

A Tribute to a Fine Friend

Unconditional Love

It occurred to me this past December that unconditional love is a paradox. It is hard to explain because as soon as you say the love is 'unconditional' you have put a condition on it already.

So, there I was house sitting in Palo Alto taking care of my favorite dog Rocky who is a 6-year old boxer that I call a puppy. He is a totally innocent puppy who has these uncharacteristic habits that endear him to me regularly. The times when we walk and he will stop-statue still on all fours-legs ramrod stiff, head cocked and astoundingly alert, laser staring straight ahead. You would think he was stalking Jack the Ripper. Instead he is on the lookout for other puppies as that is his delight. The highlight of our walks are when he cites another puppy, be it friendly looking or not, and he takes that stalking stance as he anticipates meeting and I dare say licking them.(as dogs do in all their private parts). It is at these times that I have to say right out loud, "he's friendly" as the folks walking the other dog invariably stop dead in their tracks, scared to death to make a move, any move. As their fear somewhat subsides, they smile slightly and explain – "he's so serious!" To which I would like to answer "if you only knew the half of it. He is a total idiot and it is a mere love fest he is anticipating not the crunching of your and/or your pet's leg". Soon as they are within licking distance, Rocky's little tail will start to wag along with his hind parts (those I call his 'biscuits') and he will begin to spin around in delight. Then we all settle in for a smile fest as his moves are too cute to ignore and the love he inspires with these antics is irresistible.

So, back to the unconditional love part. As I sleep, I let him up on the bed on top of the comforter where he slows down to rest and, indeed, to the consternation of his owner, sleep with me. He has to settle in and part of his body-usually his back and his head – have to be in touch with my body parts – any of mine will do and he is ready to settle in for the night. He is completely at ease and takes up 3/4's of the queen-sized bed we are in and I get a mere 2 inches if I am lucky and when or if I get up to go to the potty, that 2 inches is reduced to 1 and ½ - on a good night.

So, we are settle in, me on my two inches under the covers and comforter and Rocky (now a lump you could not move if you tried to) next to me. I start a bit of reading and realize that I am suddenly very sleepy. I attribute this to the peacefulness he exudes and the lump of puppy love next to me that lulls me into a fine sleepy state (this regardless of the hour and if I was sleepy or not when I got into bed.). This night it is a mere 8:30 p.m. and I am ready – actually I am dosing off and well onto the dreamland express. Then comes the roaring sound of Rocky as he is snoring very loudly as he settles into doggy dreamland. Not to mention his body twitching as he is into dreaming, these I can usually incorporate into my dream sleep, but that snoring is – well a lot. His little scrunched up nose makes the breathing quite a feat and usually I keep his head up or to the side or however it appears comfortable so his breathing is quiet enough not to wake me at all. But this night he is into a mighty roar and moving his head, adjusting the covers does nothing to dissipate it. I am a bit cranky as I try to sleep and again wake to the roar. You know how we are when we are bothered, at least I am when inconvenience of this sort occurs. I become my 6 year-old self and out of my mouth comes the whine. I mean t-h-e whine. And I pleadingly say, "Rocky you are snoring..." whining right along. No response. Again I whine a bit louder and pleadingly, "raaa-cccckkeee, stop snoring!" At about the third round of this wail, I look and he is slowly and sleepily raising his head, eyes half open as he is trying to focus on this whining sound. What and where is it coming from?

He looks just like a person as he squints upward and sort of focuses in my direction. I myself am peering at him in a rather whiney complaining manner, begging with the look, "Stop snoring Rocky pulleese?" At this exact moment he seems to get it, and I think "good, now he will settle himself differently and more quietly and I can get a good night's sleep."

At this juncture, I feel the bed move as he plops his head down as it appears to me in resolve to be quieter. But wait, the plop has just moved up a bit toward me and slowly he is inching his body closer to me and higher up near my shoulder (I am now on my back and wide awake). But here he comes close, and I am thinking, "What is he doing? Mostly, he never puts his face near mine; usually it is his back or side that is next to me with his head at or facing the bottom of the bed or on my feet. That is his usual posture. But no, he has realized that something must be done. The whine must mean that I need something and it is from him that the cure must come. I don't think he knows or cares what exactly I am whining about but here he is moving forward along the top of the comforter coming to rest his little head snuggly in the crook of my arm. Oh no, I think here he is – he has decided to forgive me for the sleep interference, and he wants attention now. But that is not what happens. No play moves ensue. He merely buries his head into my shoulder, blinks his baby browns at me as if to say, "there it will be alright sweetheart," and then the piece de resistance, he takes and places his paw, the

little white part at the end lifting up, and he lays it gently down on my forearm. There now, we are alright aren't we? Down his head nestles and he is back to sleep again and back to snoring.

