

A Dog's Life

The passing of our beloved American Standard Labrador Retriever, weighing in at about 115 lbs., caused me to think about the relationship between man and dog. More particularly, when friends urged me to get a new dog, it made me think about my life with dogs.

My family started with a powerful dog name, Tarzan, and the most recent one ended his life as Sampson Hamilton. Do not ask me why Hamilton, except that I have always had a great interest in Alexander Hamilton, even before the hip-hop Broadway show. Thanks to Ron Chernow's "Alexander Hamilton" for that.

Tarzan was a small black and white mix. I do not ever remember anyone taking Tarzan out for a walk. It seemed that people in Great Neck, in those days, simply opened the door and let their dog run out. Tarzan was a wanderer. My parents would get calls at all hours of the night, reporting that people had found our pleasant, friendly little dog. My parents could never figure out how he managed to make such long trips, all the way to the south shore of Long Island one time, without getting bumped off. I think that eventually he did. I am not sure how Tarzan met his demise, but it was mysterious and the details were kept from me.

Next entered Spotty. Now there is a name that shows tremendous creativity on the part of my decorator/designer parents. They showed just as much innovation with the cat's name, Kitty. Spotty was said to be a fox terrier, but he just looked like another brown and white spotted mixed breed. Now, I know exactly what Spotty looked like, because in our china closet at home is a ceramic dog that I made as a child, that looks exactly like Spotty! He was the dog of my middle childhood, and therefore the one I remember the best. To test his love, my sister, Susan, and I would stand at opposite ends of the block and call him. It seemed like he always went to Susan, but I figured that was because she was older.

Spotty was not a wanderer, but it seems to me he was struck by at least one school bus, although surviving to relative old age. He was also a dog that was not walked, but was expected to have enough sense to come back when let out the front door to do his business.

The passing of Spotty was one of my early experiences with the pain of loss. My grandparents were much older, since I was a child of my parents' middle age, and I was protected from their loss. My parents only had me attend the funeral of one of my elderly grandparents. The dog, however, lived with us and was a constant companion. It may sound strange to compare an animal to people, but it has become part of our cultural norm to treat pets as people.

There was a long hiatus in dogs, as I went off to college and law school. My father fell ill in middle age, and some genius in the family decided that what my parents needed was a dog. Somehow, the German Shepherd mix showed up, although my parents were not able to take care of her. My father had been diagnosed with curable cancer, after discovery of a heart

problem, and my mother broke her ankle taking care of my father. The two of them wound up in Key West, Florida, being taken care of by my lieutenant commander in the Navy brother-in-law and my sister. I was in school and not in a position to take care of Boots. I am not sure how anyone in my family named dogs, but the poor thing wound up frequently tied to a pine tree on the side of the house, not having been properly trained or cared for. My parents were upset about that, and asked Aunt Joan if she could help out.

Aunt Joan, the most pristine and thoughtful of ladies, was born in Dublin and grew up in London. She was an English teacher with the most refined qualities. She loved to tell the story about taking Boots to the ASPCA. She claimed that the SPCA would not take Boots because he was too wild. The family did not want to see anything bad happen to the dog, and Aunt Joan somehow convinced _____ to take him with the promise that he would not be destroyed but will live happily on a farm somewhere on eastern Long Island.

Joan, with her marvelous accent, loved to tell the story of driving down the Long Island Expressway, when Boots suddenly decided to jump from the back seat into the front seat and sit on her lap. Somehow, marvelous Aunt Joan managed to get Boots to _____, and that was the last I ever heard of him.

Life is stranger than fiction, and the next dog I wound up with was that of my ex-wife's, Gigi. My first wife's mother was the hardest working person I ever met. She had a retail New York Times delivery service in Long Island. The yard where the trucks were kept were protected by a couple of Doberman Pinschers. Into that unpleasant atmosphere came Gigi, a gift from my wife and her sister who sought a more peaceful atmosphere in the truck yard. Poor Gigi had plantar warts on her feet, but was a lovely little Sheltie who, no matter how hard she tried, had difficulty becoming vicious. When my ex-mother-in-law passed away, do not ask me why, I wound up with the dog. Here I was, a single man in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, with my deceased ex-mother-in-law's dog, who I needed like another hole in the head.

