopped at every petting zoo and agreed that we could not see how anyone would not like animals.

As newlyweds we lived in a little duplex apartment with an alley in the back. The alley was frequented by stray cats and dogs, and we served as a way station for any visitor looking for a short or long term stay. Hotdog, a redbone hound mix, recuperated on the rug at our front door whenever he needed a breather from alley life, and a beautiful tuxedo cat we named Boots became a permanent member of our little household, bringing our first litter of kittens into the world. When we moved from Durham, an aging Hotdog proudly sat in the moving van beside Karl as he drove out of town. Hotdog retired from the vulnerabilities of alley life to the country. Over the years Hotdog was joined by Sally (a coon hound who took an interest in Karl's parishioners' chickens next door), Pooker (a feisty little peke-a-poo), and Mildred (the dirtiest white cat we'd ever seen).

Our move to the country followed on the heels of our graduation from Duke University. I earned a B.A. in Sociology and Karl graduated with his M.Div. We were in our early



20's, eager to embrace the "real world." Karl was placed in a two-charge circuit as a newly ordained United Methodist minister, and I could only find part-time work at Sears with my sociology degree and no experience. We hit this rural country parish like a ton of bricks, bringing our newly minted ideas from a liberal institution into a very conservative countryside nestled in the Bible Belt. When the parishioners found out that we had pets in the parsonage, we were told that they were not allowed. That first year, two of Karl's parishioners who were part of a dog stealing ring pulled into our gravel driveway in the middle of the night, confiscated Hotdog, and took him to North Carolina where they were selling hunting dogs. Poor Hotdog had only hunted in alleyways and it was months before we figured out what had happened to him, too late to track him down. We returned Sally to my aunt who raised coon hounds because we were worried about her future, and we kept Pooker and Mildred in the house (despite the parishioners). These were hard years, and we were often mired in ideological and theological conflicts.

I realized that I needed to go back to school for a master's degree if I were to have the background to do what I wanted to do, and after two contentious years in a rural parish, the Bishop thankfully moved Karl to another church. By then, Pooker was a part of our family and provided a sense of continuity as we all moved to Knoxville, Tennessee, from southwest Virginia.

### **The Humane Association**

By 1981, Pooker was 10 years old and an only pet. Karl and I had been married for 12 years, and I was writing my doctoral dissertation. One can get a little disoriented in the midst of a doctoral program. I was also working part time at the Area Agency on Aging where I had worked for several years after receiving my M.S.S.W. I spotted an ad in the local paper advertising for a professional person who was organized and had good management skills. The Knoxville-Knox County Humane Society was advertising for an Executive Director. I applied, even though I was planning on finding a teaching job and

needed to finish the dissertation; I just needed to do something in the "real world." And something with animals might be fun.

I can vividly recall that Sunday afternoon at one of the high rise, all glass bank buildings in town. It was early fall and the board of directors of the humane society was meeting to interview candidates. I suspect that they were as curious about why I had applied as I was about them. I was doing well in responding to the interview questions, relieved to be in a world somewhat removed from analyzing my data.

Then it happened. One board member said something strange: "Would you be able to euthanize an animal?"

I was stunned. "Excuse me?" I asked. I was certain I hadn't correctly heard this question. He repeated, "Would you be able to euthanize an animal?"

I protested, rather weakly, with: "But I thought this was the executive director position." "It is, but there are holidays and times when people are on leave or out sick, and someone has to be able to euthanize the animals."

I paused only a minute. "Then you don't want me. I'd have a house full of animals before that would happen."

I stopped the interview at that point, then asked how many animals were killed at the shelter. The numbers were in the thousands.

As I left the room, I remember driving in a fog to a dear friend's house, a public health educator who owned two large dogs. When Cindy opened the door, I blurted out the story of my aborted interview and she sympathized. We ventilated. Two hours later, when I left her house, we had a plan to save the animals.

I had discovered in the interviewing process that the senior program officer of a national foundation was on the humane society board. The foundation was known to be funding community-based intervention projects with a special emphasis on elders. I just happened to be on the board of the local senior citizens home aid agency. It didn't take much time for Cindy and me to come up with a proposal.

