



Poodlevania

By Michael Finley



Kraken Press

1841 Dayton Avenue
Saint Paul MN 55104

651-644-4540

<http://mfinley.com/kraken>

mfinley@mfinley.com

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Boddhisatva dogs

I had a dog once, a mighty soul and friend of my youth. Not the dog I had for three days, but the one I had for three years.

A long time ago I was a lonely, disappointed hippie.

It was 1970, and the great epochal things I was certain would come to pass – the collapse of the military-industrial era and the ushering in of a joyous, celebratory, stoned Aquarian one – didn't.

So instead of being a part of some exploding plastic communal geodesic utopia, I was 20 years old, living alone, working alone on the graveyard shift as an autoclave operator at the University hospital, making the goo-splattered instruments and linen of each day's surgeries sterile again for the next.

I had one friend, Worth. I had had a girlfriend, but she told me to get lost, so I did. We broke up on the last day of the 60s. Now it was six months later, and I felt depressed and lonely almost all the time. I was 20 years old, and at night I experienced almost unbearable back pain. Many nights I just lay on my mattress on the floor and cried.

However. One day Worth showed up in his Volvo and invited me to take a car trip through the western states with him and his new dog Girl, a doleful-eyed German shorthaired pointer he adopted at the Hennepin County Humane Society. The plan was to drive to Colorado, visit a commune some college friends had started, and then make a trip up the West Coast and back to Minnesota through Canada, stopping at a rock festival in Oregon called The Vortex.

Sounded good to me. I threw my duffel bag in back with Girl, who was just coming into her first heat, and Worth and I were off.

It was a remarkable trip. We picked up hitchhikers, crashed along roadsides, camped out, and held a powwow with a busload of Mormon teenagers. We even beheld the spectacle of Spiro Agnew alighting from a whirring helicopter in the middle of an acid-drenched rock festival, thinking it was a good place to meet today's kids.

But the reason the trip was important was the commune we visited in the Colorado Rockies. This commune was peopled by progressive, moneyed hippies we knew from college. There were several lovely women there, and I was on the silent make for all of them. If you lined them up, they almost looked like the same woman. The sun made angels of them in their flowing hair, starry eyes, and bleached blue jeans. I stared at them whenever I thought they weren't aware of me.

As communes go, this was an orderly place, but order began to break down after we arrived. The commune had several large, gorgeous male dogs, a Grand Pyrenees, a collie, and an American bulldog mix – the good-looking kind. They were the kind of dogs you could make movies about – confident, independent, and breathtakingly handsome. They also seemed like angels to me, messengers of joy and positivity to humans, bodhisattvas in fur.

What I did not then know was that the characteristic blissful look dogs get -- mouth open in a beatific smile, eyes sparkling, chest heaving with enthusiasm -- is identical to the way dogs react to high temperature and fatigue. Oppositely, when a dog seems expressionless -- mouth closed, eyes seeming doleful -- could be sadness, but is more likely the normal expression of a dog that is not hot or winded.

The dogs all went berserk when we arrived with Girl *in estrus*, snuffling after her, baying at the scent of her blood. I remember the behaviorist hippies joking about it over the fire – that they could alter everything about their own social order, but forget about changing dogs. Everyone laughed kind of emptily, sad that dogs should be denied the utopia that they had so little difficulty achieving. The oldest dog, the collie Rimbaud, outlived the group by a couple of years.

So ardent were the male dogs that Worth and I decided to sleep in a tree house, with Girl up in the tree with us, to prevent her from mating on her first heat. It was comical pushing the dog up the ladder into the tree, but not as comical as what followed.

Worth and I awoke in the middle of the night to see Girl and Butch, the Grand Pyrenees, locked in a canine embrace, high in the crook of the tree, a good four feet above our platform. Somehow, the dog -- one of the least arboreal creatures in the entire animal phyla -- had climbed up an eight-foot ladder to be one with his intended, and the two of them had shimmied up even higher in the branches.

And one was what they were. We coaxed, pleaded, and cajoled Butch to disengage, but to no avail. The holy seed was planted.

Back in Minneapolis, Girl gave birth to a litter of pretty white and liver-colored pups. I would visit Worth's place often, and let them all swarm over me on the basement floor, licking me and batting me with their little tails. After my months of sadness, their joy had a curative effect on me. When they licked me I respected the wisdom of their licks – I had to be lovable to deserve them.

Worth had pried from me a promise to adopt one of the litter, and although I was apprehensive about the responsibility, I chose an amiable, people-loving female I

called Zazie at first, after a character in a French movie. Later, her name mutated into Çasi (pronounced sah-CEE).

Çasi was the star of the litter, outgoing and funny. She looked exactly like the Poky Little Puppy in the Golden Book. Her body was so soft you could not see a muscle twitch under her skin. Even as a pup she was built strong, big in the legs and haunches, square in the face. She had that Buster Keaton look that good dogs have – faithful despite all perplexity. All her life people would take one look at her and bust out laughing.

But she was sweet-tempered to the core, and so devoted to me, from the moment we first locked eyes. That feeling was mutual – I benefited terrifically from her love, and from loving her. She gave a life in disarray a new center, based on fun and routine, and I answered back with groceries and a place on my bed.

As I raised Çasi through the glory days of puppyhood, I concocted a new philosophy of life. The human hippie dream was dead, but I decided I could make my canine hippie world with this little dog. I would give her every freedom and every sort of stimulation, and I would never spank her, or chain her up, or call her bad. We would be like the Three Musketeers, even though there were two of us, and I was against guns. Both for one, and one for both.

For four years I was true to that promise. I cracked the whip ever so slightly while Çasi was housebroken. Otherwise, she lived in an Eden of my making in our \$85 a month apartment on 19th Avenue in Minneapolis. I gave up my hospital job and lived off unemployment for almost a year. When it came time to work again, I took a night job so she would not feel abandoned, working the graveyard shift guarding bell-bottom pants at a fashion outlet downtown.

I owned a leash, but I hardly ever used it. I got around mostly by bike, with Çasi galloping alongside on the sidewalk. She was a terrific traveler. She never bumped into anyone or bothered them. She could dance through a crowd of people waiting for a bus. And she always stopped at corners until I uttered the command: CROSS!

Police would sometimes stop us and remind us a leash law was in effect. But what could they do, put us in the car and take us to jail with the bicycle? So we ignored them, figuring the law did not count, and would probably be repealed any day.

I wanted her to be free. I didn't want the apartment door to be an impediment. I tried adding a doggie entrance to the apartment door, so she could get in and out at night. I took the door down, cut out a square, and screwed in two two-way hinges. When I tried to rehang the door I saw I had put the dog portal on the top half of the door, not the bottom. Çasi stared at my handiwork with that dubious tilted-head expressions dogs have. I latched the piece back onto the door and from then on just left the door unlocked. I assumed she was going outside every night to poop and pee. I found out later she was just going down to the building's boiler room and doing it there.

I didn't want Çasi to have a litter her first heat, because her mom had given birth too young, and been a poor mother. But one day I was hosing the garden behind the apartments, and I looked over, and this scruffy white dog with tipped ears was already climbing onto her. I cried out no, no, and I came over and tried to pull him off, but it was like history repeating itself. There's some sort of bulb in the boy dog's penis that swells, and keeps the two dogs attached to the bitter end. But I didn't know that then, and I was pulling on the dog's head, turning the hose on them, and verbally imploring them to stop. They looked sheepishly at me, but they didn't stop.

Eventually the absentee landlord, a man named Chrisney, stopped by for his quarterly visit, and discovered in the basement all the dog poop – hundreds and hundreds of hardened specimens -- and had us evicted. By then Çasi was already heavy with puppies. I told him I only had one dog, and those messes were ancient, and what kind of man would put a pregnant dog out in the Minnesota winter?

Çasi had a bunch of babies, eight in all. And sure enough, she was a mediocre mother. She lay down and nursed them, but the misgivings were plain on her face. After a few weeks we took the whole basket to the Humane Society to adopt. I never got a glimmer from Çasi that she missed them. Her true love in life remained me.

Fully grown, she was a large dog, weighing almost 90 pounds. She was no speedster, but her intensity made her seem quick. I remember once biking to the University with her. When the fourth period bell rang, and the doors to Ford Hall opened and the sophomores exited their courses in Thoreau and Emerson, there was Çasi leaping onto this astonished college squirrel in a moment and tearing it to bits.

Little kids scared her -- they were so unpredictable. Toddlers especially sent her into a panic, and she would gallop away, excreting an awful apocrine scent that hung in the air for days. Every three months or so, if she thought I was neglecting her in any way, she would go on an odor binge, rolling in some neighborhood fisherman's fish mess, or dog feces -- anything to put stink behind her ears. And she would come to me, slinking in a crouch, knowing I would go ballistic, knowing it was time for quadruple shampoos and rinses and backyard berating. But hey, it was attention.

Otherwise, she was so compliant. I could put my mouth on her nose and blow, and she would shake her head so her ears stood up, as if my breath had made them stick up.

Çasi could spell. Early on I learned to avoid using the word 'park' in conversation because she would go nuts. But when I started saying 'p-a-r-k' instead, she picked up on it, and went into the same eager routine, fetching the leash and banging her head on the door. And we would go to Powderhorn Park or down by the Mississippi, and she would fetch sticks in the water in any season, dutifully bringing me the stick I needed back, dropping it at my feet, and gazing out alertly over the waters for signs of another errant stick.

We would perform Dog Jeopardy in front of people. I would ask, "What is the structure found atop most buildings?" ("Roof!") "Who was called the Sultan of Swat?" ("Ruth!") "What is the name given the aesthetic movement led by Post-Victorian novelist Walter Pater?" ("Art for art's sake!") "Good dog!"

I worked as a security guard because the hours were good for us. I spend my days playing with her, then I would put on my blue uniform, bus downtown, strap on my pistol, guard stores or patrol a parking ramp, punch some clocks, bus home, turn the key in the door, and she would already be advancing toward me, roused from her slumbers, squinting with delight, beating the furniture legs with her tail, her hot breath and tongue all over me.

I didn't date because I worried she would be jealous, and I felt no great need for another person. At night we climbed into bed together, me first, her second, treading circles on the covers till she was sure the coast was clear. Then she would kneel alongside me and sleep with her chin across my knees. She never complained about my drinking, or snoring, or housekeeping, or sleeping in, or lack of ambition. I could always see my perfection in her eyes, and I was just enough in doubt to benefit from it.

One day I was awakened by the phone, inviting me to apply for a job at the University, editing a newspaper for alumni. How I ended up on the list of candidates, I can't say. I had never applied for a job there. But I went to the interview, and was offered the job. That was exciting but it was a day job, and full-time, and I anguished over how Çasi would bear up during the days.

I took the job, and soon found myself installed on the lowest rung of the middle class. Çasi handled it well. Some days she would get impatient and mosh an unabridged dictionary, or chew up some Pink Floyd albums. But we worked it out. I took her for longer bike rides, just before work and again just after. I even went out on a few dates, and Çasi seemed to bear them no ill. *She* knew she wasn't my wife, even if I was a little confused.

We traveled. We spent the holidays once in Miles City, Montana, at a friend's house. This was the one time she did something massively destructive. My friend, who lured me out to Montana with the image of us riding horses in the snow, with Çasi bounding through the drifts, did not mention the snow was eight feet high. We were snowed in, stuck in his mother's basement. The one day he and I ventured out, Çasi, locked below, went berserk and ate a hole in the oak door to escape. My friend's mother, an over-the-top Shelly Winters actalike, burst into tears over the damage.

A little later, when I got my first car – I was 24 -- we drove all the way from Minneapolis to Boston to visit my friend Ray. Ray and I walked around Walden Pond, with Çasi running ahead of us, peeing on the foundation of Thoreau's old shack. I have a snapshot of me that day, lifting my giant dog up off the ground. The color is no good, the picture has too much blue, but I look so happy in it, me and my bodhisattva dog.

In 1974, I met Rachel. She came with a friend to my annual Straggler's Thanksgiving Dinner at my house, where I was cooking goose in apple and plum sauce. The moment she was inside the door she wrinkled her nose, and said, "You're cooking meat?"

I knew the second I saw her that she was highly plausible as a life partner. Her face was a galaxy of darling freckles. Sunlight caught her auburn hair the same way it caught the hippie girls' hair in Colorado. And she wore blue jeans with the knees worn through, just like they did. I was helpless.

She was beyond perfect, and within seconds we were each giving the other long looks. By February we were squarely in love, with only one problem to overcome: Rachel was allergic to animal hair, and my apartment -- my life -- was full of the stuff.

One wintry night Çasi went out the back door, as she always did, and I awoke to feel her standing beside the bed, trying to jump up. She couldn't. I sat up and felt her. She was trembling terribly, her heart going three hundred beats a minute. I picked her up, and held her in my arms, as frightened as she was. In a few short minutes her heart stopped beating, and she was still in my arms.

She must have been struck by a car and been busted up inside. I can imagine how it was for her, to sense the damage, and to do everything in her power to return to our house, climb up the icy back stairs, and appear before me, to receive my healing magic, which had fixed her so many times before, or failing that, to die in my arms.

Oh, how I cried in the middle of that night. I cried and cried. For Çasi, who was a good dog, and a good friend. And for myself, who would never be loved so well again. I set her down on the braid rug she used as her napping place and

played my nylon string guitar for her, as I had done many times, repeating the same three descending chords from a song by Yes, over and over again, tears rolling down my cheeks.

When I was done, I called the animal patrol, and they agreed to get her in the morning. I placed her body on the front porch, and went to sleep. That night I dreamed she had just been stunned, but that when she awakened, she was freezing cold. I bolted out of the bed and looked out onto the landing in the dark. She lay there frozen hard. When the pickup van arrived in the morning, I slid her stiff body onto the steel floor, and watched as the van turned the corner and disappeared.

I have had sadder things happen to me. My sister died when she was 15, and I was 11. That was worse, and the destruction of my family continued for years. But I never *felt* sadder than I did at this moment. I tried to go to work, but I kept breaking down sobbing, and the people sent me home. It took me a week before my voice cleared, and I could confidently finish a sentence.

