

MY SEVEN (DOG) MONTH ITCH

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This story is about the lessons taught to the author by his dog. By using the tools of self-awareness, self-reflection, and self-examination, the author was able to discern his shortcomings to improve the relationship between him and his dog. Lessons learned from the experience also parallel social work practice.

In slow motion we glance fleetingly at each other then quickly turn away. Within milliseconds, we turn again only to catch our stares searing one another. Slowly and cautiously, we begin our march and float toward each other, as if gravity is being lifted by the air below. Our bodies crash unto each other with me picking up and lifting him as if we've been missing each other all these years. So locked into the moment that everyone and everything surrounding us cease to exist with only the earth still spinning for those very seconds. We were oblivious! We were one!

It was a cold January and that was my running "boy and his dog" fantasy as I was embarking on a nine-hour trek to Indianapolis to retrieve Colt, an eight-week-old Weimaraner puppy. Nine hours later and upon our initial encounter, the romance that I'd conjured above remained a fantasy. There were no fleeting glances or searing stares. There was no floating or lifting. In fact, Colt barely noticed me. He was too busy playing with his brothers. The fantasy, however, serves as the starting point for many of the lessons that eventually took place in the span of the next seven months. This story is about the lessons taught by Colt and learned by this author. These lessons involve many social work aspects such as self-examination, self-reflection, self-awareness, projection, and cognitive restructuring. Although the lessons took place between me and Colt and had direct effects on our relationship, they also permeate the author's personal and professional lives.

Completing the Collage

The idyllic American dream can be constructed from a collage of Norman Rockwell's paintings. The collage comes together as a picture of a family living in a nice quiet town where houses with white picket fences envelop perfectly manicured lawns that front pristine streets. These are communities in which children grow up to perpetuate this cycle of simplicity by having a job, purchasing a house to start a family of their own, and of course, along the way, integrating a dog into this perfect picture (but not necessarily in this order). I began to put together my collage at the ripe age of 37. After graduating and finding my chosen vocation, I got my dream job of being a Professor of Social Work teaching at a great university. To boot, I was living in a city that fits my personality and lifestyle. Although the family route is temporarily on hold, I did manage to find another form of commitment by purchasing a house (but without the picket fence and for sure not the perfectly manicured lawn). In this sense, the construction of my Rockwell collage was near completion with only a couple of missing pieces. Since I was having a difficult time locating the "love" piece, and with the "dog" piece more readily available, the dog was logically the next move in my overall effort to finish painting my own Rockwell.

In Preparation

Choosing academia afforded me the opportunity to pursue my passion for teaching, researching, writing, and publishing. Moreover, due to its flexible schedule and working venues, this position also afforded me the luxury of maintaining an active lifestyle that involves numerous sports activities. Hence, my days often involve many hours of teaching,

researching, and writing either from home or the office in addition to participating in sports activities to reenergize myself for another round of intellectual pursuits. During this routine I began to imagine a four-legged companion lounging around my desk while I was working or accompanying me on one of my runs in the woods. As such, having a basset hound would not have been the appropriate breed. What I needed was an active mate. After doing much research about dog breeds, I concluded that a Weimaraner would be the best fit for me, personally and professionally. I also decided to name him Colt.

Reflecting on the process of deciding whether a dog would fit in my life, like a movie, I now recall only thinking of the trauma-free scenes of Colt lounging while I was working or running with me through the trails of my bucolic environment. What was neglected in the screenplay was the everyday ongoing responsibility of providing a structured routine; crate training; waking up in the night or being away for only for a few hours for potty training purposes; making numerous trips to the veterinarian and obedience school; daily walks to the dog park in the morning and evening; learning about and feeding him the proper food; dealing with my over reaction to his swallowing unknown objects, vomiting, or having diarrhea or blood in his stool; etc. In short, it was the nuances of everyday detail that were not included in the assessment process which would come to alter my personal and professional lives. On the other hand, little did I know that there were many life lessons embedded in these various responsibilities that would directly impact not only my relationship with Colt, but also force me to examine some issues which helped me grow as a person.

Life surrounds us with many learning moments. The clear learning moments usually take place when the events are obvious and impact us profoundly. We absorb those lessons with the hope of preventing history from repeating itself. Other times, some incidents occur ever so subtly that only those with an intuitive knack are able to recognize and tease out the deeply hidden learning lessons and their meanings. By "knack" I am thinking of the

ability to reach deep into our "self" to reflect, critique, analyze, and even at times uncomfortably acknowledge and admit shortcomings. After all, self-awareness, self-reflections, transference, counter-transference, projection, framing, and cognitive restructuring are the terms we often use in social work classes with the common goal of sending future social workers out into the world to make a difference. These are the very elements that social workers ask of their clients. The title of this article, "*My Seven (Dog) Month Itch*," reflects a point in time that took place during our seventh month together. Scratching below the surface bleeds the lessons that positively infected my relationship with Colt as well as my personal and professional relationships.