Several weeks later we were having lunch with the foundation officer. We proposed that



we would work with the University of Tennessee School of Veterinary Medicine to develop a human-animal companion program for older people receiving in-home services. Thus began a collaboration between the School of Veterinary Medicine, the undergraduate human services department, the Area Agency on Aging, and the Senior Citizens Home Aide Service. With my social work background, Cindy's public health background, and our new colleague from veterinary medicine, we began a pet placement program. Human service students were trained to conduct assessments of the older people to be sure they would be able to care for a pet and veterinary students assessed the animals.

We learned a great deal in the process and those results have been reported years ago (Netting, Wilson, & New, 1987; New, Wilson, & Netting, 1986; Wilson, Netting, & New, 1985). It was our first funded research project. But it was our love of dogs that motivated us to save at least a few animals if we could. As young "pracademics" we learned so much from one another as we cut our teeth on interdisciplinary collaboration – for the love of dogs. In the process we tried not to project our love of dogs onto others, although it was hard not to do at times.

Just as we studied the human-animal bond over the years, I realized that I was living it out on a daily basis in my personal life. Karl can attest to the bonding that has occurred between us as human beings and those cherished creatures who have become so much a part of our lives over the years that their stories provide continuity and meaning for who we are. He told me the other day, "If someone hands me a dog in the nursing home, I will be one of those people who responds even if I've been very far away up until then."

### **Pooker**

Maybe it's because I'm a gerontological social worker, and maybe it's because I'm an only child who was always close to adults, but I've always liked old dogs. The only puppy we had in our married life of 38 years was Pooker—and he lived to be 16. He was a high maintenance peke-a-poo that we bought for \$20 from an old lady in Abingdon, Virginia,

back in 1971. We know he had poodle in him, but we aren't so sure about the "peke" part. We think he really didn't know who his father was, nor did the lady who raised him. Pooker was so much a part of our lives that when we were searching for additional educational opportunities, the deciding factor that determined where we would go was whether married student housing allowed pets. I'll never forget it—Karl and I had applied to four locations, one eastern, one midwestern, and two points in the west. Karl was seeking an advanced clinical pastoral education program, and I was seeking a Ph.D. in social work. We would sigh with relief when the acceptance letters arrived and then lie in wait for information on married student housing. When I opened the first brochure from a far western location, there was a statement about no pets being allowed, and Karl would say, "Well, we just can't go there." I would agree, and we'd wait for the next brochure. Finally, the University of Chicago married student housing brochure arrived and it read "pets are welcome." In fact, pets were encouraged for safety. When I opened that brochure and read it aloud, Karl said, "Then I think we need to go to Chicago." Years later, when people in academe would tell me what a good school Chicago is, I could only thank Pooker for contributing to my quality education. He was, in all truthfulness, the deciding factor.

Pooker's life was so intertwined with ours that we carried a repertoire of stories about Pooker with us. There was the time when a workman had left the cover off a manhole and Pooker fell into the hole, or the time he was hit by a taxicab on a Sunday afternoon, or the time that he took on a Doberman who almost bit him in two. He was a spunky old boy!

But it was what Pooker taught us about old age that was most revealing. One day, I remember finding something strange on the kitchen floor, a crystallized substance. It was close to the refrigerator so I decided that something must be leaking. Karl came in and we scrutinized the material but couldn't figure out exactly what it was. We cleaned it up. The next day another crystallized substance was found, but now it was in another part of the kitchen. We scratched our heads. It took



us days to realize that Pooker was having accidents (something totally unknown because he was the best housetrained dog we'd ever seen). His urine was literally so full of sugar that it was crystallizing. It is amazing the dog wasn't in a diabetic comma and it took two helping professionals days to figure out that he was diabetic. We immediately took him to the vet who put him on insulin. Karl would go out in his bathrobe at the crack of dawn, wait for Pooker to hike his leg, then catch as much urine as he could in a paper cup. He'd test the urine to determine just how much insulin to inject into that little dog.

