

LESSONS ON LIVING: TAUGHT BY A DYING DOG

by Sara Braverman

I had four cats, three dogs, and two kids. I had control of my urges to scan the DVGRR Available Dogs page daily, opting for a few times weekly.

Then I saw Rusty and Chloe. They were a tightly bonded pair of seniors, needing a home together. Chloe had a nasal tumor and poor prognosis.

My children immediately said, "Bring them home, Mom, they need us." I worried that my habit of adopting special needs animals would cause them too much pain. They assured me that they could handle it and encouraged me to get the dogs here quickly, so Rusty could bond with our family and other dogs before losing Chloe. I headed to Golden Gateway.



Chloe had limited time, according to the statistics. We thought we were adopting a dying dog. How wrong we were. Anyone who knew Chloe knew perfectly well that she was alive and living each day to the fullest.

I had a plan. When you foster hospice dogs and have children sharing the experience, you make a plan. A PLAN. You try to think of a logical, rational, calm and cool way to love the new dog, but not suffer a broken heart when the end comes. Ahhh, The Plan. It lasted about 24 hours. Our hearts soon belonged to Chloe, without reservation.

Chloe loved her ball. Despite the fact that she could not fully breathe out of one nostril, she begged everyone to throw her ball. If you didn't, she spoke her mind. WOOF!

Winter came and went, then spring, then summer. So much for cancer statistics. She loved to go on walks, sniffing everything along the way. She was a waddling busybody bustling around the block.

Ignoring the drooly mess on her chin each morning, she would start the day wagging her tail at me, grabbing her ball, saying, "ROO ROO! Let's go, let's play, let's celebrate the day."



There were some bad days. Not many, but a few. There were some tough nights. Chloe knew when to ask for help. She gently nudged me awake and told me of her need to be stroked. I would lay on the floor next to her, doing TTouches as best I could, in an attempt to calm her and ease her breathing.

Her last day began normally. We played fetch, and then she jumped in the fish pond (no fish), and happily wallowed in the cool mud. That afternoon, she went rapidly downhill. There was no doubt that she was asking me to be brave for her and to make that decision that we all dread so much. A quick trip to the vet confirmed that it was time for us to say good-bye, and as I held her, kissing her and thanking her, she took her last breath and moved on to a place where she felt no pain, had no struggles to breathe.

We shared life with her for one year, and during that time, my sweet old girl who was dying of cancer taught us how to live. She reminded me that plans are all well and good, but it's better to live day-by-day and treasure each moment. She proved that the Internet doesn't have all the answers about life expectancies; that veterinary medicine statistics are sometimes wrong. She reminded me that it truly is better to have loved and lost, than to never have loved at all.

Saying good-bye to a dog is never easy, whether he or she has shared your life for a short time or many years. The tears and sadness happen every time. There is no way to avoid the pain, and yet, as I grieved her passing, I also smiled, knowing that she wouldn't want me to be paralyzed by grief. She would tell me to take the other dogs out and throw the ball, to go for a walk and sniff the neighborhood news. She would tell me to bring home another old dog and learn the lessons offered. She would tell me to celebrate life.



Follow-up note: To honor Chloe's memory, we brought home another hospice dog.

JayJay (pictured at left) alternates between being a sock-stealing, paper-shredding wild man and a master of long naps. JayJay also

has cancer and has a very short time (expected) left with us. He doesn't know that, so please don't tell him. We will love him and celebrate life together for as much time as he has, and then when it's time to say good-bye, we will kiss him and thank him and then honor his passing by bringing home another old dog.