Single Dad

Colt was born on Thanksgiving Day. He wore a dark grey coat with piercing blue eyes. The first half of his body was literally covered by long droopy ears as he wobbly pranced. At eight weeks old he weighed about 11 pounds. With all of his other six brothers looking identical to each other and uniformly displaying the same demeanors, I decided to throw out my fantasy or any other technique of choosing a puppy that I'd read earlier. Instead, I just blindly reached out and gently picked up the first patch of fur that I felt. From that moment on, Colt became a part of my idyllic Rockwell painting.

Although nowhere near the same intensity, I am now better able to have some sense of empathy when I talk to single parents. Despite reading numerous books in preparation for Colt, I thought I was prepared for this awesome responsibility. As it turns out, one can only be educated so much on an intellectual level (theory) but nothing beats real live experiences (practice). Frankly, the two do not always connect.

After a couple days of Colt being home, the first thing I noticed was my lack of sleep. I was no longer able to sleep as late, for as long, and wake up as late as I wanted – for I had potty training duty every three hours. Luckily, my schedule at school was relatively flexible but feelings of severe panic and fear

of Colt soiling his crate would occupy me if he were left alone longer than three hours. On days when I taught or had meetings, I found my head speeding home just as fast as the odometer in the car for fear of his soiling. The same feeling persisted while I was away attending a social or sports event. Wherever I would go, I would feel the tug of Colt and as a result I began to sense that my professional, personal, and recreational lifestyles were inconvenienced. This every three hour dance with Colt would go on to take its toll for the next three months until I received advice from a fellow dog owner that I was creating a bad habit by having him conduct his business so often. Further, on the days when I was working from home, I found myself feeling uncomfortable and guilty watching him inside the crate. As a result, I spent more time taking him on walks or playing with him. Hence, my work production dropped which, in turn, created more uncomfortable feelings of anxiety for me in my tenure track position.

Additionally, Colt had to be constantly monitored almost every second of his waking moments since he was chewing anything and everything that he was able to reach with his paws or teeth. No toys were able to keep his attention span for more than 30 minutes so the search was always on for the next taste test. Once found, the chew fest would take place. For socialization purposes, Colt and I would make our morning and evening pilgrimage to the dog park where he was lavished with praise and felt the touch of human hands while enlarging his own social circle by making new canine friends.

The trips to the veterinarian or obedience school often became raucous events since he would not sit still in the car (crating him was not an option since the big crate would not fit in my tiny car). While sitting on the front seat, it was as if he wanted to test his leaping ability to see if he could jump onto another parallel moving object. I became ambidextrous at driving with one hand while attempting to hold him down with a leash with my other hand. As mentioned earlier Colt eats or chews everything in sight. In spite of my vigilant surveillance, it was not unusual for him to be sneaky and swallow various foreign objects

as we took our daily walks. I recall one time when I unsuccessfully wrestled a foreign latex object which was eventually swallowed by Colt. In my panic and frustrated state of mind, I contacted a friend whose husband is a veterinarian and was advised to give him two spoons of hydrogen peroxide, forcing him to vomit. Like most first-time parents or dog owners, any sign of him feeling ill, such as throwing up, having diarrhea, or displaying blood in his stool, would send me into crisis mode. A million "what-ifs" without any solutions would emerge. Unfortunately, these incidents never traveled alone as the entourage of stress, panic, anxiety, and frustration would cascade and descend at the same time.

Summer is now at its peak and proving its presence with oppressive heat. Colt and I have now coexisted for seven months. Weighing in at 67 pounds, he now is a gangly teenager, but still a puppy, with the energy of a turbo charger. He is able to leap as high and run as fast and far as a gazelle. He has also become a social butterfly by greeting and befriending every living object, whether humans, dogs, squirrels, or cats by wagging his short, docked tail. "Hello, my name is Colt! Wanna play?" I was proud of myself to have potty and crate trained him. However, despite the gains in size, speed, and strength, none of the previous behaviors of chewing or swallowing foreign objects inside and outside the house; occasional bouts of vomiting, diarrhea, or blood in his stool; quick boredom with toys; or riding safely in the car have changed. For me, the constant feelings of stress, panic, and anxiety continue to appear at their highest intensity every time one of the above incidents occurs. Further, I continue to feel guilty about the concept of crating Colt for several hours even after having read that the crate serves as a comfort den for dogs. Consequently, the tug of attending to Colt never went away after all these months and the interference with my professional and personal lives continues to persist. It was a constant that never faded. Bluntly, I became emotionally tired without realizing it.

Awakening

Emergence is a curious process and its meaning is not always transparent. Instead,

emergence can be like a “psychological collage” that is made up of images from various sources that seeped into our subconscious without any explicit effort. The outcome of this process can emerge slowly—or in my case, abruptly, and unexpectedly—but for sure not accidentally. Put differently, I suspect that it is usually an amalgamation of events that get processed subconsciously and eventually a product or decision emerges. One day recently, without any provocative incident from Colt or in my own life, I simply decided that Colt and I were no longer a fit. My “itch” was taking place without a specific precipitating event. Admittedly, I was surprised at the timing and level of intensity. Feelings of emotional drain and the burden of Colt enveloped me like a blanket on a hot summer day. Along with this came a layer of guilt for having such perverse feelings. Feeling a little surprised and very uncomfortable, I unsuccessfully attempted to lift the layer of guilt. At the same time, in order to feel the freedom, I knew that I had to liberate myself by removing the physical and emotional cuffs of the past seven months. While I was feeling guilty, confused, and somewhat surprised at this newly arrived epiphany, I also knew that I needed to let this episode simmer before making any drastic and regretful decisions.