Now this went on for weeks, perhaps months, before Pooker had finally had it with Karl. Being stuck with a needle every morning was not his cup of tea. One day, this dog who adored Karl and would have never turned on his owner growled at Karl when he went to give him his shot. This was unthinkable! Karl was a hospital chaplain at the time and he said to me, "I should have known better. I was showing no bedside manners, just taking care of business. From now on I'm going to love on that dog before and after his shot, so that he knows that I care about him." This intervention worked, and Pooker never growled at him again. Karl and I would both use Pooker as an example in our teaching experiences after that – talking about the importance of emotional care when instrumental care or treatment was being given.

It was not long after that that Pooker began running into things. We knew that he had cataracts and his cloudy eyes were fading, but now he was going blind. We used what we knew about working with people with sight problems – keeping everything in the same place so that he could safely negotiate the house. This worked well. Being a person who moved furniture as a form of therapy, this put a bit of a crimp in my lifestyle, but it was worth it to see Pooker negotiate his environment. Karl had always joked about my furniture moving, quipping, "Just as I learn to negotiate the house in utter darkness, Ellen moves the furniture!" Now we talked about not moving things as a collaborative effort to make the house safe for the dog, but it revealed how often we talked

through Pooker about our own relationship and what we liked and didn't like.

It was during this time that we began to talk with one another about quality of life and what that might mean to a dog. What we were really talking about was what quality of life meant to us. Pooker was blind and diabetic. He had arthritis, exacerbated by his fall into the manhole years prior, and he walked with what we affectionately called "the Poo-Bear shuffle." But he ate every bite of food offered to him and seemed to enjoy lying around the house. We began to talk about how we would want to live (or not live) in what condition and how long. We agreed that as long as Pooker didn't seem to be in pain, we would do whatever we could to make him comfortable, but we were also learning about what pain and comfort meant to us.

We both worked and left Pooker alone a lot, so we went to the pound to find a companion for him in his old age. With hindsight we realize that we were also getting a transitional animal so that we would not be without a dog when Pooker was no longer with us. We were taking care of ourselves as much as we were taking care of him.

### **Lady**

It was during this adventure to the pound that my ability to divine a perfect dog became evident, a skill that would follow me into my old age. I would walk up and down the row of cages, and when I came upon a dog that made me totally break down in tears, that would be the dog we chose. It didn't take long for me to break down when we went in search of Pooker's companion, because a little black, mixed, six-year-old dog stood on her hind legs and begged. She was ours in a heartbeat and we named her Lady.

Pooker was not at all sure he wanted a companion, and Lady had a great deal more energy than he. She was also less well house trained and sneaky about it...but she was the sweetest dog we'd ever seen and she tolerated Pooker's irritability. So they lived in toleration of one another until one day he slipped away into a diabetic comma when we were out of town and the kennel keeper forgot to give him his insulin. Pooker was 16.



Karl called me at work after he had gone to the kennel, only to discover that Pooker was dead. I came home to find Karl sitting in the bathtub (he was a shower person) and just soaking his grief away. I asked him if he was all right, and he said, "Oh, I'll be okay, but Lady is really sad and could probably use some attention." I remember thinking at that point about how many times we had projected our feelings onto our animals and had used them to convey how we were feeling. Lady was her usual joyous self, dashing around the yard and sitting up on her hind legs. Karl was really sad, but he wasn't yet ready to talk about it without crying. A few hours later we had a good cry together.

Lady was a joy and actually seemed to thrive once Pooker was gone. She was affectionate and dear, her sneaky toilet habits being her only vice. We loved her dearly and one day when Karl was petting her he discovered a lump that female dogs are wont to get. However, this lump was anything but benign and even with aggressive treatment, it came back with a vengeance. I would find Lady lying under our bed, panting, and I would gently pull her out and lie down on the floor with her, putting my face next to hers. One morning, the growth had become so large that she was having trouble walking and she pulled herself around the yard in obvious distress. We knew that the time had come to put her to sleep and we tried to prepare ourselves. That was one sad morning as we stood in the examination room with her and as she peaceably died. What we discovered is how differently we dealt with grief. Karl called the hospital, explained what had happened, and took the day off. He went to bed and slept most of the day. I busied myself cleaning up the house, gathering her things and getting them ready to give away, and trying to keep my mind occupied. It was a very sad day, and we were dog-less for the first time in 18 years.