With time, the dog grew on me and I was happy to have given this poor, neglected animal a good life. Like my parents, I simply let the dog out the back door, and at that time did not have a fence around my house. The dog obviously understood the importance of shared custody, and would walk down to my ex-wife's house for visits. After a few hours' or days' respite at the ex's residence, the dog, Gigi, would be returned to me.

We all grew to love that dog so much that when she died, my ex, her boyfriend and I buried the dog together in my backyard. At least once that dog, who should never have been "fixed," was impregnated by the neighbor's Labrador. I even remember one time going down to Loyalsock Animal Hospital, looking at an x-ray of the fetus, which I think ultimately killed Gigi.

After my marriage to Kim, I somehow wound up with Pepper-Tuchus. Do not ask me how we wound up with the dog or that name. Tuchus is Yiddish for butt. The little terrier, who looked something like a Scottish terrier, had a black ring around its tail. Dreidel tuchus refers to a spinning top that slowly loses momentum and shifts back and forth before it falls. The secondary meaning is a woman who shakes her butt back and forth as she walks; that is a

dreidel tuchus as Yiddish intends it. The terrier had the same manner of walking. Pepper probably had to do with his color.

Poor Pepper-Tuchus somehow never seemed to get properly housetrained. But this dog was not simply kicked out the back door. I learned how to walk, and to walk vigorously and often with Pepper-Tuchus. Pepper had a habit of snapping occasionally, and I am sure that I was bitten at least once. The dog was not an absolute favorite, but time is a great healer and we now think of Pepper-Tuchus fondly. Pepper, is short for the full name, lived the longest of any dog I ever had.

After Pepper, I swore off dogs. No more, I declared to my children! Unfortunately, they were just the right age for dogs, however. When I saw a couple of beautiful Labradors at Stepping Stones Park in Great Neck, New York, where I grew up and spent much time in my wasted youth. I decided right then and there that it was time to get a big dog, a big Labrador.

Somehow, we found out about a farm family in Canton who had both sire and bitch. The dogs were from Montana and were said to be from a better bloodline, since Labradors, generally speaking, have been overbred and suffer from all kinds of terrible diseases. We fell in love when we went up to Canton and saw the tiny little puppies, too small to take at that time. One of the dogs, the biggest in the litter, tried to bring me a tennis ball. That was love at first bobble. The dog's ear was marked, and he was to be ours.

The name Sampson had something to do with the large size of his relatives. One of them, all purebred, was known as Two-Ton Tucker. We knew Sampson would be big, and he was. He grew up almost overnight, while I was busy working and we were seeing our children grow up. The dog grew up with our family. One of the rules I imposed on my family was that they would have to be involved in the training of this dog. Joshua Herbert, who was probably about 11 or 12 at the time, promptly agreed. The love between boy and dog was palpable. Thanks to the phenomenal work of *Sits Happens*, Sampson Hamilton and Joshua Herbert trained together. While I am not sure if boy trained dog or dog trained boy, but it was a marvelous sight to see. Joshua took Sampson through the three courses that were offered, and our trips to The Factory building in Newberry became a weekly ritual.

For his final exam, the young dog and boy were required to parade around the big empty building. Joshua had to tell Sampson to stay, and leave the room. Sampson had to sit there while people posing as the elderly walked around the dogs, trying to distract them. One of the people accidentally dropped an aluminum crutch on Sampson's head. He did not move. When Joshua came back into the room, it was all smiles, licks and celebrations. Sampson was one of the few dogs to pass and become a licensed therapy dog.