The Learning of “Self”

As a social worker and professor, I believe that self-reflection, self-examination, and self-awareness are usually the very first steps in assessing any situation. This is applicable in both personal and professional venues. Equally important is acknowledging the issues and their accompanying feelings. A day after my emergence, I began to practice what I teach and commenced my analysis. I concluded that the epiphany did not happen in isolation but had been in the works for a long period of time. Psychologically, I never rested and began to walk the tight rope from the very moment I got Colt, if not before. Further, I had to admit that my expectations of Colt were developmentally unrealistic. Specifically, Colt was and is still a puppy; yet I was expecting him not to chew on objects, dip his head into the trash can, test his limits with me, chase

after squirrels and cats, and perform a host of other normal puppy behaviors. In essence, I was expecting adult behaviors from a puppy and in truth, even adult dogs may not have granted some of my unrealistic wishes. Subconsciously, I may have been expecting him to be “perfect,” which may be an expectation that I also have for myself and people in my life. After more contemplation, I also realized that the continuous feelings of being tugged that eventually transformed into burden when I was away from Colt were the result of *me* not wanting to be confined in a crate for hours. I also failed to take into consideration that millions of other dogs spend much of their time in the crate while their owners are at work.

In order to alleviate my guilt, I decided to run two experiments to connect my intellectual knowledge of crate training and its application in real life. The first experiment was to be away for at least seven hours instead of the usual three to four hours that I had imposed on myself. The second experiment was to work at home and take Colt out of his crate every few hours for a walk. Colt came through both experiments brilliantly. He neither soiled in his crate from being there over a relatively long period of time nor did he complain about being in the crate while I was working. I concluded that I felt more uncomfortable watching him in the crate than he, himself, felt in the crate. This led me to an overarching uncomfortable conclusion: I was projecting my own feelings of burden and imposing my own values of unrealistic expectations and perfection onto Colt. Put differently, I was blaming him due to my own shortcomings, whereas he really was just being himself. Behaviors such as chewing or darting across the street to greet people are developmentally and age appropriate. Episodes of Colt vomiting or having diarrhea or blood in his stool are no different from those of humans. And the constant need to attend to Colt or the tug of guilt by having him in the crate was all self-imposed and dispelled when he performed just fine and appeared happy relaxing in his den.

The lessons that emerged from this episode between me and Colt can also be translated into social work practice. For

example, it is essential that social workers are knowledgeable of human developmental stages in order to discern and distinguish between healthy and unhealthy behaviors of clients. Further, it helps the social worker to start where the client is in order to set realistic expectations with achievable goals. Finally, unawareness of the social worker's personal issues or counter-transference can easily lead to biases and get projected onto clients. As a result, this can cause great damage to the therapeutic relationship.

Coda

The tools used in this analysis were self-reflection, self-examination, and self-awareness, resulting in the cognitive restructuring of my views about and relationship with Colt. The product was that the cuffs of physical and emotional constraints have been replaced with a newly found freedom, allowing me to enjoy him much more. I suspect that Colt also wonders about the whereabouts of the "uptight dad" and hopefully enjoys me more. No doubt my relationship with Colt has a new and different energy; however, the lessons learned from this incident would be wasted if I chose not to examine how my shortcomings may have impacted the people in my life, both personally and professionally. At the time of this writing, the collage remains incomplete but Colt is still a part of my Rockwell.

My Rockwell painting of the "boy and his dog" was unrealistic, an idealistic view of the human-animal bond. My inexperience with puppies was the perfect set-up for quickly dissipating this image. I researched breed characteristics and the possible "fit" with my personality, as any scholar would do. And when I randomly reached for one of those beautiful puppies, it never occurred to me to spend time with the others to see if there was a potential relationship between us. I looked to Colt as an appropriate piece in an emerging collage of a faculty member's life without recognizing that I had constructed a formulaic life into which I had interjected the paradox of spontaneity that only a puppy can bring. Rather than completing the collage, Colt ran amuck doing those things that puppies do. I, on the

other hand, played the role of a worried and frustrated parent whenever he did not conform to my expectations or fit neatly into my world. This worry and frustration may have caused me to focus on the instrumentality of the relationship over and above the social-psychological and emotional aspects of human-animal bonding. What a journey these seven months have been!

I once read the quote: "*Life is a journey, not a destination, and the only constant is change.*" The journey can at times be treacherous with uncomfortable feelings. But if one is willing to do the hard work of reflection, then perhaps the destination will be worth it in the end.

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Colt. Photograph by Peter V. Nguyen.

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