We vowed not to rush into anything – we needed to get over both Pooker's and Lady's deaths, which were within a year of one another. We said all the typical things about how we didn't want to go through that again, that we never wanted to be so attached to a dog, etc., etc. We knew all the platitudes and

yet we seemed to be repeating them all. We also had a three-week trip planned in the months ahead, so it would be ridiculous to get a dog when we would only have to leave. But we also found ourselves wandering toward any pet shop we could find and spending an inordinate amount of time petting all the animals.

### Jessie

One day, Karl came home from the hospital with a newsletter, in which there was an advertisement for an 18-month-old sheltie who needed a home. We would just go and "look" with no intention of getting a dog and of course we came home with Jessie. As it turned out, Jessie was raised to be a show dog but was too fearful to show. The breeder no longer wanted to keep her and was not sure that she could even go to a pet home. Jessie was painfully shy. When we brought her home, she was so fearful of Karl that she wouldn't move a muscle when he was around. She had only known women and men were obviously not to be trusted. Jessie stayed on a small rug in front of our kitchen sink in a catatonic state. We soon discovered that her view of the world was the size of the former cage to which she had been trained. The rug, even without barriers to impede her, was about the size of her cage. Our mistake was that we put her water dish next to the kitchen door, several feet from the rug. Had we not figured out that her view of the world was the rug, she would not have had enough to drink. When we moved the water dish onto the rug, she lapped up water as if she were dying of thirst. Then she would lie on the rug, not moving for hours. We would open the kitchen door and encourage her to go into the yard. She would race into the yard, do her business, and then come back to the rug, returning to her catatonic condition.

After almost a week of this behavior (or lack of behavior) on her part, Karl was convinced that she would never warm to him. I faced having to counsel him not to feel rejected. But I was perplexed about Jessie. I had had two colleagues come to the house to work on a book manuscript and when they went into the kitchen to get some coffee, they literally did not notice that there was a dog on



the rug because she was so still. Another week passed. She only moved to go outside, then returned to her rug. We always knew where to find her.

In the second week, I sat at the computer writing one summer afternoon. The house was quiet and I heard a rustle, then a collar jingle. I realized that Jessie had left the rug. I kept composing, not looking up. The next day as I worked, I heard another rustle and I was convinced that Jessie was moving down the hallway toward my office. I looked around and she ran back to her rug, settling in for the remainder of the afternoon. On the third day, she moved into the hallway and looked for me. I decided to get up from the computer, walk slowly down the hallway, and move past her, almost as if she were not there. I did not dare reach down to her or act like I knew she was there for fear of frightening her. I walked past her, heading for the living room. She followed me. She looked at me. Then she frolicked around me, running around the room, almost joyously. I frolicked with her for at least a minute and then a strange look appeared in her eye, almost like a wild animal, and she quickly turned and headed for the kitchen rug. It was as if she'd caught herself and remembered who she was. When Karl came home that afternoon, I told him about this. He looked at the catatonic dog on the rug and then looked at me like I had been working too hard. It was almost impossible for him to believe.

Jessie and I frolicked for a few minutes every afternoon the next week. Each time she would quickly return to her rug. Karl would come home and I would tell him about this magical experience and he would shake his head in disbelief.

### Mitzi

As several weeks went by and Jessie would only connect with me for short intervals, Karl was beginning to feel very disillusioned. Then I struck upon an idea. Jessie needed a role model. She just didn't know how to be a dog and another dog needed to teach her. I recalled that the breeder who was anxious to give Jessie away also had her mother and grandmother. The grandmother was retiring from the show ring and might be available on

loan. So I called the breeder and inquired. Ironically, since Mitzi (the grandmother) was retiring, she was up for adoption to a pet home. It never failed to amaze me how people could give up dogs once they were not useful, but then I have never understood raising pure breed dogs either. That is likely another story...but on this occasion my timing was right.

