

Lessons from a dog



I arrived at certain highlights early in my adult life, while others have come to a lot later. For example, I waited a long time to get legally married (my mother warned me not to rush into marriage, and I listened to her advice). Along with a fantastic woman to share my life, for the first time I welcomed a dog to my home (see photos at right). I've always loved dogs, but never thought of a long-term relationship (just like other parts of my life). But now, Bear had all four paws in the door ? and on the sofa, and on the bed, and all over the kitchen.

Bear is mostly border collie; the one part that isn't in his brain. I'm not saying that Bear is a little thick; I'm saying that he's a lot thick. I saw a border collie on a science show that has learned over 1,000 words and dozens of tricks. Bear's vocabulary is more limited; almost all the words he recognizes deal with food. I had to do quite a bit of research to find him the ultimate pet nutrition. And that's another thing! I never thought I'd be so interested in what I'm feeding I'm such as where his food comes from, the weight, the nutrients... the list goes on. While finding the right food for him came from searching many websites, such as pet food exposed and many more so I could pick the right one. All for him to just want what I'm eating anyway. And he has never absorbed the meaning of "no", or even "NO!"

But Bear had his skills. He was a first-class Frisbee dog. He loved to run flat out for 10 or 20 meters and jump to snatch the Frisbee out of the air, just like in the dog food commercials. He also liked catching ropes, balls, or sticks. He could fly through the air with the greatest of ease, grab his target, land gracefully, then bring it back to me just like a retriever, tail wagging, eager for the next toss. And he could keep at it until your arm wore out.

Notice the change of tense in the last paragraph. Bear is now 15. In other words, he's an old man. He's grouchy, and barks irritably at every other dog (and most people), for no reason whatsoever. In the evenings, he sometimes seems dazed and confused.

And he's really slowed down physically. He has hip problems, and can no longer play Frisbee. He can't even hop up on things anymore. I have to use a sling to hoist him into my car when we go for a walk. And his walks are no longer measured in kilometers, but in meters ? and most often, in only double digits.

But now I'm not exactly pushing him to increase his distance. I've slowed down a lot myself. As Leonard Cohen puts it, "I ache in

the places where I used to play". In recent years, I've added a lot of ballast. Now I can get winded jumping to a conclusion. But the title of this article is "Lessons from a dog". In human equivalents, Bear is in his 90s. But every afternoon, as the sun gets lower in the sky, he gets a little antsy. Then I look for my car keys, and he begins to bark, looking at me to ask "Why aren't you moving faster?"

So we get in the car and head for his favourite trails. When I stop, he's out of the car like a shot. Next, he's sniffing every plant and checking if there have been other dogs around whose scent he needs to cover with a good pee.

After a while ? a shorter and shorter while - he's trotting back to the car. Actually, "trotting" is the wrong word. He's walking slowly. Sometimes he's close to limping.

But he doesn't want to get back into the car. There's one more ritual to finish. I pull out a rope toy; he nods his head, waiting. And I throw it. Suddenly he's running again. Not trotting ? running.

Mind you, it's only a few metres. He no longer catches the rope in mid-air, but waits for it to fall to the ground. And now, the number of throws is down to two or three. After that, he grips the rope and plays tug for a moment, until he gets lifted back into the car.



Nevertheless, the point is made. He has defied the vet, who told him he was too old now for Fetch. He has remained a border collie. No doubt, he will pay for it. There will come a day ? a lot sooner than I want ? when even the walk will be too much. And then he'll take his leave.

I'm sure there are many people who would give me a stern lecture about not following vet's orders. They would say, rightly, that I am being way too sentimental. But Bear still seems to want to remember the dog that he was. He doesn't want to admit he's quite old and frail.

Bear likely won't be around in a year or two. But he's telling me now about what's important in one's senior years. It's the same message that the great poet Tennyson put in the mouth of Ulysses, the aging Greek hero of the Trojan wars:

"We are not now that strength which in old days

Moved earth and heaven. That which we are, we are,

Made weak by time and fate - but strong in will

To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."

Bear isn't yielding. That's his lesson ? and I need to remember it for myself.

-Tony Pearson