

Control

While I'm getting over a minor illness this week, my dog Murphy has stood by ready to care for me with her version of affection and pranks she thinks she can get away with. Murphy believes in overcooking her humor and overdoing its delivery. I can relate to that. She's an apt companion on my road to the absurd. Her behaviors can be remarkably similar to mine, but I'm told it's impossible for the two of us to be related by blood. Still, like-minds seek each other out. And one smart-ass can always find another, even with his eyes closed.

As much fun as Murphy can be, she is also a source of frustration when she won't stop doing things that annoy me.

There is a reason why puppies are cute, I've decided. It's the last card they have to play just before you've had enough of their antics and are ready to send them back to the factory. Then again, there is nothing so sincere as a dog who knows you're sick and wants to help.

Murphy and my wife have different views on my recovery plan. I'll let you guess which one doesn't think a regimen of lying around the house is all that necessary. The other never needs an

excuse to have a good time. The dog's reaction to my taking station on the couch much of the day is pure ecstasy, to know I will join her on the furniture she considers her playground. I don't mind sharing the space with Murphy, but I've insisted on a No-Fly Zone. No jumping through the air and rolling right over me down the length of the couch. She runs it with three somersaults before executing a triple axel at the end with both her feet in the air. Then she flops off head first on to the floor. I'm speaking of Murphy, by the way, not my wife.

For this particular travail, Murphy has been more attentive than my wife, who describes my infirmity to friends as quite minor and deserving of little notice. But I can't escape the dog's notice.

For the times Murphy hasn't found me on the living room couch, she's been happy to stop by and visit me in my little office at the back of the house. She sorts through the wastepaper basket for a failed story to chew on. She noses through the zillion wires under my writing table that connect computers, radios, Yamaha keyboard and audio cables. She bites down on her favorite wires, as though her teeth could sense Eric Clapton shivering his notes onstage at Glastonbury. When she gets bored, she leans against my knee until I notice her. I'm speaking of Murphy, by the way, not my wife.

She cannot figure out what happened to the shoe laces she so loved to chew. They disappeared with the warm weather when I switched from shoes to sandals.

When she comes upon me her first thought is of food. That's because she's never seen me without it. I'm a grazer and

am always nibbling on something. It's probably a bad habit, but I'm convinced if I eat more often I'll have more opportunities to substitute nutritious snacks for the sugary ones. And once in a while I do. Murphy doesn't care about nutrition and will eat anything I happen to be carrying as she follows me around the house. I wish she'd stop begging.

But when she behaves perfectly, I begin to wonder if dogs are sincere. I tell my doubting wife a dog's actions may appear to us as affection, but are no more than the animal's instinct to find out where the food is and how to get at it. I suppose their apparent devotion is no more than a survival technique honed by evolution to help the dog ingratiate itself to a human benefactor. But I mistakenly suppose figuring out her psychology is one way of learning to control her.

While Murphy does not have a sentient mind that truly cares about my well being, I would be cold and heartless to not accept her desire to be with me as at least a tiny bit of evidence of her affection for me. She is a dog, not a human, but to treat what appears to be her devotion as no more than a primal desire to guarantee a food supply would speak more to my lack of soul than to any advantage I might have from my intellect.

Owning a dog forces one into a metaphysical discussion of why we relate so well to them. OK, not everyone is forced into such a dialog, but there are those of us who can't let a bumble bee fly by without facing the temptation to dissect its psyche. Especially if we want to control it.

We spend so much time in life trying to control things and we don't spend enough learning to see anything beyond what's apparent or logical. Or to believe in more than what our feeble minds can comprehend. Not all of what we experience can be measured by a ruler ... or a dollar sign. There are dimensions of the heart we cannot explain. They are not measured, they are heard. They do not explain, they simply witness.

I can't tell you why I have befriended a small animal whose best skills are often useless today. I no longer need a Springer to hunt in the autumn fields or depend upon a canine companion to protect me. And I have rescued more dogs than have rescued me.

When I become upset with Murphy because she's still a puppy and won't stop biting my toe, chewing her way through the bottom row of books on my shelves or scaring the hell out of me by crawling under the curtain into my morning shower, I wish I'd remember my job is not always to control her. But rather I should be patient with her, let her grow up and love her. I'm speaking of Murphy, by the way, but my wife probably said the same about me.

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