Mitzi was Jessie's grandmother and both were beautiful tricolored shelties. We learned that Mitzi had become so stressed in her years as a show dog that she had actually killed an entire litter of pups. Mitzi had a record. But when we brought her to the house and Jessie saw her, it was if a light had gone on in Jessie's eyes. She leaped forward and ran to her grandmother. They frolicked in the living room, much as Jessie and I had done. Jessie literally came alive when her grandmother walked in. Karl kept saying, "I can't believe you knew that she needed her grandmother." But truth be known, my grandmother had been my best friend, so I figured it might work for another species as well.

Jessie and Mitzi were a bit neurotic in many ways, but they were constant companions. Mitzi didn't seem like a dog who could be a murderer of her own children, but then she had been living a life of stress. She settled into her retirement from the show ring with us and followed Karl around the yard, inspecting every plant planted and every seed sown. Jessie would imprint after her grandmother, then seek some solitude in another station in the yard. When a lightning storm would come, they ran out into the rain and looked up at the sky, the exact opposite of most normal dogs. As shelties, they were herders, so whenever we pulled into the driveway, they would try to herd the car until we'd have to get out and put them in the backyard so that we didn't run over them. They didn't appear to have any common sense, but they were beautiful animals.

When we moved across country, they sat side-by-side in the backseat of the car and didn't move a muscle. We had to coax them out to go to the bathroom. And when we arrived in Richmond, after three days on the road, they got out of the gate of our rental house and disappeared into the night. We



searched the alleyways and streets until 2:00 a.m. and finally gave up until dawn. They were located at least four miles away, having crossed one of the busiest thoroughfares in town, at the Purina Dog Chow Company next to the railroad yards. A bunch of railroad men used cell phones and trucks to round them up for us. We figured that they were going to hop a train and head back west, once they'd rounded up some grub. When we tried to give the railroad men money to go out and have lunch for finding them, a man in bib overalls looked at Karl and said, in a deep southern voice, "Son, you don't have enough money to feed a hungry railroad man!" Instead, we wrote a letter to their supervisor, thanking them for welcoming us to Richmond in such a helpful way.

Ironically, Jessie and Mitzi ended up being the transitional animals who introduced us to our new work colleagues. A human interest writer for the local paper picked up on the story of our lost dogs and put a piece on the front page of the paper about our arrival in town and how the dogs were rescued by the employees of the railroad company. When Karl appeared at the hospital for his first day of work, and when I came to the faculty retreat for the opening day of fall semester, everyone said, "Oh, you're the one who lost the dogs!" This made for a smooth transition as new colleagues shared their animal stories with us.

Jessie and Mitzi both went deaf over the years. We got used to calling and not having them respond. I would go out into the yard and wave until they saw me motioning that dinner was ready. Or if they were sleeping soundly, we'd go over and touch them to alert them to whatever we needed them to know. Neighbors often said quietly, "I hate to tell you this, but I think your dog is dead. She's been lying in the yard not moving, even when I turned the lawnmower on." We'd simply reply, "Don't worry, she's just deaf." And for a long time that was true.

At age 16, we found Mitzi outside the back door, lying in the gravel one Saturday morning. We knew that she was dead as soon as we saw her, lying there quietly, her tongue somewhat distended. We wrapped her in a

large towel and carried her to the veterinary office where they took her body to dispose of. Her death was not unexpected, as we had set up a little clinic in the laundry room, hanging a bottle of saline from a large plant hook in the ceiling, setting her on a nonskid rug on top of the washing machine, and then hydrating her every few days so that she would not be overtaken with kidney failure. Death was inevitable but we prolonged her life for months with this procedure. Being the chow hound that she was, we think we prolonged her quality of life because she ate ravenously until the day she died, enjoying every morsel and seeking treats at every opportunity. She reminded us of Pooker who was always ready to eat.