But you know, I was all right. This was grief, not depression. I would eventually package all this pain and set it aside, and get on with things. I would never revert to the unsure status I had when I got my dog. She lifted me out of that, and like any good angel, set me down on the proper path. And my back pain went away.

And I had Rachel now, and we were suddenly free to be with one another and have human fun. I vacuumed the hair off the upholstery, and packed away the dog dish and leather.

Years after that I would still come across items of clothing in summer storage box and they would be herringboned with Çasi's white hairs, and I would hold an item to my nose and smell, with a tiny fraction of her power,

her musky doggy body, and think of her. So powerful, so gentle, so serious, despite all our fun, so humble in her love.

That was 23 years ago. But not a week goes by that I don't think of my old friend. Çasi, sweet friend, you saved me, and I am so very grateful.

Daniele's boon

Of course, I did go through all that emotion, and more, years later when Rachel and I, now married and semi-propertyed, had our first child. Now I was 34, and presumably adult enough for the rigors of fatherhood.

Parents hate hearing this, but if your only point of reference is pets, children seem an awful lot like them. Both kids and dogs have developmental passages they go through, with corresponding emotional nuances.

Daniele was born in our apartment in Milwaukee, and the moment she tumbled out into my waiting hands, and she looked at me with already open eyes, and let out a mighty, sage sigh – “Ahhhh” – I have been crazy for her. Daniele was the bestest puppy ever.

I worked the first year of Daniele's life, but I would come home at five o'clock and fling the door open, expecting, and getting, the same high levels of hysterical glee that I used to get from Casi. We lived those early months on a blanket laid square on our living room floor, surrounded by the toys we bought for her – some of which, like her squeaky cheeseburger, were really dog and cat toys.

Daniele was a bodhisattva baby. She had the round face you associate with all-knowingness. She had poise, and readiness, and humor. She was spectacular, and just like me, she loved animals. Her first word was *guh!*, which she applied to her stuffed mallard – you will recognize *guh* as an accepted

variant of duck. By the time she was ten months old, she had mastered a long repertoire of animal sounds. If, out driving, I called out “duck,” she replied from the backseat, *quack-quack!* If I said, “laughing snake,” she’d answer with “Ssss! Sss! Sss!” God, I adored her.

Daniele grew into a stellar toddler, astonishing elders we presented her to. When we moved back to Minnesota, and I started working at home as a freelance writer, I took her out almost every day to the zoo, to a playground, for an adventure in the big wild world. I have a series of four pictures of us, taken in one of those seventy-five cent arcade photo machines, where we are both mugging shamelessly. We seem so happy on the picture strip, so high on one another.

But then, at about the time she began attending preschool, something happened. Though powerful in the company of adults, Daniele was powerless in the company of peers. She spent hours hiding from the other children under tables, crying when things did not go her way. By kindergarten she had begun balking at competitive activities like school Olympics.

Rachel and I were slow to see something was the matter. We considered it a mood, or a developmental pothole. But it was more than that. Daniele began exhibiting phobic behavior, shrieking when she would see a cat or dog, even when the animal was a block away. It hardly made sense, because this was a child who adored animals.

She became the pariah of her Brownie troop, because the den mother had a tiny dog – a West Highland White – who bothered no one but terrified Daniele. The other children began excluding her from activities and parties. In a few months she had gone from a confident kid to a sad, unsure one. At times she seemed helpless to act on her own behalf.

This went on for four years – what should have been the brightest years of her life became a very sorry period. By the time she was a fifth grader, Daniele was silent, guilty, anxious, depressed, unable to pay attention, unable to initiate tasks, and foreclosing on every opportunity. “I can’t talk to that person.” “They would never want to be my friend.” Other kids, except her best friend Betsy, excluded her. In her unhappiness Daniele was slipping into minor compulsive behaviors, counting the panels on the car dashboard, counting the tick marks on the clock face, counting everything.

And do you know the strangest thing – when I would ask her, in her misery, what would make her happy again, she answered without hesitating:

“A dog.”

Speak

My friend Mary Ellen insists to me that her German shepherd tries to mouth words. He wants so desperately to be part of their conversations that he apes the motions. Alas, dogs can’t talk.

You would think, since dogs can't talk, that this limits the dialogue between people and dogs. But this is not so. When I am out with Beau, I often notice other dogpeople maintaining a low level of patter with their charges. If I crane my head and listen, I hear them saying things like:

"Mind the broken glass here. Looks like someone had an accident, eh?"

"What have you go there, boy? Yes, that's doodoo, all right."

"So I told her, if that's the kind of person you think I am, we should maybe better call the whole thing off right now."

That the dogs never reply, except perhaps with a moment of eye contact and a reassuring grin, is evidently OK. People know that, to the dog, the speech of humans, especially if it is soft and friendly, is a source of reassurance in a strange world. And it allows them, the humans, to talk. It's a good way to find out what's on your own mind.

When Beau was young, for instance, I sang to him. I often had the song "Little Deuce Coupe" going through my head. I never learned the words to the song, and I don't even know what a deuce coupe is, but I could tell it made the Beach Boys very happy and proud, and that was what Beau made me. And he liked it, too -- you could tell by the sprightly pace he maintained.

Outside, at the river, he will bark with the other dogs. Indeed, he barks interminably at dogs who don't understand what he wants to do (chase them and nip at their shoulders).

But with me, alone, for the entire 24 hours of every day that we spend together, he is almost silent, his back arching over his big pillow, his head dripping . People who wonder about our relationship can't see what we are like when we are at work. I type, he sleeps. If he needs something, he stands and stares at me with his oblique, unsmiling, pelican-like expression.

But mainly it is sleep and silence. Like all big dogs, Beau uses up his power in bursts of running. The rest of the time he saves up power for the next burst -- by sawing dog logs.

Dogs understand that they are standby equipment. They know not the hour they will be released to run, so they bide their time, and store up strength.

Where Beau and I are silent partners, Rachel and Beau are a torrent of conversation. When he sees her coming down

the walk, he makes a sound that is midway between a cold engine trying to start and a cow mooing. He knows he can always count on her for kindness and attention, whereas I tend to ignore him. (In my defense, he is with me 24 hours a day, and I am no more aware of him being there most of the time than I am aware of my liver.)

Long before we ever got a dog, Rachel had raised the practice of baby talk to a celestial art. She has at least a hundred nicknames apiece for me and the kids. They spring so naturally from her tongue that they are a delight to human and nonhuman alike. When she comes home and Beau greets her at the door, she cries out in a cartoon musical voice, "O-no the oni-Beau!"

From my many years of experience, I can parse that sentence. The first word is uttered at high C, and the rest drops down to middle C.

Beau, of course, is the dog. *Oni*, as in *the oni-Beau*, is the affectionate suffix she applies to anything she loves. It's like "-ito" in a Spanish nickname. If you want something to eat in our house, Rachel says you are a *hungrioni* -- accent on the last syllable. The kids always counter that they are not merely *hungrioni*, they are *starvingoni*.

"O-no" is just a bit of sonic nonsense she throw in to rhyme with Beau and parallel "O-nee."

So it's O-no the oni-Beau. It is more than a greeting. It is a greeting, a salute, and a happy hymn all rolled into one. It means next to nothing, but Beau is invariably asleep on his beanbag chair when she arrives with the greeting. Taken aback, he can only slide head downward off the chair, waggle his tail weakly, and expose his tummy in supplication.

I could write an entire book just on the grammar and syntax of Rachel's baby talk. If you or I were to do it, it would

be cloying in the extreme. But she pulls it off every time, always joyful, always energizing.

Opera hound

Rachel decided some time ago that she wanted to sing opera, and so spends an hour every evening running through scales and arpeggios and stuff. The kids and I have forged an attitude about this that contains elements of tolerance, encouragement, and eye-rolling sarcasm.

For his part, Beau is simply bewitched by the singing. He can be lying on his side, asleep, when she begins. Rachel will sing a scale, and without opening his eyes, he ventures a practice whimper. Rachel will respond with a snippet, and he will sit up and sing in earnest.

He can't help himself, and he sings with an eerie passion that seems to fit the opera she is singing from that week. We thought when he first did this that the sound might be hurting him, but no – his singing is an honest contribution, freely offered.

When Rachel changes pitch, Beau struggles to change his, too, which is difficult because Rachel ranges freely across three octaves and Beau is limited to a few modest tonal loops. But his ambition in meeting her call with his own is so sincere -- if it were art, it would be high art, because he seems so exalted in the doing. What he is thinking, I cannot say -- some ancient coyote ritual that retains some holy meaning for him. He looks about the room so soulfully as he bellows, while the rest of us shoot milk out our noses.

Other sounds

Besides singing, Beauregard makes an assortment of other noises, and I have compiled a list of them:

There is his lovely *woof*, which is his way of serving notice. Beau's first complaint to an approaching dog is this woof. It arises from his throat, and is a foreshadowing of louder noises coming from deeper in him.

The deeper noise he makes is his *bark*. When he barks, he is all business. It is neither friendly nor unfriendly. It is a clinical sound, but a powerful one, arising from deep in his diaphragm. His woof has grown bolder as he has grown older. Sometimes I will be working very serenely with my back toward Beau, and he will suddenly bark, indicating his wish for a Milk-Bone. It is like a gun going off by your ear.

Beau makes a *yap* sound when he is at the river, and he is trying to dissuade a retriever from retrieving, and to play chase with him instead. It is an insipid, repetitive, and annoying sound. I tell people along the bank that he hardly makes a sound at home, but they just roll their eyes and say, sure, sure.

There is his ominous *growl*. It is like a purr, only deeper, and intended to sound mean. He emits this when he thinks another dog is dissing him. He would never go into battle without first growling. It is a cold and menacing sound, and I hate it.

There is the *hint* that escapes from Beau involuntarily, a rapid, defeated exhalation (*hnnn!*), as when he sees another dog, and he wants so badly to be with that dog.

There is his *howl*, that he makes almost against his will, when he hears another dog in the neighborhood call out, late at night.

The cute *merp* sound Beau makes at the table, when he wants a taste of what we're having, and the faux-menacing *growl* he follows up with, when he realizes we will not be blackmailed, and he must up the ante.

There is a *whine* of engagement, as when he is wrestling with a chew toy on the carpet, throwing it up in the air and pouncing on it. He is conversing with his prey at such times. ("I'll show you. Take that! My name is Beau!")

There is a *blip* sound he makes with his tongue, sklupping water backwards from his dish. And a corresponding *blap*, when he drinks deep from the toilet, the round ceramic bowl around his head, causing the sound to resonate.

There are the *moans* and *groans* Beau makes when he is rubbed at night. He has to be in a sleepy, sensuous mood. It is a pretty, animal sound, a hum that rises and falls like a very low-pitched slide whistle.

And there is the *sigh* when he is asleep, and Beau lets the air tumble out of him. It is the sound a pump organ makes, when the song of the day has been sung.

A primer in dog psychology

Every dog owner has wondered what it is like to be inside a dog's head. But I, and I almost alone among our species, have actually had that experience.

Over the holidays, my son's school held a fundraiser at a local bakery. All profits from that day's sales went to the school. To lure traffic in, human volunteers were asked to dress up in semi-realistic animal costumes and parade around outside the bakery.

You know how it is, when you see someone dressed up in an animal suit, and you just want to whip out your checkbook. The last thing you would do is cross the street to avoid the person/animal.

Anyway, I was volunteered for this operation ("We thought you would be perfect for public humiliation," one of

the moms told me), and the suit I was given was of a husky dog, or possibly a Samoyed.

It was a very good suit. The fur looked real, and the head, though oversized, was naturalistic. No sooner did I slip the enormous outer head over my inner one, and peered out the gauze eye-windows, than I felt different. And I don't just mean unable to breathe. No, I began to feel like the creature I looked like.

It was a slushy day, and it had begun to snow when I slunk out to my appointed post along Summit Avenue. Altogether I spent two hours on the corner, and in that period I went through a series of transformations.

First, I was: *the man in a dog suit*. New to the concept, I imagined myself as a cartoon dog. When cars would go by I would wave my hand in a friendly way, like the girl in the Mickey Mouse suit at Disneyland. But after a minute or two of that, that seemed mind-numbingly insipid, so I began to experiment with other modes of behavior. Like lifting a leg at the stop sign to make my mark.

Some people, passing by, made me want to look away -- they were cold and distant -- cat people. Others filled me with alarm -- I wanted to shout at them, repeatedly and insistently, as if there were some point to my bellowing.

Other people seemed sympathetic. I whined when they passed me on the sidewalk, hoping they would pity me and take me home. I zeroed in on a family with only one child, a little boy about six. I sensed a vacancy in their hearts, and I yearned to fill it. But they, unsure about a six foot, one inch, bipedal malamute, walked right on by.

But I grew tired of that and became: *the man who did not know he was a dog*. Now I was just an ordinary man, but one wearing a dog suit. The fact that I was in a dog suit was of

no consequence to me. I pretended I was waiting for a bus, glancing at my paw-watch to check the time. I rocked on my heels, and whistled a tune. When a car drove by too quickly and splashed slush onto my feet, I made the Italian *fungoo* sign at them as they sped away, laughing.

Then I became: *the man who awoke to find himself changed into a dog*. Like Gregor Samsa in the Franz Kafka story, trapped in a large cockroach's body, only I was a dog. I paced around frantically, pretending to pull my head off, only to discover it was my real head. It was a horror story, but no one showed the slightest sympathy. I waved at passersby signaling that I needed help in the most urgent way. I even stepped into traffic a bit, as if I might stand in front of a car to get it to stop. You should have seen people's expression, delight fading into something unnerving.

But the metamorphosis deepened, and I became the most frightening apparition of all: *the man who really was a dog*. All human perspective was gone now. I was a tall dog standing on its hind legs, teetering close to traffic. This was serious. I could bolt into an oncoming car, or nip a passerby in my confusion. I looked around me at the world of people, orderly for them but incomprehensible to me.