No whine left in me...My heart is spread wide open. How can I need more than this? All the love the little fella has is laid right there before me. If I needed something he gave what he had, the love and caring for me that he knows I share for him. I smile with tears in my eyes and settle into the bed hoping that within some hours I will sleep forgetting the snoring and not desiring to move any part of my body throughout the rest of the night. And I think, "That my dear is unconditional love in action".

More Rocky

I had the very good fortune to babysit for a sweet boxer puppy. Well, Rocky (that's his name) was not a puppy by this time, more like middle-aged moving steadily along to old age but his personality was certainly, "stuck" in puppyhood. He had that way about him which so reminded one of a child- a wee one; learning about the world and experiencing all things new and exciting.

When we first met, I was greeted with all his idiosyncrasies (and there were many): spinning in place, howling to some tune only he was aware of, eating his own poop while outside to deliver it, grabbing any and all food as much as he could, stretching upside down on the family room's leather sofa to nap, and the list goes on. Actually, in many ways, Rocky ran the household and everyone in it. You were either dealing with something he was doing or destroying or telling someone all about your dealing with something . . . furniture, food, people, landscaping, household goods and services were all occasionally to be 'enhanced' to accommodate his desires, needs, or adventures.

Each member of the family, be that primary, secondary, and extended, along with guests and visitors were exposed to a dose of Rocky in one way or another. He was intrinsic to each and every relationship and every occasion at the homestead necessitated the customary inclusion of him and his "creative" behavior- whether warranted or not. It goes without saying that he spiced up any happening and was the highlight of many conversations and much of the goings on of everyday life.

As I spent years with the family caring for this wonderful pal, I got to take him out into the neighborhood more and more on walks to the parks, school and outings to the beach, library, and post office and was able to experience first-hand his stunning ability to brighten everyone's day and alter their living experiences for the better. Indeed, tripping along with him I became a bit obsolete as neighbors would invariably rush up to greet him, "Hi there Rocky, Oh, there's Rocky, isn't that Rocky?" and stare at me like we'd never met before. He was the idol, the rock star, I was the back-up, "bit" player. Along life's path we travelled together, he leading the way and me hoping to somehow keep my sanity and keep up with him. Back to the learning part. From Rocky I learned innumerable things about how to get along and enjoy life here on planet earth. I learned several key principles from our interchanges that I share herein offering them as a way to honor my pal Rocky and all that he brought to me and to everyone who had the good fortune to participate in a life marked by the joy he invoked.

- Always rely on your own good instincts and spread those around regardless of how others appear to accept them. If the neighbors are reticent to come to you, come to them.
- If you find others to be larger than you – more accomplished or better organized, or better looking-act as if these observations are delivered in a foreign language and therefore cannot possibly have any meaning for you.
- Do not react when you find yourself in a situation not to your liking, merely recreate the scene and move on. So what if folks are pointing at you and/or backing away slowly, you are on a mission and you must remain poised to handle praises that are sure to come.
- When you are hungry, who needs manners? If your host is slow to arrange the appetizers, arrange them yourself, at least let everyone know you are starving so they can move themselves to help out and offer you some food.
- If afraid, holler or howl. It is better to acknowledge fear, be it of the dark, or a new person or situation, things always get helped if you first howl out your trepidation. Usually someone will immediately reach out to comfort you and you can then gain the strength and confidence to make a move to a safer environment.
- Sometimes you meet someone who is not so likeable. Instead of getting carried away with yourself, don't let on that they are a dunce, just move along like you have not even seen them. Things will be a lot smoother once you remain on your own wavelength and disconnect theirs.
- When in love, be in love. If you see someone that you always enjoy let them know this outrageously. Be sure to twirl around them, act excited to hear and see them, pay attention to their every move it lightens up the atmosphere and paves the way for friendly responses, hugs and kisses, and general good will toward all.

- People often do not give of themselves freely and it is hard to know how they feel about you. Rather than worry about this, or obsess over fixing yourself, merely faun all over everyone and they will change their opinion about you quickly enough. That, or they will move away from you and leave your space alone and peaceful.
- When folks laugh at you, don't be offended. Laughing is a way of smoothing the way for the connection that is sure to come. Take it as a compliment and continue to pursue life as you see fit.
- Sometimes we are faced with a challenge. Sometimes we hurt or have an injury. At such times, be mindful that everyone is focused on your well-being. Know that all will work out and find something good to eat or someone to play with which will help alleviate any discomfort you may be experiencing.
- As we age time has a way of slowing us down and thwarting our favorite past times. Concentrate on the people and things we enjoy, and make these the highlight of your experience. If walking is slower, and there are times you simply cannot do any more, make that a time of rest and relaxation so fully apparent everyone around you will stop what they are doing and slow down to a pace you can handle. Don't worry about these changes, but enjoy the sweet moments to the hilt as they arrive.