Sampson did not work very hard for his meal ticket. He did go into a few schools for autistic children in the Philadelphia area, but most memorable was when my elderly mother fell out of a car and broke her femur. She was at the Parker Geriatric Center, Long Island Jewish Hospital in New York. It was easy to get permission to take Sampson in. The elderly, injured and recuperating absolutely loved him. Sampson behaved perfectly. He did not eat anybody's food off their tray, knock anyone over, or behave badly at all. In fact, he was the perfect

graduate of the school run by our friends, Denise and Renee. On a few occasions, Sampson even went back to the school to show off one of the more successful graduates.

Sampson did have one odd quality for a Labrador, and that is that he hated water. That probably had something to do with the time that Joshua decided to throw him off the dock at the Hiawatha location. Sampson was never crazy about water after that, except splashing around up to his belly. He splashed in Rose Valley Lake and any other place that we could get him near the water.

While a gentle giant, Sampson had the fiercest bark known to mankind. Perhaps it was because of his large size, or his gender, but it was a deep, ferocious bark which was somewhat misleading since he usually wagged his tail unless the hair stood up on his back. Several times at play groups in Sullivan County, Sampson was set upon by other dogs. At least twice he was bitten by smaller dogs, no doubt intimidated by his presence. We were told that Sampson stood there and never fought back. He was a lover, not a fighter. He may have looked like a beast, with a ubiquitous name, but except for one neighborhood dog, he seemed to love other animals. Oh yes, there was that one dog that Sampson could easily have killed, but he restrained himself or was restrained by his dotting family.

The big brute loved his walks. We walked at least twice a day. One of the neighbors said to me that it was good for the dog, but probably just as good for the owner. That was true. It was impossible to tire Sampson out. He would walk and walk and walk. He would smell and walk. He was the neighborhood greeter, and everyone in the Vallamont part of Williamsport was aware of the friendly dog.

Sampson hated the summer and loved the winter. He was a snow dog. More importantly, he was a snow, ice and cold dog. The winter we had two or three feet of snow in Philadelphia, and less in Williamsport, he was in doggie heaven. He might be in doggie heaven now, but he loved life then. I think Sampson's favorite thing was to roll and simply lay out in the snow. To me, it became almost a mantra or a meditation walking him in the coldest possible weather. I needed to show him that I too could go outside no matter how miserable the conditions. One particular evening in Williamsport, it reached zero degrees and the wind was blowing. Sampson not only enjoyed his walk, but did not want to go back. When we reached the area of the cemetery, he simply stuck his nose into the wind. I wondered then and I wonder now how his wet nose did not freeze. Obviously dogs like that have a way of overcoming the cold and adverse conditions. I remember the vet once telling me that he was only about a half a gene away from his ancestor, the wolf.

When Joshua was at Barrack Academy School in Philadelphia, I used to walk Sampson in the mornings after I dropped Joshua off. In springtime, he would frolic over the 12 acres with the kids watching him. In the winter, we walked down to the frozen pond. One year, he decided to venture out across the ice and - you guessed it - fell in. There was this 115 pound dog in the ice, 15 or so feet from the edge of the pond. I thought that was it. That was really it. There was no way I was going to be able to get that dog out of the frozen ice pond, and I was on the other side of the pond as well. But Sampson turned around, faced the shore, and swam to the edge. He had little trouble getting his front legs on the muddy ground, but he had to work very hard to

pull the rest of his body out of the pond. Pull he did, and he saved himself. After shaking himself off numerous times, he came around the pond to greet me. No more walking across the ice for Sampson. I was amazed that he was strong enough to pull himself out. Somehow, we managed to hose him down – I am not sure when, where or how – but he had a good night's sleep that night.

Sampson, true to his breed, was a major eater. He ate like a dinosaur. I don't know how dinosaurs ate, but one would think that a brontosaurus must have eaten a lot. Sampson was an eater. In his youth, preventing him from over-eating was always the key. We fed him the same dog food with chondroitin and glucosamine for joint health. It seemed to work and, while he was big, large, curvaceous and heavy, he really never got fat. Between exercise and watchful parents, Sampson always kept his weight in check. He was a beast, but he was our loving, friendly, warm-hearted beast.