### Sandy

By the time Mitzi died, we had acquired a third dog. Sandy was about two years old when Karl brought her home. She looked like a golden on corgi legs and she had the disposition of a golden – incredibly dear with soft brown eyes. Sandy had been raised with a yardful of dogs of all extractions and her owner was an old man who was the son of slaves. He loved his dogs, but his wife was not particularly fond of them. He wanted his dogs taken care of before he died, so Karl said that he could take one. At that point Karl had moved to hospice chaplaincy so he was visiting patients in their homes. Sandy was often picked on by the other dogs, so Karl had bundled her up and brought her home. Sandy was shy, like Jessie. She cowered whenever we'd have a broom or rake in our hands, making us think that she had been struck at some point. She and Jesse were good companions for one another. When Mitzi died, Jessie was 13 and Sandy was three.

Jessie lived to 16. It was strange how 16 seemed to be the lifespan for our old dogs. Jessie was following Karl in the yard when she stumbled and fell over. Karl thought that she was dead, but he was able to pump on her chest and revive her. However, something devastating had happened and she never fully regained herself. She began slipping away, retreating and not eating. She moved into her catatonic state of solitude almost like she had begun her stay with us many years before.



Soon she was not eating or drinking at all. She was dying, but very slowly. I would spend time with her, trying to help her up, but she moved very little. We waited and she was starving to death. On Karl's birthday we made the decision to have her put to sleep and we felt as if we had waited too long. As we carried her into the veterinarian's office, she was limp and close to death. She slipped away very quietly.

Sandy was devastated. She grieved like nothing we had ever witnessed in an animal. She was not hungry. She kept going under the deck and staying for hours and hours, not moving around the yard very much. She was so sad that it made us sad to see her. She had always been around other animals and she grieved the death of Jessie. We vowed to find her a companion and went to the shelter to rescue a dog.

### Pitiful

We looked at a number of dogs, trying to find one that would be gentle with Sandy and about her same size. I saw a row of cages along the far wall. I asked about that row and the attendant told me that that was death row. Those dogs were old. I asked her to open a cage along that row because I could see two eyes but the dog was way back in the recesses of a dark cave. She pulled out the most pitiful animal one could image. This dog was so thin that her bumpy backbone was sticking out. She looked like an old poodle mix with sad eyes and totally matted fur. I broke down and started crying. Karl said, "Honey, I don't think this dog is well." The attendant said that we couldn't take her anyway because their policy was to keep a dog until the day of its being euthanized in case someone claimed it. Her day was on Monday and this was Saturday.

On Sunday night I awakened in the middle of the night and said, "I can't live with myself if I don't rescue that dog." So Monday morning when the shelter opened, I called ahead and said that I was coming to pick up number 334. When I picked her up, she was emaciated and I headed straight for our veterinarian's office. Our veterinarian took one look at this old poodle mix, guessed her age to be at least 12 or older, and ran her finger down her bumpy spine.

"She's SO thin," she kept saying. "You've got to get her to eat." I took her home and fed her. She ate well. Within hours she was trying to climb over the doggie gate between the kitchen and the laundry room. When Karl called, she let out a howl that would disturb the dead, and Karl said, "I can't believe it...that sounds just like Pooker!" (Pooker had had an incredible ability to throw his head back and give a soprano glass-breaking howl.)

When Karl arrived home, I asked him what we should name her. "She's pitiful," he said. "I know she's pitiful, but what should we name her?" "Pitiful," he repeated, "Look at her, she's pitiful." So, that's how Pitiful got her name. Gradually we introduced her to Sandy, who was still grieving over Jessie. Sandy thought that Pitiful was the grand dame of all dogs. She was enthralled with this ancient creature and followed her everywhere she went. Pitiful strolled around the yard like a queen, looking over her shoulder at Sandy as if she were holding court. But Pitiful was not to be a yard animal. She staked out the best seat in the den and spent hours lying on the couch. Each week she gained strength and when we bathed her, she looked soft and wooly white with spots of gray. Sandy adored her.