These are a few of the truisms that I have gleaned from my association with one of life's masters, Rocky my boxer pal. Most of the lessons learned bring up such fond memories that they are difficult to divulge as merely life lessons. Truly, time spent with Rocky was a blessing—a creative, interactive adventure in life bringing the goodness of human nature to the forefront enabling those special, heartfelt feelings to bubble up and spill over — the ones that grow love.

The Final Lesson

I'll end this short explanation with a bit of a sad memory of Rocky's departure. As an older boxer, Rocky was failing with skin lesions, rickety legs, tired movements, and the shakes. It appeared that a stroke type occurrence had also happened, and he could not walk as well anymore as he had always loved to do. Out we went one day toward the park area where he would regularly meet his buddies. He was really trying to enter the park (near the high school) but I could not risk the length of the trail to get us there. I did not think I could carry him as it appeared likely that he would not be able to handle going there and walking back home. It is one of the major regrets that I carry to this day. One of his last days when he so wanted to see his friends, and experience the free atmosphere and bonding he enjoyed so. I should have gone there with him. I saw the pleading in his eyes and it was the last time he would be with me. I should have gone there. I thought I was saving him from pain, but moving to the next world, isn't it better to go with the experience you cherish most, even if it is a little bit hard?

The next day, it was time to take Rocky to the vet for a peaceful exit. Discussions had ensued and all were in agreement that he should not have to suffer any further. I delivered him with a friend to the facility, and the vet kindly gave us a room together. He placed a blanket on the floor of the room, and let us know to take the time we needed. Rocky was wrapped around my leg, looking at me, a scrappy little pup all grey in color and nervous. I rubbed him and held him as I cried knowing in a few moments he would not be the energy that I held now and his life would be over. He looked at me with brown eyes, now faded, but with the total trust that comes from a loving bond, and he knew as I did that our friendship would go on in each of our hearts.

Prayers said, my friend and I called the vet. Rocky was now curled on the blanket looking much smaller and grey in color now, not his usual size, subdued and resting, I petted him as I expressed my love and appreciation for who and what he was and had been in my life and in the lives of all who knew and loved him. Peacefully, medications were provided and within a few minutes his spirit was gone. The vet said we could stay as long as we needed to and we thanked him for his kind assistance and professional manner during this hard task.

Once he left, we had the chance to look back at Rocky and ready to say a final goodbye. Lo, and behold the Rocky we had with us a few minutes ago was gone. In place of the aged, suffering Rocky we viewed a completely different specimen. Stretched out on the blanket was a Rocky in all his glory and prime, rich light-medium brown in color, legs stretched out in front and in back, and head held erect and glorious. We had to blink and look again. It appeared to be a show dog on the blanket, all large and long, all lesions gone, no grey color, and a miracle really. Trying to catch my breath I thought, well he certainly is out of pain now and onto the higher angelic realms where light and life coexist and all glory is meted out in abundant sums. I cannot explain this shift only that it occurred where Rocky's miraculous spirit was lifted from its place on earth to the heavenly realm where he belonged and his body was transformed in the process. Out of the ashes, literally, came a sight which set me back, but at the same time, affirmed my overriding belief that a special living being had been here on earth helping all whose path crossed his and now had returned to the heavenly creator where he would live on in God's beauty and majesty. The final lesson I learned from Rocky's good-bye was the one that I call the revelation of the

resurrection. Knowing death is a part of our life, it is hard to trust that we will meet an end that brings good consequences. Watching Rocky depart and the way he appeared thereafter, seemed impossible to me. How could his body change so suddenly, and how did he look miraculously perfect, whole, complete, not injured in any way? I can only consider that death, when we leave our body-inevitably releases our spirit which returns to its glory, to a spirit that encompasses a rebirth-a return to our youthful state which renders us perfect as we let go our earth-bound consequences and move to a world of peace, goodness, and renewed blessedness.

Thank you Rocky, my friend, for your final farewell and for the reminder that we love and experience while here and we return to greatness when we depart.

Cliff Notes of Rocky Philosophy:

- Rocky was always seeking love
- Rocky was fair with everyone (except the cat Puck!)
- Rocky was accepting
- Rocky recognized and accepted true kindness from people
- Rocky had his own (simple) game plan
- Everything new was an adventure
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- When afraid, ask for reassurance and accept it when it comes
- Relationship is a building process
- Innocence is especially attractive
- Rocky was always Rocky
- Rocky's childlike spirit lit up a room with smiles and laughter
- Rocky's talent (singing) was not to be denied
- Loyalty is overrated, love should be spread around like peanut butter
- Rocky taught me to always expect the good! No matter what or who appears
- Rocky taught me that appearances do not an attraction make