Soon, my coat blanketed with wet snow, but my mask wet inside from perspiration, I trudged lock back to the bakery, undid the dog's head, and felt the cool human air rush to my slick face. Things began making sense again. Business was booming; we wound up raising \$7,000 from sales of bread for the school.

But I felt changed for having been a dog. It made me realize dogs in human society feel almost constant fear. I remembered my last thoughts on the boulevard:

If I was a real dog, then I wasn't on a leash, and what did that mean? That I was lost, or somehow emancipated. If

so, I was in deep trouble -- alone in the city, confused by traffic, stimulated by my freedom but unsure what to do with it. I appeared to be grinning, as dogs in danger do. But I was at my wits' end.

I controlled nothing in this environment. I understood nothing. Everyone else seemed to have a direction to their behavior, whereas I was simply improvising from moment to moment. One wrong move and I was a dead dog.

My only defense against all this confusion was to latch onto a human who could make sense of it and ingratiate myself to him. But who -- who?

I put my head back and I howled into the falling snow.

Why they are that way

My psychologist friend Harvey found a tidbit for me in his reading. It turns out that dog anatomists have examined dog brains to see how they differ from those of other animals and of humans. Size is the obvious big difference between human and dog brains. I know that Beau's head, when you get past his pompadour, is incredibly small, and most of it is taken up by mouth. His brain can't be any bigger than a tennis ball.

In proportion to the total brain, the dog cerebral cortex is much smaller than a human's. This is the curly mantle around the brain that is the glory of human intelligence. But the dog amygdala is four times as big, proportionately, to their brain mass, as ours are to ours. In large dogs, the amygdala system is actually bigger than ours.

This is interesting because the amygdala is the main organ of the limbic system, which is the emotion center in most animals. It is where a creature makes the split-second decision to fight or flee. It is the most efficient part of any

brain, channeling information and arriving at an action decision a thousand times faster than "reason" can.

The amygdala is where fear responses are, and fear is a major component of canine nature. When we hear a dog bark, we think it's -- barking. But barking is a fear symptom. When your dog starts yapping at the mailman, he's not just being obnoxious. He's terrified of what the invader may do. And the fact that the mailman walks up to the door every day probably won't rationally override the emotion response. The emotions are smarter than the thoughts.

Fear is not the only emotion housed in the limbic center. Other canine emotions include affection, delight, homesickness, unflagging devotion. The things that make dogs wonderful.

(Interestingly, cats have tiny amygdalas, relative to their total brain size. This may explain why they are so cool emotionally -- they are slowed by neither love nor fear. They move efficiently through life securing one need after another, unencumbered by the need for approval.)

There is a complicating factor in dogs' brains. Like us, they have temporal centers -- a part of the cortex which keeps track of time, and distinguishes between things that happened a minute ago and things that happened a week ago. But ours are big, relative to our total brain. Dogs' temporal centers are tiny relative to their brain size.

The result of these size skewings is that dogs are constantly being thrown off-balance. First, they don't "get" the passage of time. And when they don't get it, their oversized limbic centers magnify their confusion and misgivings. In this situation they are little more than anxiety machines.

So dogs spend much of their time feeling frantic about something they don't understand even when they aren't

frantic. This is why dogs greet us nearly as enthusiastically if we are away for ten minutes as ten days. They can't tell the difference. They are completely unshielded from this fretful feeling. It gnaws at them all the time.

When their masters leave for the day, many dogs feel they are losing their masters forever. Every day. And because their cerebral cortex is so small, they never quite learn -- the separation hurts as much the hundredth time as it does the first.

A personality test

What people seeking to adopt a dog need to know, more than anything, is what the dog's personality is like. You want a dog whose personality is either like your own, or complementary to your own.

You know the old cliché, that dogs take on the likeness of their masters. It is true not just in appearance but in temperament. If you choose well, you identify traits that are compatible with your own traits. If you choose badly, you wind up yoked together for life, like Laurel and Hardy, exasperating one another to the last gulp of breath.

This isn't rocket science. If you are a lively person, you will want a lively dog. A dog who looks up from the studio couch when you return home, only to resume unconsciousness upon determining that you are you, will disappoint you. You will want animation, expression, and action. Your dog will want only to contemplate the obverse side of his eyelids.

If you are a precise and tidy person, a dog who yearns to explore your wastebaskets and laundry hampers will be problematic. You will want a dog like yourself -- contained, disciplined, a little dull maybe.

Personality must also be compatible with situation. If you live in a tiny apartment, you will not be happy with a very active dog, unless he and you both enjoy scaling walls.

If you are a family with very young children, a dog who acts like a very young child, whatever its actual age, will be redundant. Indeed, the dog will compete against the children to be top child -- which can be dangerous.

When you say you want a dog with “lots of personality,” you mean you want a dog with lots of personality just like yours. You don’t want a dog with a lot of personality you can’t stand.

And so on. Along with my partner Harvey, I have had a hand in creating several personality tests that are widely used in industry. So I figured it would be a snap to do the same thing for dogs. With people you create an X-Y graph based on the two fundamental issues of personality -- control and sociability, for instance. Then you test people for their need to control and need to socialize, plot the score on a grid, and presto, there’s your innate personality.

But that approach doesn't work with dogs, because what matters most to you is not the dog’s innate and permanent personality, but its capacity to adapt to your personality.

"Control" and "sociability," for instance, both have two entirely different meanings in a dog – a dog’s ability to control himself and deal with others within dog society, and the same ability in human society. There’s a big difference, because a dog can be really great with other dogs and murder with people, and vice versa. If you decide to plot all four characteristics, you wind up with a messy graph.

Limiting the test to how the dog does with people doesn’t work either, unless you are taking the dog to an

environment where there are no other dogs, like Jurassic Park. Otherwise, you miss something very important, because interdog relations (fighting, biting, roaming, dominance, etc.) are a big reason for dog failure.

A final hurdle is that dogs, unlike people, can't fill out questionnaires.

Then it hit me. Why not use the transactional analysis model of the 1960s? It was absurdly simple. Transactional analysis was the "I'm OK, You're OK" approach to psychotherapy. It maintained that people operate out of three different spheres of the self.

The first is the Child, or the inner child as some call it. It is the part of us that loves to create and play and shuns responsibility and regulation. It is laughter and narcissism, a puppy chasing its tail. The second is the Parent, in many ways the opposite of the child. It is the part that is entirely focused on responsibility and rules. It is the frowning face of enforcement. Abutting these two spheres is the Adult -- mature, self-aware, rational, and pretty much at peace.

The spheres translate very well to dogs. And, they describe dog behavior both among other dogs and among humans.

The test is simply to ask yourself a few identifying questions, and see which mode is the dominant one for your dog.

First, is your dog a Child -- or as we rename the category, a Puppy?

The Puppy, whether it is eight weeks old or five years old, is a creature who is insanely curious but never learns, who goes bananas when you arrive at the door, who never tires of games, who seeks continuous approval from other dogs and other people, who flirts shamelessly and sees every human

interaction as an opportunity for charm and conquest, who denies danger, and who can never, ever, ever, ever get enough attention.

Many lap dogs live lives as canine bonsai, bred and disciplined to live their entire lives as Puppies. Dogs who “just don’t get it,” and are forever running in the street, are locked in Puppy mode. Dogs who get hung up all their lives in the Puppy sphere may be the life of the party but they are neurotically needy, immature creatures.

They have stopped growing, because they enjoy the power of charming others with their ingenuousness.

On to the second category. Here, the Parent in the transactional model becomes the Dog. The Dog has grown beyond Puppy innocence to a knowledge of the rules and a rigid enforcement of them. The Dog is always on the job. Where the Puppy is loose, the Dog is tight. Where the Puppy is all play, the Dog is all business.

The Dog is quick to scold puppies and other dogs for their failures and trespasses. Indeed, he takes the business of correcting others to be his vocation in life.

Most work dogs occupy the parental Dog sphere most of the time. It is the Dog that chooses a career and pursues it overzealously, guarding the house and family to the point of tediousness, hating the postman, despising the electrician, barking at pedestrians before they come within two blocks of his territory.

Dogs who get hung up in the Dog realm are neurotic in another way. They are drones, scolds, I-told-you-so's, and boors. They have stopped growing, because they enjoy the power of enforcing their view on everyone else. Dogs who lodge permanently in the Dog phase never quite become actualized.

Finally, if you are lucky, there is the third category, the Adult mode, which I call the Companion.

The Companion has evolved and matured beyond both the loony latitudes of Puppyhood and the narrow strictures of Doghood. He has grown beyond both the begging of Puppyhood and the nagging of Doghood. The Companion knows what his job is, and he no longer seeks to expand the description.

Like the Puppy he seeks enjoyment, but without the compulsion and without the insatiable need. Children are not a threat -- they are young humans, to be enjoyed and loved -- and put up with -- as such.

Like the Dog, the Companion knows the rules, but knows that circumstances and context are more important than rules. The postman must deliver the mail, and you know he's not Satan, really, so why not let him do his job?

The Companion has risen above instinct to be a rational creature, and at the same time, emotionally fulfilled.

Think of the three stages as part of a Canine Comedy. And they correspond to the Canine Comedy theme.

Puppyhood begins in the garden of Paradise, then devolves into a Purgatorio of problems, destruction, and aggravations. Puppies are anxious because they are incompetent. The reason they need love so much is because they are sounsure of themselves.

Dog Parenthood, the second stage, can become a raging Inferno of unhappiness if the dog obsesses about dominance, aggression, and sexual abandon. Dogs hung up in the Dog stage are miserable creatures -- cut off from other dogs, cut off from pleasure, by their workaholism and single-minded devotion to what they perceive as What Masters Wants -- which is usually way off the mark.

On the other side of that life, however, is the tantalizing Paradise Regained -- the mellowness of maturity, in which the dog abides as only dogs abide, as Companions, friends to man and members of a human pack.

And here is the key. In order for dogs to be fulfilled, they must be part of both a human pack and a dog pack. They must have a foreleg in both worlds, and find a suitable mix for themselves and their mental health.

Other types

I want to point out that there are other dog personality types. But these are not natural types -- rather, they are the faces of extreme stress.

There is the Cur, who is a beaten dog, damaged goods. The Cur has lost the spark of sociality that makes a dog lovable, the sense of occupying a rung on the ladder of being between humans and other animals. Any good dog will turn Cur if its luck goes sour enough. Animal Protection every day picks up thousands of dogs who are *not* put up for adoption, because they match this description.

And there is the Feral, who lives outside the bounds of human society, and thus is possibly not a "dog," not a domesticated creature, at all. This dog never had the spark of sociality with people. Sometimes good dogs revert, because they lose their homes, or because they fall in with other rogue dogs.

To be fulfilled in human society, dogs need to be taken care of, to have food waiting for them every day. It is the essence of the canine bargain -- food for loyalty. Dogs who must spend their whole day hunting to fill their bellies never find the leisure to smile.

Note: I am not saying your dog is one, and only one, of the three primary spheres -- Puppy, Dog, or Companion. Every dog is all three, at different times and in different degrees over its life. Every dog is a Puppy when young. A few puppies exhibit the solemnity of being ready for the job ahead of them -- Dogs ahead of their time. A few blissful puppies seem self-aware and content to a degree puppies should not be. They are Companions ahead of their time.

As for the Companion, this is obviously a terrific phase of dog being. We would all like to think of our pets as occupying this noble, resolute stage.

But frankly, most dogs do not spent much of their lives in it. Lassie was the archetypal Companion, but Lassie was fiction. A real Lassie would have had good days and bad. Days when you save Timmie after falling into the well, and days when you see Timmie down there and go take a nap. Time is the main ingredient in dogs reaching this state of psychological maturity. But the passage of time is no guarantee dogs will attain it or occupy it for long.

Anyone who has seen an older dog suddenly get it into his head that he is still a puppy, and can play with a scrap of rawhide on the rug, knows that the stages roll through your days like a continuously shuffling deck of cards.

Choose the kind of dog whose personality type is right for your life. Many people want and need dogs who spend much of their lives in the Puppy sphere -- they treasure the dog's childlike beauty. Many others, people needing a stern guard dog, or a life companion, have no use for these traits beyond the puppy time.

To choose an adult dog, it should be easy to assess which sphere is most natural to him. As a young puppy still in his litter, it is more difficult. Breed plays a role. A breed known for careerism, like the German short-haired pointer or

Australian cattle dog, will likely yield working Dogs. A nonsporting or de-sported breed like the poodle or cocker spaniel is likely to yield clever puppies. A breed that reliably yields friendly adult dogs like the golden and Labrador retriever is likely to yield dogs who do their jobs while making the very best of friends.

But breed by itself is only a partial indicator. Look at the individual dog. Look into his eyes and see what wisdom is there. In his long life he will be Puppy, Dog, Companion and more.

Look into his eyes, and believe what you see. Because while they are many things, dogs are never liars.

Canine wisdom

A friend asked what I was writing about. A word of advice to friends of writers: ask any question but that one. We are the last ones to know such a thing.

Fortunately, this question came late in the writing, so I had more of an answer than I had six months earlier.

I said it was a book about a dog. More specifically, about a certain young dog that lives with me. More generally, about the blessings of a certain kind of company.

This friend then went one step further, and asked me to summarize my findings. In response I created the following list of nuggets I call "canine wisdom."

Canine wisdom is more than the names of two kinds of teeth. It describes a kind of knowledge that all dogs have, and that people can acquire only through dogs.

If you have mastered these eleven points and you are a dog, you are a hell of a dog. If you have approximated them and you are a human being, you deserve a pat on the head.