It was a Saturday morning, exactly six months after we had brought Pitiful home, and Karl had gone down the steps to the back deck, ready to do some gardening. As he glanced back up the steps, Pitiful teetered on the top step, went limp, and fell down the steps at his feet. He brought her limp body into the house and handed her to me while he called the veterinarian's office. She was alive, but leaned her body into mine as if she would melt into me. By the time we got her to the office, she had come around a bit, but something was decidedly wrong. Our veterinarian wondered if she had had a stroke. That afternoon, she died in the clinic as a team of practitioners tried to revive her.

### Schnapsy

Sandy was alone again and Karl and I were devastated. There had been something about that old dog that had reminded us of Pooker – spunky and strong willed, in control and able to ask for what she wanted. We saw



in the paper that someone was advertising schnapoos (schnauzer/poodle mix) puppies. We drove for an hour way out into the country and found the trailer in which an older woman lived with a house full of dogs. Two of the cutest schnapoos were racing around the living room with a full bred schnauzer, a two- or three-year-old schnapoo, and a poodle mix (the mother of the puppies). The two- or three-year-old was in distress and a bloody patch oozed from his chest. She explained that her grandsons had been helping her clean up the dogs and had taken the scissors to this male dog, trying to cut out mats, and had cut him.

I didn't miss a beat. I went over to him and asked her what he would cost. She was her daughter's dog, but her daughter couldn't keep him in an apartment. She replied, "I guess it would be \$25.00." I opened my purse and gave her the money. Karl looked at me in bewilderment. We thanked her and left the trailer, with the bloody adult schnapoo in tow. When we got into the car, Karl looked at me and said, "I thought we were coming for a puppy." I simply replied, "We have to get this one to a vet. He's hurt." The dog, who would later be named Schnapsy, leaned up against me and we drove away.

Fortunately, Schnapsy was not deeply cut and healed well. When we introduced him to Sandy, she did something that I've never seen another dog do. She moved away from her food dish and let him eat her dinner. From that moment on, Schnapsy and Sandy were companions. Neither had the need to be an alpha dog because they looked to Karl as the alpha dog. Today, Sandy is about 12 and Schnapsy is about eight. We're all aging in place together.

### Lessons Learned

Karl and I brought a love of animals to our relationship. We each had a history that involved numerous pets of various kinds. In my household growing up, animals served as a source of companionship in a quiet home dominated by a good provider, my engineer father. In Karl's home, animals served as a source of social support in an environment dominated by an unhappy mother. For different reasons as children, we grew to appreciate

the companionship provided by animals and appreciated their unconditional affection. We then brought that appreciation to our relationship; in sharing our pet stories, we got to know one another. One of the values we held in common was a basic respect and sensitivity for nonhuman animals.

Our animals have provided us with insights into both our personal and professional lives. As a gerontological social worker, I often witnessed the importance of companion animals to their elderly caregivers. Older persons would tell me that they could not move to public housing because their pets were not allowed to go with them. Colleagues and I were involved, now over 25 years ago, in advocating for public housing laws to change those policies. When others could not understand why an older client would not move, I could explain the importance of that human-animal bond. As a hospice chaplain, Karl visits in people's homes. He comes home covered with animal hair, telling me stories of how he connected with his patients when they saw that he was willing to let Muffy sit on his lap or when he disclosed about his pets. The language of pet ownership is a way to develop relationships with those patients who have those attachments.

I was involved in human-animal companionship research early in my career. Our research team could cite all the platitudes – dogs are nonjudgmental, they are always glad to see you, they serve as communication links with others (Wilson, Netting, & New, 2006) – but it was in our personal relationships with Pooker, Lady, Jessie, Mitzi, Pitiful, Sandy, and Schnapsy that Karl and I learned the most about ourselves.

Pooker taught us the importance of the human touch in our professional, instrumental practice. Giving treatment without a warm bedside manner could do more harm than good. He was the final factor that influenced our decision about where to go to complete our graduate education. Pooker was a conduit to our dialogue about the meaning of quality of life and quality of care. He literally became our communication link, facilitating our talking about what quality of life would mean for us and then jointly trying to decide what we might



need to do to make his life as comfortable as possible. In the process we learned how one another viewed quality of life and what we would want for ourselves as we age in place. Karl and I still talk about Pooker and use him as an exemplar of resiliency in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. He is part of our story for we literally grew up together with Pooker as our companion. As a couple our small talk with others is often based on Pooker stories – the time in fell in a manhole, the time he was hit by a taxi in Chicago, how he chased rabbits in the dessert when we moved to Arizona, etc. He became part of our narrative as a couple.

