

My Unificationist Memoirs Chapter 95

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Eugene, Carl, Guide Dogs for the Blind, and Gratitude

We have been raising Guide Dogs for the Blind in our family for more than 20 years. Cindy and I originally undertook this volunteer activity with an eye towards the character education of our children: we thought that, if Misa and James learned to surrender a dog they raised and loved to assist a person with visual impairment, then they could learn the beauty of unselfish giving. Our children became very good at separating from these puppies; my wife and I found the entire process very difficult, and at moments, heartbreaking.

Over the years, we have raised many wonderful dogs. Even the ones unable to succeed in the program and were "career changed" (we never say "failed"), found meaningful paths either as service animals or as pets. Though my wife might take issue with me, I have come to accept the courtroom adage made famous by George Vest: A dog is man's best friend. The emotional bond provided by a dog to a blind person, I believe, provides as much rationale for a person to train a Guide Dog as does the actual work the animal performs. More than

one recipient of our dogs has told us that he would never get a "robotic guide" (if and when such a technology emerges in an affordable way) because he could not imagine sacrificing the relationship developed with a working dog. These ties run deep.



When a Guide Dog retires or dies, the grieving can be prolonged and the transition difficult. Eugene, who works with Carl, a male Black Lab we raised, recently came and stayed the night with us, as he does on occasion. Eugene lost his sight at birth--the oxygen flow in his incubator was improperly regulated, damaging his eyes. I feel especially close to him: we are roughly the same age and he was born into a career military family as was I. Eugene is widely read, quite erudite, and an excellent conversationalist. It helps that he loves Homer and the classics. Over dinner, he recounted the story of each Guide Dog he had over the past 50 years. We could not help but be moved as he

described their qualities, strengths and weaknesses, regaling us with tales about the individual dogs, in colorful detail and often with great humor. However, when he spoke of separating from them as they aged, he would pause with emotion. Academics have posited that Homer too was likely blind, and as Eugene spoke like a modern bard, I thought I heard echoes of the poet's lines about Argos, the faithful canine companion of Odysseus, getting a final glimpse of his master's return from war and closing his eyes to die in peace.

Eugene spoke of the three essential qualities a Guide Dog must have in order to work successfully: 1) Biddability; 2) Intelligent Disobedience; and 3) Initiative.

It is self-evident that "biddability" or the desire to please, would be an important quality in a guide. If a dog does not want to please his master, then training would be out of the question. However, the second quality, "intelligent disobedience," is not so obviously a desirable trait. A working guide needs to be trained to disobey a dangerous command. Eugene described numerous situations in which the dog guiding him prevented a serious accident, such as walking into an oncoming car or stepping off a precipice into the ocean. Thus, dogs are trained to make "judgment calls," when their handler may be placing both of them in harm's way. And finally, initiative is an essential characteristic. By initiative, Guide Dogs means not only the willingness to work but the capacity for the dog to guide his person along the best path if

several options appear. This requires a degree of confidence and self-direction on the part of the Guide Dog.



In our experience raising Guide Dogs, it is possible to channel the energy of a confident and spirited dog, but nearly impossible to strengthen the initiative of a skittish dog. Often, as dogs mature, they will naturally settle down and internalize their training. However, if dogs are fearful of new situations, crowded sidewalks, or loud noises, then these tend to be automatic dealbreakers. Sometimes, an otherwise "perfect" dog will encounter a situation at the very end of their training that disqualifies them from working. We raised one dog, Truman, a Golden Retriever-Yellow Lab Cross that simply seemed perfect through each of the eight levels of his training and testing. We were expecting a call from Guide Dogs to tell us the name of the person who would be partnering with Truman. That was not the call we received. After passing all of his tests, they were working with him in San Francisco honing his guiding skills, when he suddenly became very anxious and began to balk. His trainers were flummoxed. They couldn't identify what exactly had happened, whether it was a loud noise, or the behavior of a person on the street, but suddenly Truman's anxiety level had increased dramatically and he no longer could be a reliable guide. When the phone call came, they asked if we would like to keep Truman. "Yes!" was our immediate answer.

Like human beings, dogs appear happiest when they have a purpose or mission. When Truman returned to our home, my daughter, Misa, trained him as a therapy dog and as a team, they were certified to work in the local hospitals, medical offices, retirement homes, and hospices, all of which they did. Later, when Daisy, also a Golden Retriever-Yellow Lab Cross, was "career-changed," Misa certified her as a therapy dog with hospital privileges. When the dogs were not working with Misa, they spent their days with me in the classroom, often with whatever other dog we were raising for Guide Dogs. As one might imagine, my classroom became a popular spot where students could go to spend free time.

Over the years, we have spent countless hours raising and nurturing Guide Dogs for the Blind puppies. Though "countless," we would never count anyway. Through this volunteer activity, our family has discovered the truth that the reward is in the giving. Though we have often sacrificed our sleep and our comfort, as well as our attachment and our time, to later experience one of our dogs assisting a visually impaired partner, literally changing a life and creating new possibilities for a person socially and economically, is a joy beyond measure.

We have received back so much more than we could ever give, and we are grateful.