The children thought that he was Clifford the Big Red Dog, and I was Sampson. I tried to explain to them that I was Clifford and he was Sampson, but it did not make any difference to the kids.

Sampson was slowed down a bit by "knee" surgery, but after recuperation he was back to smelling and walking.

Now, there is something about big dogs. Like small dogs, they can be butt-smellers; but because of their large size, they can be particularly annoying. At an early age, Sampson learned not to jump because he easily could have knocked anyone over or caused total mayhem. Sampson had his moments of chewing, destroying and annoying, but he never became the horror dog of legendary books and movies.

Towards the end of his life, Sampson greatly enjoyed traveling to New York and giving therapy to my mother, who absolutely loved him. We used to joke that my mother seemed to enjoy having the dog around more than all of us. She spent the 15 formative years of her life on a farm, and dogs, along with the dairy cows, were just part of the landscape.

We always considered Sampson a therapy dog, even when he stopped working. He gave all of us therapy and everyone who cared to have anything to do with him. After a rugged day, there was little better than petting Sampson, rubbing his belly, and most importantly taking him for a walk, a long walk.

On Saturday afternoons, we took our Shabbat walk. Since I do not drive on the Sabbath, it was an opportunity to take even a longer walk. We walked all around the Wildwood Cemetery, and sometimes we would walk down to the Rabbi's house. Fortunately, the Rabbi and his wife are inveterate dog lovers. Sampson was permitted to lay down on a corner of the Rabbi's Persian rug in the living room. I would get a cup of green tea, but first Sampson would get a bowl of water. I remember Judge Muir watching a dog follow and sidle up to the other law clerk. The Judge declared to me that he knew the man to be good, since he was liked by dogs. I could say the same thing about Rabbi and Arlene Kessler. Sampson enjoyed his visits there, was treated with dignity, and clearly became one of the favorite dog congregants.

I never thought much about the question as to whether dogs or other pets can have a soul. For me, how we treat each other during life is what counts. Sampson Hamilton will of course continue to live in our memories. He set an exemplary example for how a dog should act, how a dog should be treated, and why a dog should be trained to work.

I used to joke that dogs were like kids; they needed to be treated well, respectfully, and to be taught the simple virtues of a youthful life. Indolence is to be avoided in all living creatures.

Unfortunately, Sampson passed away while we were visiting Kaila in Israel. We learned about it the day we arrived back in the States. The folks at Loyalsock Animal Hospital have always treated Sampson like a favorite, as they probably do every pet they take care of. They have been wonderful to us over the years, and on all occasions kind to deal with.

Even at the end, when Sampson could hardly walk, he insisted on taking his two walks a day. Thank you to my kind and thoughtful neighbor, Alan Wilcox, who frequently walked with me, encouraging Sampson onward. I could tell that Sampson liked Alan and would work just a little bit harder to complete the loop to please Alan. There are certain people out there who just have a way with dogs and people.

Will I get another dog? I have absolutely declared no, under no circumstances. Yet, I have been fascinated by the Canaan dogs. I just do not understand how people there train dogs to walk down the busy streets of Tel Aviv and not get bumped off. It is common to see the Israeli breed walk without leash in the busiest of places. Israel is a pet-crazy country, where dogs and cats abound. I read somewhere that not only are there dozens of dog parks in Tel Aviv, but there are even dog beaches. Maybe I could see myself someday having a well-trained therapy friend, but not for a while.

A dog is, and should be, a big responsibility. Like a member of the family, a dog needs attention, time from his or her owners, and good training. Sampson received lots of love and guidance that other dogs in my life did not enjoy as much.

The sadness expressed to me by friends and neighbors has been surprisingly warm and comforting. Anyone who had any acquaintance with this dog has a positive feeling for him and expressed their sorrow. Sampson Hamilton Rieders, you will always be missed.

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