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Dog Therapy

I grew up begging for a dog. In my eyes, every child had three indisputable rights “to life, liberty,” and a puppy. My mother disagreed. Her response to my persistent plea was always the same. “We aren’t dog people, dear.” This was true of my family at the time. We often jested at those elderly, canine-worshipping couples and at those who carried photos of their so-called “babies” in posh, leather wallets. We scrunched our noses at the thought of pet dander and gaped in bemusement at those who fussed over their sweater-clad pups. No, we weren’t dog people, but it didn’t matter to me. I still wanted a puppy.

Nothing was more exciting than the day my mom finally caved in. My older brother was about to move out for the first time, and our close family was in distress. We foresaw a gaping hole that would be left in our home after he moved. Searching for something to fill it with, my mother consented to get a non-shedding golden doodle. From the first moment I picked Lily up, I could sense that she was special. She was a spirited dog, and while nothing could replace my adored brother, Lily could certainly detract from the pain.

As she grew into those oversized paws, her grip on my heart tightened. Her soft, white fur was my refuge from the gales of growing up. Her tail always wagged when I walked in the door, regardless of whatever stains were on my report card. She bounded after me on the days I felt like running away. Shallow boys and untrue friends could never fully break my heart, because my furry companion was one I could depend on. Popularity, looks, and maturity were

all irrelevant in her blissfully ignorant eyes. Lily just wanted someone to play with, and I could be that someone.

It didn't matter if I was tired or tangled in problems. She needed to be fed, brushed, and played with every single day. Without the ability to do these things for herself, Lily gave me an opportunity to show a small fleck of kindness. I was always happier after meeting her needs. Some days, running around like a maniac to give a dog exercise was the last thing I wanted to do. I always did though, and it probably benefitted me more than it did her. In her own unassuming way, Lily taught me that helping others is one sure way to make myself happy.

Some winter mornings it was difficult to get out of bed. On those days, my mom would crack open the door to my bedroom. Lily would bound inside, jump on my bed, and lick my face until I was wide awake. She was thrilled to see me, and I rewarded her love with praise and attention. Her early-morning enthusiasm made me wonder if I had been missed through the night. I must admit, it was flattering to think that my presence could have been craved so. Whatever her motives, that energetic greeting could turn even the sleepest grouch into a morning person. It was the best way to start the day.

Now that Lily is a mature dog, those bright morning greetings are rare. She stands two feet tall with strong muscles and focused attention. Her once fuzzy coat has refined into more dignified curls, and the exuberance of puppyhood has generally receded. She now performs tricks with mastery and resists the urge to destroy all my shoes. I remember wishing she would stay small forever, but now I wouldn't take back those months of growth for anything in the world.

We've reached adulthood together, and both of us are more intelligent than we used to be. Her round, coffee-colored eyes often suggest a mysterious understanding as they peer into mine. There's no telling to what extent her thoughts delve, but I do know that she is sensitive to human emotion. When I'm happy or excited, she drops her tongue in an animated pant, and her tail begins to rapidly swoosh around. If ever I'm sad, she slowly and somberly curls up at my feet and presses her head gently against my leg. I have nick named these interactions "dog therapy," because they have a healing effect on my heart.

The core of our friendship was forged in the mountains. I'm never happier than when there's dirt under my feet, and I think Lily feels the same way. There's a wild excitement in her eyes as she sniffs out squirrels and chases butterflies. Her natural, animal side comes out, and she glories in the open freedom. I too need to release my untamed soul from time to time, and Lily is the perfect companion. I feel safe in her presence, but she never detracts from the sweet solitude of the great outdoors. Despite her inherent mental state, Lily remains fiercely loyal. I never put her on a leash, because I trust her to come back whenever I call. This confidence validates the sincerity of our friendship. She bounds ahead of me on the trail but stops to look back every so often, making sure I'm still in sight. If she follows her nose off the path after a rabbit or squirrel, all I have to say is, "Lily, trail!" and she swiftly returns to the marked course.

The best thing about my dog is her simplicity. She has no judgments, no worries, and no regrets. The only thing she seems to care about is the present. Too often, my troubles revolve around past events or future anticipations, but Lily has shown me how to change through example. She lives in the moment, loves people, and plays. Aren't these things we should all

be doing? Before we met, I didn't think a canine could be a mentor, but now I see things differently.

Today, I'm a "dog person" through and through. I miss her severely living away from home, but I try to incorporate her lessons into my life every day. Loyalty, sensitivity, and unconditional love have all been a part of this friendship that will ultimately outlive our bodies. I will hold on to our bond forever.