- On Purpose.** Our job is to be good. So be good. When you screw up, forgive yourself. Others will, too.
- On Belonging.** We are not alone; we belong to one another. We are not "friends"; we own one another.
- On Joy.** We ennoble ourselves through work and duty, but we find greatest meaning in the moment. There is no greater happiness than moving with the pack you belong to.
- On Obedience.** Don't measure it by the number of tricks you perform on command. The obedience that really matters is about compliance in crisis -- Stay, No, Good dog.
- On Autonomy.** We're domesticated. Though we feel the call of the wild, we also know when we are being called home. Some things we can do for ourselves. Other things, we need the other for.
- On Friendship.** To be a true friend to someone is to be loyal to them. A friend is someone who, when you need them and say Come to me, is there before you, awaiting your next command.
- On Solitude.** The anxiety of waiting is that you never know when waiting ends. To be alone is to be hollow, and the time till we are no longer alone stretches silently out like desert sand. Be sad, but be calm. And wait.
- On Suffering.** Turn down your neediness and be grateful for small things. A drink of water, the patting hand of someone you know. When there is nothing you can do, there is nothing you can do. The pain will pass. Or you will die, and then the pain will pass.
- On Dying.** You see it everywhere around you. It is part of living, not something to torment your dreams. You sniff it, you accept it, and you go about your business.
- On Love.** It is not unconditional. It thrives on goodness and reciprocity. But when it is there it enlivens every breath you take and every step you take. In a lifetime

of moments chained together, being loved puts a soul into us, and makes everything matter.

On Faith. You can never be sure what will happen next, if the beloved will return in a minute or in an hour. Faith in things unseen carries us through these times of worry. The loved one will return. Be patient and nap, until the golden moment comes.

World wide web

When you take your dog for a walk, you know your dog is aware of things you aren't aware of. But did you know dogs have their own Internet?

Out on a walk, the human may be enjoying the exercise. Or it may be lost in that fuzzy reverie pet owners give themselves to. Many people look forward to walks as an opportunity to bond with their pet, as a special moment between the species. And there are humans who impatiently urge the dog on because they have better things to do than walk a dog.

But to the dog the walk is everything. In rain, sleet, snow, or scorching heat, it is just as eager to get out and do its thing. The walk is not about getting exercise or bonding with the master. The walk is about trees and smells.

Every time a city dog takes a walk, it logs onto the dog Internet, in which it communicates with all other dogs in its network. Dogs download data with their noses, which house 10,000 times the information receptors that human noses have. And they upload data with their bladders.

Like our Internet, the dog Internet is ubiquitous yet invisible. We can see the dogs, and we can see the trees, but the network itself is transparent. To participate in the dog Internet, human eyes are useless. You need a nose, one 10,000 times better than your current one.

For a human to "see" the dog Internet, you might want to videotape a single city block from above, perhaps a gondola shot from a blimp. You will want to film the proceedings using sped-up, stop-gap camera technique, like that famous film of a rose blooming, then wilting, all in ten seconds.

And you would want to add chroma key video "tracer" to the dog pee, highlighting it like an enhanced hockey puck on TV, so it appears bright blue or hunter orange as it splashes onto tree trunks, fence posts, telephone poles and bushes. After a day of shooting, run the sped-up tape and, finally, you will "see" the dog Internet. You would see that a single city block experiences scores of uploads, each one a splash of fireworks, plus hundreds of downloads. Each hit is a message from one dog to all other dogs logging onto that network.

Since dogs cross streets, the tracers cross the street with them, carrying news from one block to the next, thus creating a network of networks -- an Internet.

In both Internets, telephony plays a vital role. While the human Internet is conducted by electricity along telephone phone *lines*, the dog Internet is conducted by urine and other scents distributed along telephone *poles* -- and other vertical objects.

While the messages dogs post are encrypted, so as to be readable only by other dogs, it is not hard to guess what they are saying. They are saying the same basic thing we say on our Internet: I was here.

Each day's marked signpost is like a prisoner's hashmark. It may contain clues about your existence: "My name is Smoky. I am this tall. I had noodle soup for lunch. I am very fierce and very potent. But I might like to play. This belongs to me."

The dog Internet is not a dogs-only Internet. The trees carry the scent of every creature that has been near. In the city this may include cats, squirrels, rabbits, raccoons, insects, slugs, snails, and birds of every feather. Each has a story to tell that is interesting to the dog, and invisible to you.

Marking is a form of online advertisement. It is a dog's way of saying who I am, how big I am, and where you can find me. The higher up a pole a dog posts his message, the more status accrues to him.

This becomes amusing when you realize that height on the pole does not always correlate with size of the dog. It is inspiring to watch the efforts of undersized dogs to stand practically on their heads to direct their stream to the topmost point on a pole or tree trunk. Dogs are not above Internet forgery.

The dog Internet is essentially urban in nature. The countryside does not have the critical ratio of dogs to trees and telephone poles to create the network effect. In the country, there are more trees but fewer dogs.

In my city neighborhood of Merriam Park in Saint Paul, there are about perhaps 20,000 people, 4,000 or so dogs, and half as many trees. This is a favorable ratio for a canine community bulletin board. So many dogs, distributed among a handful of trees, means that no bush, no hydrant, no No Parking signpost, is spared.

The next time you are out with your dog, and you can't understand his urgency to get to the next tree trunk, try to appreciate what he is going through. He is experiencing sensory overload, downloading from multiple sites simultaneously. Give him time, and a long leash, and let him be about his business.

Dog smarts

My neighbor John, when I told him I was trying to write about dog intelligence, synopsised the wisdom of that species as "Duh."

OK, he has a point. Dogs, living with people, are perpetually in an environment they are incapable of understanding. There is an old joke that no dog will ever be president, because our enemies would only have to threaten us with vacuum cleaners.

The human world is unfathomable to most humans -- how much more fathomless it must seem to these small-skulled creatures. Not just the inventions, but the meta-principles at work, like time. What does it mean to be in a hurry? Where does the hurry come from? Why is it that a dog can take his time sniffing the bushes one day, but have to be forcibly dragged around the block the next?

Why do people walk past the house and imagine their action could be taken as anything less than threatening?

Why do people keep peeing in the water bowl, the big one with the handle?

Why are people always yelling at me?

One of the great injustices is that we accuse the smartest dogs of being dumb. Smart dogs looks dumber than dumb dogs because you never see dumb dogs try to figure anything out. They remain purely instinctual and reactive, and so seem quick in their way. Whereas a dog able to figure out how to get a peanut from a jar will look very comical -- you can see the thought processes.

That is the charm of the old Pluto cartoons. He is no different from us, except he's transparent. He really wants that

clam in the seaside episode to open up. And he's not cool enough emotionally to pretend it doesn't matter to him.

Pluto was some kind of genius.

In place of high levels of cognitive, improvisational smarts, dogs come prepackaged with instinctual smarts. These are habits of mind that have been drilled into the canine mind for a million years or more. Like circling twice before settling down for a nap. Like barking at approaching visitors. Like the slack a dog cuts a young child, that he would never tolerate in an older human. Like the instinct to catch, fetch, and herd. Like reading the daily news at every bush, tree, and signpost. The reason a dog does these things is lost in the sands of time, but there is no arguing with its success.

Beauregard has always had a sensitive stomach. When he was twelve weeks old, during the winter to end all winters, he licked the wrong box of detergent or something, and became nauseous. His instinct to eat grass kicked in. When I took him for a walk, he dug under the crust of snow to find a few frozen blades of brown grass, and gobbled them up. It was not enough. Back inside the house he conducted an inventory of grasslike vegetation, and decided that the palm tree in the dining room came the closest to grass. We watched on in fascination as this young pup defoliated a plant Rachel had had for 20 years, summarily barfed on the linoleum floor, and cheerfully walked away, having solved his health problem himself.

I remember one very warm day at Battle Creek Park in Saint Paul. Beauregard was beat. Everywhere were huge summer picnics. The biggest party was a Vietnamese wedding. People were everywhere. You could see young couples kissing behind trees, and younger kids dashing by on skates.

Beau slunk from shade to shade, looking for a place to rest. Though I had trimmed him, the heat still collected in his tight curls, and his eyes looked waxy from the hot sun.

We met a family with a golden retriever, the two dogs sniffed one another over, and we received a nice compliment.

"I suppose you saw the PBS report on poodles," she said. I confessed that I had not.

"Oh, you'll want to dig up a video of it. It was an examination of dog intelligence. They studied over 100 breeds, and the standard poodle came out as the most intelligent of all."

I looked at my steaming dog, panting and big tongued under a linden tree. He did not look especially intelligent. He looked fagged.

But I know he's smart. It was clear as a puppy, when I wrapped my entire office in warehouse plastic, to keep him from gnawing my books. He would walk around the room on his hind legs, balancing himself with his forepaws. Just above the plastic line. He could pull any book from its place with his mouth -- or any other object that caught his eye, like a clock or light bulb. He was looking for something -- not a book to read, but something that would entertain him. A mere pup of two months, he followed his nose everywhere in search of relief from the tedium of being a dog.

But Beau, super-intelligent? When I point at something, he looks at my finger.

I must admit, when he is not staring gloomily off into space, or barking pointlessly at a female dog he wishes to impress, he has moments of something like cleverness. He can be a deliberate thinker, and a stealthy one. When he was a puppy, we kenneled him in my daughter's bedroom on our house's second floor. Over time he came to regard the room as

a place of confinement, and no dog worth his salt wants to be confined. Many times he was cajoled in there with a piece of hot dog or chunk of ham, and then had to spend an hour or two cooling his paws while the family went and did something fun.

So Beau developed a strategy for avoiding that room.

This was difficult because he and I office together on the third floor. In order to go to where all the good things are, on the first floor and outside, he has to pass my daughter's door. So this is what he came up with:

If he and I are on the third floor, and I decide to go downstairs, he will follow halfway down the first flight, and stop on the landing. Then he watches me very carefully. If I go into the bathroom or into my bedroom or stay on the second floor, with its dreaded proximity to the kenneling room, he will stay right where he is, on the landing.

If I continue downstairs to the first floor, he waits until I am on the third or fourth to the last stair -- safely removed from the kenneling room -- then he runs down the stairs, passing the room in a wink.

As a sign of intelligence, this episode revealed both pluses and minuses. On the minus side, he hadn't been kenneled in over a year. In fact, the actual kennel or cage we used to have in there had been taken away months ago. So he is showing an irrational sense of alarm over something that couldn't possibly happen. That's dumb.

On the plus side, his strategy worked. He outwitted the bedroom, much the way that his barking at the door had empirically succeeded in keeping elephants from barging in. It's hard to argue with success.

A deer

One day, we were walking along the river after a fresh snowfall. Suddenly we noticed three stout whitetail deer not thirty yards from us. Beau had never seen a deer before and pure instinct took over. I watched as the deer spotted him, their eyes widened, and they took off into the trees, Beau hard on their heels. In a second they were all gone, and I was thinking that the sight was very beautiful -- and very worrisome.

I had three worries:

One, the deer would kill Beau. I'm not sure how they would do it, but they were strong, and kicked hard. It could happen, and it would be really bad.

Two, Beau would kill one or more deer. To this point he had never killed anything, except a slow fly on a window pane. But I suppose it was possible. If park officials found the carcass of a deer killed by my poodle, we could be in big trouble.

Three, I had seen the last of Beauregard Grandprix Poodledog Finley. He was probably a half mile away from me already, and putting more distance between us every second. Sure, I had an electronic tag under his skin, but by the time animal control scanned him for that, he would be damaged goods.

I called for him. I kept calling for him, every fifteen seconds for about 20 minutes. I was scared.

Then, just as suddenly as he had departed, Beau was back. He must have run a mile away, lost the deer, then lost the scent back, and realized he was really lost. I can't prove he did this, but I believe he utilized some combination of reason and improvisation. He left the part of the woods he was in, found the river, and trotted back up it until he came to me,

wearing the humongous grin of a dog that knew all there was to know about deer, that I would never know.

Bark at Saint Mark

Many dogs, especially the bigger breeds, are unable to watch TV. Their brains can't three-dimensionalize the dot-images on the screen. So when they hear Lassie barking, they get off the couch, run past the TV, and peer out the door to see who's doing that.

Other dogs have no problems. My experience is that the smaller breeds, perhaps because they are bred for lap-sitting and are thus genetically better fit to be couch potatoes, do see and follow TV images. Cats are excellent TV watchers.

On the other hand, maybe larger dogs are better at discerning that there are smarter things to be doing than watching TV. A judgment call.

Beau can't three-dimensionalize TV, but he is good at animating inanimate objects. Not far from where we live is a Catholic school called St. Mark's, and in front of the school's gym building is a concrete statue of Saint Mark. It is gray, and mounted on a pedestal about three feet off the ground.

When I take Beau for a walk past the statue, he goes berserk and starts barking at the statue. On the plus side, he sees the concrete human form as something human - that shows imagination. On the minus side, his intelligence is limited to seeing the statue-come-to-life as a figure of menace. It is unthinkable to him that a human made of stone could be a saint.

If Beau could talk, and he were asked what is the greatest danger in the Merriam Park neighborhood, I am fairly confident he would say that it was the statue of Saint Mark. When you look at him, sure, he just stands there, silently. But

dogs know they are fooled routinely, and this is a preemptive strike by the poodle. Who knows, when you turn your back on Saint Mark, what he starts doing?

If you can entertain that notion, of a statue posing a threat to a community, you are halfway to thinking like a dog. To dogs, stranger things happen routinely. Cars start up and go. Lights switch on and off. Doorbells cause people to appear on porches. Put food in a microwave and one minute later -- it's hot. In such a world it would be foolhardy in the extreme to give statues very much slack.

I tested the notion some more. Beau can not see the images in a bus stop poster by day. But by night the same poster is backlit. This is one of those "Get Milk" posters, with some Olympic hopefuls grinning through a mustache of painted-on milk. Beau hates them, their milk, and their insipid smiles, and lets them know with a barking challenge.

But this is nothing compared to Halloween. In the space of a week, a half dozen neighbors create scarecrows on our block. These effigies of people made of clothing, stuffed with newspapers or straw, and with a head made of anything from a balloon to a paper bag to a pumpkin, are placed strategically along Beau's walking path. He looks at them, he squints, and he decides something is terribly wrong. Going into his vulture stance, shoulders higher than his head, he approaches and challenges them.

When they give no answer, he decides they have an attitude, and tries out-attitudinizing them, turning his back on them, expecting them to make their move. When they fail, he whirls around and blisters them with a minute-long volley of shouting and condemnation.