Lady and Jessie taught us that dying is a very personal process, and that withdrawal is okay and must be respected if that is needed. I have learned to admire Karl's incredible, almost uncanny ability to recognize what dying people are telling him even when they cannot speak. He is a master at interpreting symbolic cues and messages, both verbal and nonverbal. We both have learned a great deal from our animal companions who communicate in nonverbal ways and I think it has made us more observant in our work and in our personal relationships. We have also learned how to respect one another's need for silence and to read one another's nonverbal cues.

Jessie also reminded us of the importance of relationship when she frolicked with her grandmother and came out of her shell. Mitzi taught us that a quality life can be maintained until the end if palliative care is administered with gentle attention. It was Jessie and Mitzi who served as the communication link with our new colleagues in Richmond, facilitating our transition through the medium of animal stories. In Chicago, Pooker had been our communication link to other people who lived in our building and we watched the formation of a dog walkers' culture of protection and caring in what could have been an unsafe environment. In large cities we learned that dog walkers are on the streets for a purpose, and therefore they are likely to garner more trust than persons who have no obvious purpose for being there. People would start conversations with us because we were walking a dog.

Lady and Pitiful were pound dogs and both lived much shorter times with us than we would have wanted. But they were incredibly full of life, even though they both had come from death row. Lady was six, and Pitiful was 12 at a minimum, and both were not likely to be adopted because puppies and younger animals simply stand a better chance. They taught me that I was absolutely right to stop the interview with the humane society. It would have broken my heart to have euthanized an animal just because no one wanted to take him or her home. What it did for us as a couple is incredible because it opened an ongoing dialogue about the stewardship we owe our environment and the value we place on life, both human and nonhuman. Karl and I are deeply connected in this value and now that we are approaching retirement, we talk about ways by which we might volunteer to work for the betterment of animals.

Pitiful was with us just six months, an interesting length of time since Karl works for hospice where a diagnosis of six months or less is the norm. We believe that those six months were exemplary in terms of what can happen in hospice care. Pitiful reminded us of the spirit of resiliency and a determined nature. She was with us a short time, but her impact was greatly felt. She was a beacon of hope for Sandy and helped her work through her bereavement process in a way that we could not. For us, she allowed us to cry (again) together but more freely this time as we are less concerned that we not break down in front of one another. In our early years, I cried freely, but Karl tried to hold back. Now we both cry and it's okay.

Sandy showed that even a dog can befriend a stranger, moving from her dish to allow Schnapsy passage. And Sandy reminded us of the importance of relationships, something we had witnessed when the light went on in Jessie's eyes as her grandmother (Mitzi) came into the room. As they frolicked, we saw playfulness and joy come to Jessie. I have watched Karl gently stroke Sandy and sit with Schnapsy, his head on Karl's lap. I see in this man a sense of compassion and caring. In our relationship I have discovered that Karl is a person who can seize the moment, who lives



for the day, who does not dwell on the past or live in the future. We are so different because I am always living years ahead, planning what I need to do, pushing to make it happen. Finally, I am beginning to recognize the importance of just "being with and being present." Karl respects my ability to plan and says that he benefits from those skills, but we have often talked about how our dogs know how to live in the present, and Karl and the dogs have taught me to be more present in my relationships.

Sandy and Schnapsy are sitting on the couch with Karl as I write this. They think that he is the best thing since sliced bread – their alpha dog. I think that they have enriched our lives beyond words and their stories have become part of our narrative as a couple. Their stories have been told in our professional circles as well, for it is in their telling that many lessons about aging, illness, intervention, relationships, and the bond among living creatures contributes to our understandings of ourselves and others.

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Karl and Schnapsy. Photograph by F. Ellen Netting.



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