So, statues, scarecrows, and miscellaneous other homunculi, beware. Though you stand or sit smugly on your pedestals, or in the crook of a tree, postponing action beyond

all our patience, there is at least poodle in this world that is onto you. He will find you out, and expose you for what you are.

Olfactories

It occurs to me that I have been unfair to dogs to this point -- comparing their cognitive skills (unfavorably) against ours, their emotional stability (unfavorably) against ours, and their sense of time and place (unfavorably) against ours. To offset the load, let's look at a facet of intelligence in which they are the geniuses and we are the dolts. Their sense of smell, and how they use it.

Where the glory of the human brain is its language center, the glory of the dog's is smell. Where we think in words, because that is where our power is, dogs probably think in smells. It is as legitimate a foundation for thought as human metaphor, which is primarily visual in nature. You could write an interesting script for a dog's day in which all sensory information is olfactory in nature. You would be translating smells into words:

"Smell hand coming. Familiar -- chicken broth, urine, but cat! Wrong smell! Wait -- second-hand smell from elevator, carpet deodorant, insects, mayonnaise."

The mind is like a two-way sieve in which smell impressions arrive in plumes, are processed, compared against memories, and prompt decisions by the dog -- accept, reject, ignore.

Dogs' noses have neuroreceptors wired directly to the brain, but with an ancillary processing mechanism that does all its work, all its thinking, right in the nose. This means the dog has a main brain and a subbrain that deals exclusively with smells -- much as the human optic nerve deals with visuals, or as a hoof-and-ladder truck has steering fore and aft.

The common claim is that dogs have olfactory neuroreceptors outnumbering human smell receptors 1,000,000 to 1. That seems like a lot to me. If true, it is mindboggling. Consider that human smell is our finest, subtlest sense -- we can easily detect a smell like roasted coffee, that comprises a few parts in a billion parts of air. The roasting coffee smell that is a threshold perception for us is screamingly, howlingly obvious to a good hound.

They are to us, smellwise, as we are to them, logicwise. Nonpareils. Gods.

So -- god that he is, why is it that when a dog comes upon a turd, he puts his nose right on it to smell it?

You have to figure that he smelled that turd on the sidewalk six city blocks away. In terms of raw odor emitted, turds are hard to beat. Yet the dog, encountering this flower of the city, approaches it to the closest possible proximity. I have even seen dogs pick up a turd and gargle it for a second before spewing it out, to make sure they know what they are dealing with.

What can you compare this to? An alcoholic diving into a vat of acetone? An elephant putting its ear to the loudspeaker at Woodstock? It's like being sensitive to the mildest burst of electric current, but nevertheless stopping at every electric outlet we encounter in a day and sticking our tongue into it.

And it's a predictable sequence. What is the first thing they do after touching nose to turd? They go directly from this activity to letting you know how fond they are of you. Or perhaps it just seems that way.

Shared intelligence

But I want to suggest there is an even higher aspect of dog intelligence than their sense of smell. It is the highest measure of intelligence I can think of -- shared intelligence.

Shared intelligence is what happens when you live with a pet for a long time. After a while you start to become very intuitive about the dog. I wake up sometimes in the night and I see Beau staring at me in utter silence, but with very erect bearing. There was a time when this mystified me, and I paid the price mystification exacts. Now I know it means he has to go to the bathroom.

This is something that happened just before Beau turned two. He had been getting earaches. For a week his ears will be fine, and just as I lull myself into thinking the last potion worked -- mullein and garlic oils, peppermint, eucalyptus, antibiotic ointment, or whatever -- the pain cycle will start up again. When it happens, I am very attentive and try to take care of him right away. Some of the potions sting, some of the alcohol-based ones are icy cold, and the cotton swabs are always invasive. But when he's in pain, he wants the treatment. I think the attention I give him makes him feel better about his suffering.

So I'm sitting at my computer, and Beau enters the room, very stiff and determined-looking. He barks. I get up, fetch him a dog biscuit, and offer it. He refuses.

I escort him to the back door, open it, and point him toward the crickety garden where he likes to relieve himself. He refuses again.

I'm exasperated. "I don't know what you want, Beauregard," I say to him, in plain English, so he will understand. "I've given you everything I can think of."

Then Beau steps into the hallway, lays down on the rug under the bright light I use when I work on him, and sets his head flat on the floor. He's saying: "Do me."

When Beau did this, I was overcome with different emotions. I was proud of him for coming up with a way to tell me something completely new. I was proud of both of us, because we figured it out together, like two different species playing a game of charades.

I believe Beau has altered my brain.

Something happens to a person when he or she becomes a dogperson. The emotional volatility that is a dog's becomes your trait as well. It's as if they reach into your brain and pump up your limbic system. So now you, too, have hair-trigger emotions.

That's why the death of a dog may move us more than the death of a parent. Their emotional accessibility, their defenselessness against happiness and sorrow and fear, frees up our emotions to be the same way.

It's why we keep them.

Vocation

In January 1997, while out for a walk after a deep snow, Beau experienced a moment of imprinting. You know what imprinting is: it is a learning experience which permanently reorients you -- like ducklings seeing a Ping-Pong ball on birth and believing it is their mother, and then following Ping-Pong balls for the rest of their life. In Beau's imprinting, he became convinced that his mission on life is to be a mailman.

Beau suddenly looked up from his sniffing to see a letter carrier going about his appointed rounds. He walked up one walkway, up three steps, and deposited mail a box, then back to the sidewalk, down to the next house, up to the mailbox,

and so on. It is a credit to Beauregard's attention span that he stood rooted to the snowy ground until the mailman had visited every single house on that side of the street -- about twelve minutes. The expression on the young dog's face was one of utter seriousness.

Every dog has a vocation, a calling to a certain kind of career. Deep down, the vocation is some aspect of hunting -- either killing, or pointing, or retrieving, or chasing, or tracking. Even herding and racing, I suspect, are reshaping of the basic hunting instinct. Even guarding and providing companionship and security, connect to that ancient impulse. Even breeding and showing, in the sense that these processes create more hunters.

So how do I explain that Beau chose to make letter-carrying his vocation? Because from that day on, when we are out on the retractable leash, he makes his way through the neighborhood, stopping at every porch for just a moment, then moving on to the next house. I think he derives meaning from this. In some weird, very earnest way, he is delivering the mail.

I think Beau admires Bob, our mailman. He doesn't see Bob the way I do, as an amiable, hard-working man who has chosen to make a walk through the neighborhood his livelihood. To Beau Bob is a dog with a good job, a job any sensible dog would covet.

Bob is off leash. He is allowed to wander up to just anyone's territory, and leave his marker on their porch. He can linger as he pleases, and when he leaves his little package, Bob leaves the scent from his fingers and his bag.

To most dogs this is an outrage, and it is especially outrageous that other humans do not rise up in opposition to this arrogant behavior. But Beau has crossed over. He has evolved to a higher level of contemplation, of postal envy.

And when Beau and I are out walking, I notice how he walks up every walkway, pauses a moment on every porch, and when he returns from his rounds it is with a sense of peace and completion.

A dog's grief

I paid Brigitte Leahy \$600 for Beauregard with the idea that he become a family pet. But he became more than just a pet. He became a new center for the family.

Before we got him we were four strong personalities going in four separate directions. Though we were a loving family, there was something missing in our dynamic. Beau became that thing, a ritual point of reference.

Beau was a boon to Daniele because she wanted a dog and now she had one. He was a boon to Jonnie because the dog replaced him as the inept, youngest member of the family. I liked him because he provided easy, continuous company – a free lancer’s dream friendship. Rachel liked him because he was cute.

It is not that we were incapable of laughing together before Beau. It is that, with him, we always have something to laugh at. It is like living with Stan Laurel: nearly everything he does is hilarious in some way.

Climbing onto his beanbag to nap is funny – it might take thirty seconds at the minimum, as he circles, crisscrosses, tries one posture, then another, then finally settles on one that seems far and away the least comfortable-looking of those he tried, with his head on the floor and his butt sticking way up in the air.

Beau’s humor is usually physical. Unlike outwardly muscular breeds like a boxer or a beagle, whose parts fit together fairly tightly, the poodle is slack and loose. Beau can

lie on the floor in such a way that his back legs can be pointing west, his forelegs can be pointing south and east, and his head points true north. His legs are so long that just the act of crossing or uncrossing them following a long, tongue-splayed yawn seems impossible, like watching a very tall ballerina do a *pas de deux*, or a magician with extra-long sleeves produce an ace in hand.

The simplest thing can amuse. When Beau sits normally it is like a long-legged Sphinx. It seems impossible his legs could fold up so neatly in the rear, and his arms could stretch so far into the room.

Or he can sleep on his side, no part of him rising more than five inches from the floor. If a person enters the room, he will lift his head like a periscope. The body remains collapsed in a horizontal heap while the head swivels in a slow vertical to see what's going on. The head does not seem to belong to the body.

Yet another posture is his supplicant's position. The Sphinx lowers his head so that his chin rests on the floor, while tucking his forearms in. Now he is in perfect three-point alignment – paw, chin, paw. It is a humble pose, all the funnier because the dog is so often so haughty and disdainful.

The funniest thing about Beau, though, is not physical, but the attitude that he projects. There is no possibility that he understands very much about the world he lives in. Yet he takes it all in colossal stride, as if it were his due. He is vain not about his looks, which can be regal one moment and ridiculous the next, but about his perceived station. He has no self-esteem problems. Indeed, he thinks so wonderfully well of himself that comeuppance is never more than a eyeblink away – a head bumped on a tabletop, a newly-dryered sock statically stuck to his hindquarters, the sight of him proudly

wearing a life vest before stepping into, and over the side of, a canoe.

Though he seems to think himself an icon of inscrutable complexity, in fact he is emotionally transparent. He cannot hide his jealousy, for instance. If one of us has Bumba, our oft-neglected guinea pig on our lap, he draws near, frowns, stands at hair-trigger attention, as if to remind us that he too likes to be on a lap. If this gambit fails, he pokes his fearsome nose into Bumba's business. The guinea pig chatters at the threat of being eviscerated by those pearly canines. But Beau is without pride, he demands attention until the guinea pig is returned to her fetid box and he is hauled onto a lap.

He is inventive. If no one will play with him, he makes up a game. If no one will play catch with him, he picks up a ball or chew toy, heaves it across the room with his mouth, and then springs after it, as if it were a rabbit trespassing on his compound. He is as capable of creating a drama around this contrivance as a kitten, sneaking up on the object, barking at it, informing it that he is about to deal with it, and then dealing with it.

And he has his own humor. He loves the sound of laughter around him. Hearing human laughter prompts his own version of laughter – a grin, even in cold weather, and a vigorous flailing of tail.

There is a sad aspect to some of this clowning. It is that Beau is improvising like crazy, trying to lead a dog's life among humans, with nothing but instinct to guide him, and no hope of matching the humans' awesome abilities. I sense his awe in simple things, like the ability of cars to locomote, or the garage door to open by itself, or the fact that we all know what is going to happen every moment, and he never does. The most beautiful thing about a good dog, it seems to me, is

that they never know what is going on – and they seem able to adapt to that chaos, and to make a home in it.

Dogphobia

The request was like a boon from an Arabian Knights tale, and I was parent-bound to honor it. But it put me in a bind.

First, I could not get her a dog so long as she was afraid of dogs. I would have to intervene somehow and get her beyond her phobic feelings. And I didn't know how to go about that. She was also phobic about being in deep water, and I had tried everything to get her to dunk her head under, even offering her \$20 to hold her nose, stoop down, touch the floor of the swimming pool, and stand up again. She couldn't do it.

Second, I had my own reasons for not wanting a dog. Half my family was allergic to dog hair. There were maintenance issues. Daniele and her brother Jonathan would undoubtedly shirk their part and make me the primary caretaker. Taking care of the animal would eat into my worktime. I'd start popping deadlines, and pretty soon we'd all be out in the cold, thanks to some dog we hadn't even met yet.

But the deeper reason was that I was afraid of the emotional burden of getting another dog. When Casi died I felt not only grief, but guilt. By giving her freedom that put her in danger, and that she never asked for, I was responsible for her death.

And God help me, I was afraid of the inevitable attachment. I would be hornswoggled by the next dog just as I was hornswoggled by the last. It would quickly become a relationship all out of kilter. And I was a grown man this time, with wife and children and priorities beyond a dog's happiness.

This time around, did I have what it took to put on the emotional brakes, be a superstern owner, and keep the puppy from making a doggie bed out of my heart?

I doubted it.

But first I had to do something about Daniele's phobia. I knew offering her twenty bucks didn't work. Perhaps immersion therapy, in which I threw her into a pit of assorted snarling dogs, and didn't pull her out again until she seemed happy to be there? That didn't seem quite right, either.

It occurred to me that what we had here was a case of father-daughter cowardice. That what each of us was really afraid of was our feelings. We were both hyperemotional people. I was like a kid who wanted to adopt every sad-eyed creature I saw. And Daniele really was a kid, and confronting an animal for her was like standing under a waterfall of her own confusion and excitement. She loved going to the zoo, where steel bars provided some emotional distance, a shield from the experience. But meeting dogs up close, the emotional shield was gone. The experience was so intense, she froze up in fear.

I hit on a plan. Instead of immersing her in a pit of dogs, what if I created an environment in which she experienced dogs, but I equipped her with a shield to hide behind while she experienced them?

And so we both became volunteer dog-walkers at the Ramsey County Humane Society.

The shelter is located on the edge of Como Park, a pretty city park that includes a conservatory, a kiddie amusement park (closed in the winter), some playing fields and picnic tables, a tiny patch of woods, and a small zoo.

Every Tuesday in the winter of 1992, from November through April, Daniele and I showed up at the shelter, signed

in, found our identity badges in a file cabinet, walked through the cages and pens in back, and selected the three dogs that looked like they most needed a walk that day.

We generally spent an hour to ninety minutes walking one dog at a time. When weather permitted, we brought the dogs all the way to the zoo perimeter, and let them glimpse and call to the two wolves that were kept in a large open pen. There is no genetic difference between wolves and dogs, and no matter what breed of dog we had with us – from bulldog to bichon frise – they hailed their feral brothers with cries of recognition, and vice versa.

At first Daniele stood back from the process, walking behind me and the dog by ten steps or so. Our first dog was Fred, a 4-year-old basset hound. His ears were like big drips tumbling from a spigot. Once outside, he became a pulling machine, dragging me through the muddy snow, barely aware of us, pulling on his leash, nearly inhaling every tree trunk he came to, smelling every smell he could smell, like a condemned man's last act of gluttony.

Which it might have been. Fred was intense, but endearing, at least to morose souls like Dan and me. He was the perfect dog for our first encounter. His soul was completely domesticated – he would gnaw off a leg before biting a human being. I could easily picture Fred in a home of his own, making slow circles before lying down to nap, shutting his bloodshot eyes. But that sorrowful face must surely have warded carefree adopters, or adopters with young children away.

Daniele followed from a distance, but I could tell she, too, was lulled into feelings of security by this comfortable old dog. The next dog, she walked a bit closer, and each time she followed with greater interest. By the second week she was

walking right behind me. Then beside me. Before the month was up, she was heeling big, ungainly dogs on her own leash.

It was a glorious victory for her, because she loved dogs even when she was terrified of them. She not only overcame her fear, but she learned at an early age that specific fears could be overcome. That's a powerful lesson for someone so young.

Her favorite dog was one we encountered early in our tour of service. He had belonged to an older woman who died, and now he was trying to start all over again. His name was Ricki, a kind of longhaired Pekinese football, very spirited and proud despite bouncing up and down when he walked like a car fitted with square wheels.

Ricki was the first dog Daniele took on her own. Where Fred dragged you through the snow, Ricki was an instinctive stepper, never falling behind, never allowing the leash to tighten up. He was so happy, even trotting in the rain, his feet moving invisibly under his shaggy coat, water cascading off him when he sneezed. He was like a robot dog, with a face that looked flattened by a rolling pin.

At home, Daniele drew pictures of Ricki. He was the kind of dog she would have wanted at that age, toylike and funny. You could picture him blissful to be a member of your household, skittering up and down a staircase, excited that his master, a little girl of nine, was home from school.

But we didn't adopt Ricki. Indeed, the third week we showed up, Ricki was gone. We had been told that only one of eight dogs put up for adoption are actually adopted. So when a dog vanished from the kennel, death was a more likely reason than a new life. We tried not to get too involved, but the dogs were so brave, and so grateful for the moments we gave them, it was hard not to take them into your heart.

Another dog that got to us was Rusty, a mix of Irish setter and Lab. Rusty was one of the most beautiful dogs I ever saw. His coat was short, the color of his name, and his legs seemed longer than they needed to be, wonderful for running but somewhat awkward for just getting turned around. In his cage he seemed defeated, but out in the woods he came alive, and his face shone with a sad gratitude. He would stand and hold his chin up in a cold breeze, and you could see he was luxuriating in the air brushing his face. I don't know what his story was, but for such a gorgeous, well-behaved dog to hit such a patch of bad luck seemed very wrong.

That winter we must have walked 75 dogs. There was a big Saint Bernard puppy, solemnly and determined not to be *too* big. There were Labs of every hue, and setters, and terriers, and the occasional lapdog, who seemed heartbroken and a little deranged, like Blanche Dubois, to have fallen from a high station to this.

Several times we did the unthinkable – we took a dog that did not belong to us, and that we were responsible for, off the leash, and let it run free for just a minute or so. We chose these dogs carefully. Not many prisoners, losing their chains, will voluntarily let them be put on again. But these creatures did, like Christs being led off on leather tethers to Herod. We never lost a dog.

By the end Daniele was walking the dogs all by herself, and I was walking one step behind. There was a spring in her step, and a cheekiness in her voice, a feeling of confidence from doing something that used to scare her. She could make the most ebullient dog heel. Even the German shepherds and Dobermans, the big dogs that seemed to have little sense of humor, didn't scare her. She proved she could handle a dog of her own.

A year later

I didn't expect Beau to "cure" Daniele's anxieties, phobias, and depression. He is just a dog, and her problems were systemic, arising from her own personality, from other people in our families with some of the same sorts of problems, and problems she was having with her school cohort, and with her studies.

But learning how to be with animals, and taking care of Beau, was nonetheless a breakthrough for her. Within a few days of adopting the dog, I asked her how she felt about him, and she looked at me tearfully and said, "I love him so much, Daddy."

The dog stayed in her room for the first eight weeks. And these were difficult weeks. We were housetraining him. We were trying to settle on a good diet for him. We were trying to teach him to like his kennel. We were socializing him, inviting people in to see him, making new experiences a normal event in his day, so that he would not freak out at every new encounter.

Throughout this period Daniele was a trooper. She stayed with him when he was afraid, she changed the papers when he would pee or poop on them, and she even mopped her floor when he would miss the papers, or he would vomit up his dinner.

This was a girl with no particular history of cleanliness, and in fact a powerful history of squeamishness.

I don't have the art or insight to tell you what caused this transformation in her. Perhaps it was gratitude – she has always had the good grace to be thankful. Or perhaps it was the necessity of it all – she had to sleep in that room, too.

I do know that I would peek in on her sometimes, just before bed. If she saw me coming she would shoo the dog off

the bed – he is not allowed on, but has probably spent a third of his life there by now. Or she would abandon the ruse altogether and pet him on the bed in plain sight of me.

The dog has always had a special relationship with her. He is her protector, her boyfriend, and the beautiful doll she never wanted, her toy. One of her favorite games with him is what I call the puppet rub. She rubs her hand up and down the long curly sleeve of his throat – he looks like Kukla of Kukla, Fran & Ollie when she does this, clearly synthetic – while he shuts his eyes from the sensual pleasure of it all.

Not everything Beau did caused family delight. Rachel would berate me because I would rather take the dog for a walk down at the river than go swimming at the Jewish Community Center, or skiing with her. She worried, as I did before we got the dog, that I was becoming obsessive about him.

She was right. I did leave him alone several times a week, and I know it did him no harm. But I could not find time in my life for swimming, which I don't enjoy, or for skiing, which is just walking anyway. I felt put-upon – what was so bad about getting exercise and giving the dog what he needed? Besides, I liked the time “alone,” just me, my thoughts, and the dog sniffing alongside.

More ominous was the issue of me taking the dog away from Daniele. One night, Daniele had a sleepover at her friend Betsy's house. It was the first night she had been away since we got Beau. When it was time to turn out the lights that night, I opened the door to Rachel's and my bedroom, and Beau traipsed in and flopped down next to my side of the bed. I felt disloyal taking him in, yet he had to be someplace.

In the weeks ahead, whenever the door was left open to him, he found to his way to my bedside.

For many weeks, she was angry with me, thinking I had deliberately made away with the love of her life.

Dogpeople

I have worked at home since 1985. Until we got Beau, I spent my days alone. While friends were going off to jobs, chuckling together over cartoons posted on the corkboard, I sat by myself.

Up until now, I have never been much of a neighbor. I have sometimes lived in places for years and not known my next-door neighbor's name.

But Beau has changed all that. From the first walks I took with Beau, I have been meeting people, and telling them my name and pointing to the house where I live. Children three and four years old see Beau and me ambling down the walk and cry out "Poodoo, poodoo!"

When adult neighbors see my dog peering through the cyclone fence at their dog, they come out of their houses and we introduce ourselves and chat about our dogs' habits. Because we both have dogs, we are at the very least fellow sufferers. While they apologize to neighbors without dogs when their dog barks at the moon, with me they don't have to apologize. We have a common baseline of experience. We know each other as soon as we meet, because of the dogs.

One time, I was out with Beau on his genius leash, and Beau, as is his mailman's wont, strolled up onto every house's porch to sniff around. A man on Dayton Avenue began banging on his window from inside his house.

“Get your damn dog off my yard!” he yelled at Beau, who was marking the lilac bushes at the corner of his lot. You could hardly hear him because he was inside.

“Too late,” I replied, enunciating carefully in case he could read lips. “It’s his now.”

The happiest times I have spent with Beau have been while walking him. Every morning in our house, Beau and I get up and we drive Daniele and Jon to their respective schools. Then the two of us go down to one of our Mississippi River locations, within a mile of the airport.

On the Saint Paul side are Hidden Falls and Crosby Farm. On the Minneapolis side are Fort Snelling State Park and an area known to historians as Camp Coldwater, but known to my family as Poodlevania, the one place in the Twin Cities where dogs roam free.

These areas are all wild and relatively unpoliced. They include sandy beaches, cottonwood swamps, backwater pools of the mighty Mississippi, ruins from Minnesota's earliest settlers, cattailed marshes, and tall stands of pin oak, red pine and spruce. The woods are plentiful with deer and raccoons, and the waterways course with ducks, herons, and snapping turtles.

When the coast is clear, I let Beau off his leash, and he dances alongside me while we walk two to four miles along well-worn dirt paths.

The horrendous blizzards of our first winter brought equally horrendous spring floods. The roads into many of our river-walking areas were shut down, as the river rose up above its banks and dumped millions of tons of riverbottom sand along the alluvial plains south of the Twin Cities. The transformation from sleepy green riverbank to barren soggy dunes could not have been more striking. Footbridges, docks,

picnic shelters and sheds were lifted up and swept away. The scars of the flood are still evident -- plastic bags caught in tree branches at twenty feet above flood stage are still there today, tattered and translucent, ghostly markers of yesterday's high water.

The upshot of all this destruction was that the parks were officially closed for about three months. These three months of devastation, coinciding with Beau's fourth through sixth months of life, were exceptionally fun ones for the two of us, because we would go where no one else dared, and no one, including police, would follow.

There on the dunes and muddy plains of the river flats, Beau seemed to blossom into the kind of bodhisattva dog I pined for -- happy, handsome and brave. He encountered every kind of creature, from white-tailed deer in high snow to big, dangerous snapping turtles at egg-laying time. We saw snow fall, and heard ice crack, and seedlings sprout. We heard the chaotic yakking of the crows in subzero weather in the bare treetops.

Every day I seemed to walk further with him. Some days we walked for two hours or more. I had an aching knee, but having my puppy dance with me by the river made the twinges bearable.

Sometimes we would just sit in the soft sand and watch the river go by, and we feel our breath inside us. Beau gets all panty when he is happy and his mouth opens in a saurian grin and he winks at me. Such times I thought, this dog understands everything. That matters, anyway.

When I walk Beau, I often take a tiny wire notebook to jot down ideas in. We are like two toddlers doing parallel play. Beau will roam from tree to tree sniffing the beauty and fixating on places where a woodchuck may have paused in the last 48 hours. And I will daydream about projects I am

working on. If a thought comes to me, I whip out my 69-cent Mead memo-book and scribble the thought down.

I don't think Beau minds my daydreaming, but I'm certain he resents the memo-book. Sometimes I look up from the silver coil and he is looking at me with a look of dissatisfaction that seems to say "Yo, Shakespeare, ixnay with the ookbay."

Walks

Sometimes Beau has severe energy rushes, in which he suddenly starts dashing back and forth in frantic ellipses. He tears like a cheetah through the underbrush, tongue hanging out the side of his head. It is truly an uncontrollable mood he is the grip of, and if I could translate it into words it would be something like "Wheee!" Only in giant triple-italics, double-underlined, and red.

The best thing about walks isn't smells, however, but meeting other dogs in the actual flesh. There are dogs who adore all other dogs, and there are dogs who despise all other dogs. But there are no dogs who are indifferent to their own kind. Walking is the best chance a dog has in the course of a day to meet with its own kind and exchange particulars.

Beau, from an early age, was an adorer. We would be out walking in the newfallen snow, and he would strain at the leash to cross the street, where a man was walking his German shepherd. When Beau got a chance to mingle like this, he was all over the newfound friend, licking and pawing him, offering evidence of his goodwill. He wanted the new dog to begin where his litter left off.

Very often, however, dog owners, seeing us, would quickly turn in the opposite direction, and hurry their dog away. Beau would whine his frustration, seeing them disappear around the corner. I, too, was frustrated – what

could the owner be thinking of? Didn't he know that dogs need other dogs to be fulfilled? Wasn't he afraid the dog would contract his own antisocial behavior, and turn mean?

A better way for Beau to encounter his kind was to make regular rounds of the backyards. The two of us created a mental map of the homes in the surrounding blocks that had dogs, especially dogs that spent lots of time outdoors.

Beau would be in terrific tension as we would head out of the house, looking for dog action. He was so much fun to be with when he played, in those days, that I was frisky, too.

Many dogs came up to the fence to make our acquaintance. Many people also seemed happy to see me and my proud pup. But at many houses, we encountered suspicion and evasiveness. When we approached, the people inside would see us and call their dogs inside – even when Beau and their dog were behaving nicely through the fence. It seemed awfully rude.

There was a young boxer named Ginger, the same age as Beau. Her owner was a Latin teacher who wanted to raise her for breeding. Beau was always dashing out our front and over to their place, where the two dogs would frolic on the sidewalk. Ginger especially seemed to lose control, going into a squirm and shimmy dance on seeing Beau.

Ginger's owners' great concern was that Beau would have sex with Ginger 1) at all, which would have produced the world's weirdest dogs, boxers and poodles being the opposite of one another in every possible way, and 2) during her first heat, which most breeders like to avoid, as it taxes the dog's maturity. So when they saw Beau coming, they freaked out and tried to shoo him away, which was not strictly possible.

They may have felt they were just being sensible, but I felt they were being just a little nuts, and that they didn't want

their dogs to be happy. I gloomily entertained the notion that all dog owners were like that. Then we met Noelle and her two dogs Cobi and Sonja, who became Beau's first and best friends -- his sisters, really.

We first met them walking down the alley of their home on Selby Avenue. Cobi was the elder of the two females, a mix of poodle and border collie, with very strong herding instinct. Sonja was the younger dog, a Labrador retriever big enough to retrieve Labrador and half of Newfoundland.

When we walked by after an especially deep snow, they barreled off their back porch and began barking at us. Cobi, the herder, orchestrated the barking, and Beau was delighted with the havoc, and wagged his tail appreciatively.

The dogs' owner, appeared in parka at the back door. "Allo," she said. She was French!

"Hi," I said. "This is Beauregard, and we were just --"

"Beauregard," she said, stooping to pet the puppy. "It is true -- you are so beauty-ful!"

Beau and I both brightened. I was dying to have someone say nice things about Beau. We had been cooped up in the house, me falling in love with him -- and no one to show him to!

"You know what we call you where I am from," she said, scratching behind his ears. "*Caniche*. Oh, you are such the beauty-ful boy."

"It's nice to meet people who like dogs," I blurted out.

"We love the dogs," she said with a Gallic shrug. "I tell you, any time you want to visit, come by. My dogs, they always love to play. And you would be most welcome, Mike." I liked how she said *Mike*, stretching it into two syllables.

I was stunned – to encounter such hospitality in emotionally frozen Minnesota. “Are you sure?” I said. “Because we’ll be here every day. Beau just loves to be with other dogs.”

“Let them play,” Noelle said to me. “I will make you a cup of coffee inside.”

And so began a splendid friendship all around. Noelle and her husband John, and their three kids, and their dogs, became “best family friends” of my contingent. All winter, and then all summer, and then on into the next year, I would stop by, almost every day, and Noelle would make me coffee, and maybe I would buy a sweet.

Noelle wanted someone to tell her stories, and someone to tell stories to. She told me about growing up in Mauretania in Africa – her father was in the foreign service, and a friend of DeGaulle, and her mother was a concert pianist in her hometown at the base of the Pyrenees.

And so we talked, and enjoyed our coffee, while the dogs out back raced around the apple trees and played.

I loved watching Beau play, as a puppy, with other dogs. With Sonja and Cobi, they would run, snap at each other, paw the air like stallions, and otherwise wrestle one another to the ground. They could do this for an hours, and the looks on their faces were of unmitigated joy. I wondered why it was that Beau was so ready to play, and that other dogs sensed this in him and joined him in the fun.

Except for our brief introduction to his father razz, I was never really allowed to meet Beau's family. I understand his mother was a snow-white bitch named Emily, a champion show dog, as was his jet-black father. But Brigitte and her daughter Lorraine, who actually kenneled their dogs, were careful to hide their operations from me, and I never glimpsed

what Beau's litter was like, except for that one moment when we all first met, and a lone white sister was with him.

Nevertheless, I have come to the conclusion that Beau had a terrifically happy puppyhood. I never saw him with his brothers and sisters, but I know enough about him to suspect he was fun to be with, capable and active but never mean. As the alpha leader, he set the pace for the pack. I'm guessing they played rhapsodically, day after day, for the three months they were together.

And now, when he pulls on the lead because he senses a dog behind hedge or fence, or he knows I am headed for Sonja's house, I think he is out to recreate those weeks of bliss, rolling on his back, nipping at one another's ears, striking heroic poses one moment, clowning poses the next. Dog friendships recreate the litter emotion of childhood. And emotion is everything to dogs.

Which means that, when he is solitary, at home, on his pillow, staring emptily out the window, he misses his litter. Even the most pampered lap dog must feel this quiet grief, a yearning for what is happening on the other side of the window, and a dim memory of paradise, tumbling with one's siblings.

One day I had a special treat for Beauregard. I took him with Daniele to her riding stable in Wisconsin. While Daniele struggled with the lesson (in addition to her other phobias she was very much afraid of falling from a cantering horse and being trampled; go figure), Beau played with a setter collie mix, and the two of them fought and played for the full 60 minutes of the lesson. It was a dazzling display, in the dizzying atmosphere of horse manure and sawdust, of all-out full-tilt dogplay, like a boxing match with no bell between rounds. The only rule was, get in each other's face. They loved it.

It is possible to over-romanticize dog society. While dogs are social, their socializing is not always natural or fluid. Not all dogs hit it off. Sure, they universally sniff one another out, but that's just the most basic thing, like a handshake or greeting. Beyond that, they can be quite helpless.

Each breed is like a tribe, and each tribe has its eminent concerns. Beagles are concerned – they are very concerned -- about rabbits. For a setter, fetching sticks is the order of the day. If a Labrador retriever is not paddling about in the water, it cannot be fulfilled. Border collies are obsessed with maintaining order in the herd, even when there is no herd. Whippets run. Terriers harangue. Poodles pose.

Get all these breeds together and there are bound to be disconnects. Beau wants other dogs to play dueling tyrannosauri with him. He can do it for hours. But if the other dog is a golden retriever, he won't get far because the retriever, perhaps nature's most devoted dog, will have all eyes on his human, in case a stick is thrown his way, or a compliment, or a pat on the head. (Goldens are do-gooders and praisehounds.) The poodle barks at the retriever to forget the stick and play with him. The retriever ignores the poodle, eyeing the stick as if it were God's gift. Oh right, the poodle, says, and he almost rolls his eyes: the stick.

Dogs want to mix it up, but their interests are not the same. So different, they are unable to find common ground. I have been to parties like that.

I can illustrate this point by going one dog at a time through our neighborhood:

After Cobi and Sonja, Beau's best friend was Britt, a queenly Doberman pinscher several years his senior. We often poked our long nose in her back fence when passing her house, and if she was there, we let ourselves in for a few minutes of play. Britt was exactly what Beau's education

lacked -- a strong feminine presence to lay down the law about what was proper and what was not. Some days Beau would hector her, and she would let him know with a cold glance that he was not welcome. Other days she would deign to play with him, and their play was inspired, like the dinosaur battles from old sci-fi movies, with the two of them thrashing, jawing, and pawing the air. I could watch the two of them wrestle for an hour.

Basil, an oversized golden retriever whose master bitterly regrets neutering him -- “It took all the dog out of the dog” -- is a loner by nature. He just likes to stand like a statue in his lawn, and warn away interlopers. He also likes to slip out of his collar and go for long, slow walks through the neighborhood. When Beau salutes him, Basil smiles fondly, but can’t think of anything they might do together.

Reggie, a fox terrier, is a people dog. He likes to be fondled and held on a lap. When Beau and he get together, they haven’t a clue what to do. Beau gets into a semi-sexual position with Reggie, standing atop him with his genitalia dancing in front of the little dog’s face. The little dog bows down and averts his gaze. It is a stalemate.

Emma, a Dalmatian, wants to kill Beau. She hates the thought of other dogs walking by her alley. Her owner wears a look of exquisite pain when we walk by -- she is ashamed that Emma is such an unmitigated bitch.

Barney, an elderly beagle, looks gouty and gray. His owner, Bill, steers him away when we come by. My sense about beagles is that one thing alone causes blips on their radar, and that is rabbits. Beau, as a puppy at least, is blind to the possibility of wildlife. I have thought of putting a bumper sticker in our back yard: Start Seeing Squirrels.

There are two Alexes near us. The Berubes have an Alex who is a sheltie, and he and Beau seem unable to

connect. Alex only likes his master, Ned Berube. There is no room in his life for an erratic, self-involved puppy. Ned, a minister, finds Beau interesting, and always gives him a pat. But I get the sense he is writing sermons, with Beau as the Prodigal Poodle.

The other Alex is a soulful Brittany spaniel, who hints and whines when we stroll by. But he seems more lonely for human company than for Beau. He licks my fingers through the cyclone fence. Alex is a dog whose owners leave him all day, and each day he suffers meekly until they come home.

Two dogs Beau was intrigued by were Harley, a Rottweiler, and his pal Buster, a golden mix, who live upstairs and downstairs from one another in a duplex on Dayton Avenue. Harley's owner is Brent, a dancer, and Brent's dad Pete owns Harley. After the big snows, the two dogs discovered they could tiptoe up a tall drift and stand atop their garage, and bellow at anyone traversing their alley. It is quite a sight, to look up and see two giant dogs hollering at you. Beau thought that was very neat, but Buster, himself a puppy, was standoffish with Beau, and even a bit hostile.

Other dogs have even less chance of connecting. Sparky, the Keiths' mini-dobie, is blind and frail and incontinent. Beau is more interested in her as a chew toy than a companion.

There are two dachshunds a few blocks away that are very clever. They ring bells to be let outside and poop in a litter box. One dog is evidently the pet of the other. But there is no room in this precise living arrangement for a creature of Beau's sprawling temperament.

We also know a small poodle mix named Binks, but Beau doesn't like him much. He is the kind of dog who tries to attack you and complain when you fight back, simultaneously. Even his owner doesn't seem to like him. Only the daughter

likes Binks, but she likes him very, very much, which suggests he has virtues only she can measure.

Besides Cobi and Sonja, Noelle's dogs, I can think of only two dogs in the neighborhood that Beau has struck up any kind of relationship with. The first was a lovely small golden named Mango, who lives behind the Congregational church. Mango is a male the same age as Beau, and has the same ineffable light in his eyes, that seems to say is was ready for anything. But we have never got the two dogs together. Their friendship exists with a fence between them.

The other dog, whom Beau did not discover for several months yet, is a gorgeous white Samoyed named Sophie, who lives by the park in a corner house. Sophie and another dog, a ferocious-looking but very childlike, older, black Samoyed male, spend hours every day tied to two giant spruce trees. Sophie and Bear are owned by Walter, who dotes on those two large dogs like a dad, and takes them running in the park across the street every night, off leash. When I met Walter, I felt I had met my twin.

Beau and Sophie usually play with Sophie chained up, and Beau let loose. They have a marvelous chemistry, Beau pursuing Sophie with a heroic passion. Indeed, she is the quintessential spirit-dog, with an angelic light shining out of her, beaming news of great canine wisdom and joy. When she is with Beau, I see Beau at his very best -- gallant, funny, and fair-minded. He loves her.

Beau is so taken with Sophie that, if she is not home, he will find the spot in the yard and sit where she usually sits, and sprout a huge pink boner. And his smile is a true smile.

Beau loves all these dogs. But Sophie (and Cobi and Sonja) are the only dogs he gets to play with. The others are either barred from him by fences and gates, or their masters

shoo him away, or the dogs can't figure out what to do with one another.

For a dog who lives to socialize, this is a frustrating formula.

Walking the dog

Dogs not only let you make friends, they can usher in romance, or in my case, the momentary fantasy of one.

If I went for a walk through the neighborhood in the old days, few people said hello to me. Women, the people most often home during the day in our neighborhood, are especially leery of stay-at-home men. But since we got Beau, people feel they know something about me. I'm not only safe, but a little bit -- dare I say it? -- desirable.

I read somewhere that one thing women in singles bars look for is if a guy owns a dog. A guy who owns a dog can only be so psychotic, the reasoning goes. Because he has to take care of *something*, which sets him aside from most guys right there. It may mean he knows what affection is, beyond plain sex. A man like that will think twice about stalking you or bullying you into spending the night with him. Because if he doesn't get home in a reasonable time, his dog will eat his couch.

But back to me. Everywhere I go, people recognize Beau as the woolly big poodle with the jaunty step. He is a classy-looking, reasonably well-behaved dog who seldom barks. He strikes people who encounter him on the street as uncommonly civilized, for a dog.

Different kinds of people see different values in him. Kids like him because he is an animal and thus not an adult. Yuppies see him as a trophy hound. Dogpeople are always

interested in unusual breeds, and in Minnesota, poodles are not common.

I can't tell you what young women see in him. But evidently he moves them in some powerful, instinctual way. If you think about it, a poodle, if he were a man, would be the kind of man other men dread -- dashing, good-looking, charming-and-he-knows-it.

Women cannot resist that kind. They stoop down, they tousele his ears, and they say the darnedest things:

“What a handsome man you are! Aren't you my handsome little man. Oh, I just want to eat you up!”

I am never sure, when this happens, whether to be jealous of my dog, or to be grateful for the traffic he attracts.

Sometimes, being with Beau has had the opposite effect. While by day he radiates a spirit of harmlessness, by night he takes on a different aura. His coat is black, and his teeth are ivory white, and his customary silence can be unnerving.

I have several recollections of night walks with him that turned creepy. Our nightly walk is a wind-down from the day -- a chance for him to expel some energy, and anything else he feels the need to expel, before bedding down for the big sleep. Typically I take him out on the retractable leash at night, and he stretches it out to its full 26-foot length as he patrols the yards and alleys of Merriam Park.

His curiosity is what makes him creepy. He has always been hypnotized by red brake lights on cars, and one time, he stared a car into its garage. When the driver emerged, all she could make out in the dark was a dark dog and a dark-clad stranger, both standing stock still and looking directly at her. All I was doing was waiting for Beau to snap out of his trance. But I could tell from the look on her face that she thought we

were really bad news, as she scurried to her house, keys in hand.

Evangeline by the River

Poodlevania is treacherous in winter because of the ice along the cliffs. But I love to see Beauregard run in the snow there, pausing to dip his beak in it -- for voles, I think. When the falling snow lands on his black coat, and there is a hint of movement in the air, he is dazzling to look upon.

And there is another reason.

I should preface this by saying I am a very happy married man. I hope I have conveyed that in these pages. But when I go to this place I sometimes see a woman who has a thrilling effect on me. She emanates vibes that scream how intelligent, high-minded, and kind she is. I have a Platonic crush on her.

Everyone who visits Poodlevania knows Evangeline is the expert on dogs there. It isn't easy remembering the names of a hundred dogs, and something interesting about all the people the dogs drag down there. But I have seen Evangeline do it.

She knows who has what, and she has an unerring instinct for diagnosing their virtues and shortcomings. She identified Beau's gig in life almost immediately, that he was a rogue clown. No sooner did she lay eyes on his peculiar beauty than he burst into laughter.

Evangeline is pretty. But better than that, she is gracious. One time I saw her walking with three gawky men. They were hopelessly single, and wore their loneliness on their parka sleeves. How exciting it must be for them to walk alongside her, pretending to be interested in dogs, indeed, on

the very verge of adopting one -- just to trail her aura for a few frozen moments.

Can I get myself out of trouble with Rachel by saying Evangeline reminds me of her? Probably not, because Evangeline is a dogperson through and through, and Rachel, bless her, is not really one. Besides not being allergic to dogs, Evangeline has built her life around them. She bought a house adjacent to Poodlevania so she could walk *her* dog Tea (pronounced Tee-a) there.

A few times I have sort of walked alongside her, while her dog and my dog played and sniffed one another out, and she and I did much the same thing.

One day I made the calculated decision to go to the river not once but twice, at 8 am and noon. I just wanted to be there, I told myself. The winter was beautiful. But I was also thinking of Evangeline, and sure enough our cars -- two identical old bronze badge models, Chevy Celebrity and Pontiac Sunbird station wagons -- arrived simultaneously. You could sense the gods moving us around like Tonka toys.

All we did was walk along, very respectfully. I had never spoken to her before, one to one. I talked, using the dogs as a conversation starter. Evangeline said she was a poet and an artist, raised by missionary parents in Madagascar, and like Daniele a sufferer of depression. When she told me she was a vegan, because it was her way of honoring animals, I relaxed. The exoticism of vegetarianism put her outside the realm of reality for me. But then she lured me back in, by telling me that, while she doesn't eat meat, she fries up giant steaks and chops for her German shepherd to eat.

And so we walked and talked, while the dogs danced circles around us. I was schoolboy happy. My father once told me this about himself: "All I have ever wanted from life was

for beautiful women to laugh at my jokes.” I know what he meant.

When I mentioned my momentary infatuation to Mari-Lou, a friend, she was alarmed. “Tell your wife!” she told me. “Without delay!”

It hadn’t occurred to me that I had done anything wrong, just that I allowed myself to have a giddy feeling. But that night I did tell Rachel about the walk, although I downplayed the golden hair and sky-blue eyes part. And you know, Rachel didn’t care. She wished it was more OK to have friends of the opposite sex. She knew exactly the feeling I had had, and thought it was OK.

Like eagles, Rachel and I are mated for life.

The next day, going down to the river again with Beau, no one was there. We walked for miles on the crunchy snow. By the river’s edge I came to one of Evangeline’s snow sculptures, which I had only glimpsed from afar before, and which I had assumed was a crude sort of snowman.

But it wasn’t. It was the head and shoulders of a snow queen. You could tell the head had come off, but someone had set it back on its shoulders. Though some snow had melted, you could make out the indentations of her cheekbones and eyes, and her head was turned in a silent, sad way, like one of those odd collages of de Chirico, as if something ancient and important were drifting by in the cold Mississippi water.

The best part of Poodlevania is being with the dogpeople. By dogpeople or dogpersons I don’t mean just people with dogs. The people I met at obedience school, completely mystified by the little animals yapping at their heels, met that basic definition. But true dogpeople, like Brigitte’s daughter Lorraine, who ran the House of Poodles, and suffered their insanity twenty-four hours a day, go way

beyond that. They are humans who at some point in their lives take an irrevocable sidetrack: they take their life and break it, the way you break bread, and hand a piece of it to their dogs.

There is a pleasant easiness when you are with dogpeople. The example of the dogs is always there in all its muzzy genuineness. They are funny, athletic, obnoxious, curious. They are like comical dumb people, a Punch and Judy show of wagging tails and flashing teeth. Having them nearby drains your pretensions away.

Like Evangeline buying a house near Poodlevania, building a life around her dog walks. Or Noelle wanting the happiness of her dogs Cobi and Sonja so much that she allows Beauregard into the yard to play chase with them any time he likes, with all the damage that implies to her garden and landscaping.

Noelle loves flowers, but she shrugs. "It's only grass," she says.

Or my neighbor Walter and his two fantastic Samoyeds, the ferocious Bear and angel-haired Sophie. At night he unties them and runs with them himself across the ball fields. I think Walter might be something fairly formal by day – a lawyer or city administrator or something. But by night, when the moon comes out, it is clear Walter has dog in his blood.

I myself, when I had my pointer many years ago, and I took a part time job as night watchman so I would not have to leave her all day long, was a dogperson. Twenty-five years, I denied my nature. Now I am remembering it, feeling it coming back.

Mere dog owners freak out when their dogs do things that are horrible in human terms, like fight, or bully one another, or simply sniff one another out. Dogpeople watch the

proceedings with a calm and happy demeanor. They will tell you, if you are alarmed, that they have seen a thousand fights, and no ever died in them. Scrapping is what dogs do, so let them do it.

And when true dogpeople, who have sorted out the wild issues of territoriality, protectiveness, and even dominance, gather together, they have an easiness among them that is like the comfortable society of dogs. They don't show off. They don't push themselves on one another. Nor do they shy away. It feels nice, even to dogpeople still roaming the precincts of dog hell, as I do, trying to sort out their pets' behaviors. Dogpeople won't hold your dog's peculiarities against it, or against you. I felt I had finally located the tribe I were born into.

It was Evangeline who introduced me to Bob, a curious gentleman with a fantastic bloodhound named Sherlock.

Most of the dogs down in Poodlevania are midsized -- Labs, goldens, border collies, and mutts in the 35-70 pound range. But every day Bob would show up with Sherlock, a 180-pound miracle of sinew and sorrow. He was truly magnificent, with his long red flanks of defined musculature, and a face reflecting a thousand defeats. In my life I never saw a more dignified, impressive, lovely-hearted creature. Bob claimed there was not a better nose in the Americas.

I'm not sure what Bob does for a living. He talks like a very agitated lawyer, and indeed, he was active in defending Poodlevania against a highway project that threatened to marginalize the entire area. Many people in the neighborhood were up in arms over this construction project, but Bob expressed contempt for their "little old lady in tennis shoes" approach to protest -- wait till it was too late to do anything, and then man a picket line.

Bob's idea was more subversive, and more rooted in the reality of Poodlevania, or Camp Coldwater as he called it.

The area was one of the first two or three settlements in the state of Minnesota, essentially the back yard of the fort set up in the 1820s to oversee commerce along the frontier. But the people squatting along the banks of Mississippi just above the fort were not the kind of yeoman settlers our history books describe. They were rum-runners, gun-runners, pirates, and half-breeds -- not all what we think of as Minnesotans.

Bob and Sherlock led Beau and me through the hidden parts of Camp Coldwater, showing us ruined foundations and rusted implements from the period. His plan was to unleash Sherlock's space-age nose on the area and have him come up with Indian relics. White people's bones had no statutory power to stop highway construction, but an Indian burial ground was a force to contend with -- it brought the feds into the controversy, and that seldom meshes with the state's interest, which involved lots of bulldozers.

Bob and Sherlock were such a pair. Bob was small and crafty and excited by ideas and history. Sherlock was a bodhisattva of the highest, highest order, chained like Atlas to a cosmic burden that only he could bear, his nose the olfactory equivalent of a Cray supercomputer. I believed he could smell and distinguish subatomic particles.

If there were Indian bones in Poodlevania, however deep they were buried, Sherlock would unearth them, and Poodlevania would be saved.

Docents

All spring Daniele, 13 and going on 14, had been pining for a volunteer job at Como Zoo. It was the perfect summer job for her because it involved animals -- showing lizards, lagomorphs, turtles, tarantulas, exotic birds and other

creatures to zoo visitors and explaining things about their lifestyles in the wild.

But it was a program that many kids coveted, and not every kid got into. We had a long history of Daniele not making the final cut in her applications, not making a drama team, and Rachel and I were careful not to get her hopes up too high. Though she worked hard on this, she did so in her usual uncompromising manner. She refused, for instance, to dress in any way but her usual punky way, with ripped jeans and Crayola-red dye job. We could easily imagine her missing the cut again, this time because she did not seem “appropriate” for a teaching role.

But she wanted it bad. Indeed, she talked about making an academic career of it, going on from the zoo docent job to taking courses at the big zoo in Apple Valley. She read every book she could find on wildlife, ecology, and animal care. She had her whole life mapped out, including a driver’s license and car to transport her to the big zoo every day – all based on this first job. She had either prepared herself brilliantly, or set herself up for a catastrophic fall.

My job – what was my job? To protect her from failing, which seemed likely? Or to help her to succeed – which, if she failed, only made the failure more of a failure?

So I dithered, right up to the day she set off to take her docent examination. She would first go to her karate practice with her friend Betsy, and then the two kids would go with Betsy’s mom to the zoo and take the test.

After she was gone, I began to panic. I pictured her in the oral examination, blowing it. Instead of showing off her knowledge, she would go into her paranoid, phobic mode, shut down, and glower at the judges, giving cursory, hostile answers to their questions. And she would come home suicidal.

I was tearing my hair out, figuratively. How could I help Daniele present herself to the judges in a winning way?

Then it hit me. I grabbed Beau, we both jumped in the back of the Celebrity, and we raced down to the karate parlor. I peered in the window, and there she was, exchanging kicks and chops with Betsy. I motioned to her to come out.

I was almost in tears. I took her by the shoulders. “Daniele,” I told her. “I figured out how you can do well today.”

“What is it?” She seemed touched that I had tracked her down, and so much more serene than me.

“When you talk to the judges, let them know how you feel about animals. Let it shine out of you, the fun you have with Beau and your bunnies, the beauty you see in them.

“I swear, Daniele, that’s what this is all about. They want someone who can communicate the kind of love I know you feel. Make it plain – let them see it.”

By this time, tears were definitely pooling. “Let them see your joy,” I croaked. “It’s what it’s all about.” And I hugged her and jumped back in the car. And you know what, she did great. Betsy, too.

Pack of woes

When Beau was nearly a year old, fully grown physically, but mentally still quite young, he was as much a mystery to me as ever, with his shifting moods and personalities, a growling fiend one moment, a lovable clown the next.

We took the same walks through the neighborhood as ever, but there were many changes among the dog and human population.

Do you remember Reggie, the fox terrier? His family decided they could not keep him, that their house was just too busy with four kids to do justice to a little dog. So they handed him over to another family, a block away. Freaked out by his transfer, Reggie did poorly in the new household. He chewed the wrong things, he messed in the wrong places, and worst of all, he bit someone. He had had none of these problems at his original home, but they were deemed intolerable by his new family, who had him destroyed.

Harley and Buster, the two dogs from the duplex who climbed the high snow to stand on top of their garage, were split up, when Harley and her master Brent moved a few doors away.

Barney, the gouty beagle whose owner ushered him away from Beau, disappeared. I never found out what his precise fate was, but I imagine he got sick and died.

Ginger, the funny boxer Beau loved to shimmy with, never became the breeding dog her family planned. She became quite broad in the back. She was still cute, but she was no longer handsome. Worse, she developed a malignant tumor on her back, which left a divot of scar when it was removed. She was spayed, and is now just a house dog like Beau.

Some dog stories took a strange turn. Cobi and Sonja, Noelle's dogs and Beau's best friends, cooled toward him after his neutering. Whatever it was that he had before the surgery, he no longer had after it. Sonja became positively hostile to him, preventing him from entering the house. Noelle and I remained friends, but with the dog thing no longer working, we saw less of each other.

Mango, the golden who seemed to share the same spark as Beau, seemed to lose his spark after he was neutered. Neutering seems to take a heavy toll on golden retrievers.

Basil, the other golden in our neighborhood, continued to exhibit his customary personality deficit.

I now, belatedly, came to understand why so many dog owners, seeing Beau down the street, hurried their dogs away. It was not because they were party poopers, but because their dogs were like Beau – they were willing to fight to establish dominance. They had been embarrassed too many times, and did not want to be embarrassed again.

But the saddest story involved the two Samoyeds, Sophie and Bear. Both were angels and very childlike, but Bear, age 8, looked quite ferocious. And he was said to be part wolf. One day he got off his rope and chased the neighbor's cat. Both Walter, his owner, and the cat's owner looked on in horror as bear caught the cat and tore it apart and ate it. Walter cried out to stop, until it was too late. Bear never responded to the command, and thereby sealed his fate.

"I couldn't have a dog that would not respond," Walter told me. "So I took him down to the hospital, and we sat, and I fed him his favorite food, raw beef, and I stroked him and sang to him as the injection went in, and he lay down and died."

"That must have been so hard," I told him.

He nodded, tearing up again. "I blubbered for days."

A statelier death awaited the noble Sherlock, the bloodhound. One day, following a week of 95-degree days, Bob found him in his bed, the mighty heart stilled by the heat.

Poor Bob – he loved that dog like a bride. His solemn dutifulness was the perfect counterbalance to Bob's inventiveness and wit. I tried looking up his name in the phone book, to tell Bob how sorry I was, and how great Sherlock was. But Bob is one of those American originals who don't have a phone. Bob, I'm so sorry.

And Poodlevania -- what about the country of dogs? Throughout 1999, the park was a staging area for a lengthy protest by anarchists and Indians, who sought to keep out a four-lane highway that had been agreed in a long-term plan upon 30 years earlier.

For months the police let the protesters camp out and say their say, as they filed petitions, talked to the press, and plotted counter strategies. Then, on a cold fall day, the axe fell. I drove with Beau down to the river and pulled over to see the goings-on. I could see over a hundred patrol cars parked on an open field. Kids who had been maintaining a weeks-long vigil in some old oak trees were being pulled down. Teepees and tents were smashed and dragged away.

This all happened a few months before the famous Seattle riots, but they had much the same flavor -- inarticulate complaints from the powerless about an indifferent plan by the powerful. It ended as all these things do, in tatters.

Now the area is brimming with construction. Crushers, rollers, dump trucks and worse are recountouring the area. A tiny walkway has been constructed for dog people to escort their dogs through the war zone and down to the paths. We can't walk a hundred feet without coming upon another artifact of the long siege -- a scrap of soiled blanket, or a single sneaker. Beau sniffs at the item, and we move on.

Beauregard is four years old now. And he and I live as we always have, savoring our hours by the river and our encounters with dogs and dogpeople. On a perfect day the wind passes through his coat like a breathing hand, and Beau pants with open mouth, gazing out without focus at the world he dwells in and loves.

And he is so beautiful then, and we are so together for members of different animal groups. Me knowing things, and looking out for us, him guessing every moment almost right.

