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Life and Death and everything in between

By Ellen Kohn

Sharing our lives with dogs is one of the greatest gifts enjoyed by mankind. Like multicolored threads of a beautiful shawl, the bond between dog and man is woven into the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual fabric of our lives.

From joy and laughter to frustration and sadness, our dogs present the gamut of emotions to us on one giant silver platter. Each dog offers his unique personality to teach us what we need to learn, at the exact moment we are ready for the lesson.

We enter into an agreement, a spiritual contract, with each dog that comes across the threshold of our lives. These contracts can come in the form of a lesson, or a new phase in our lives that unfolds as we interact with our dogs. Some dogs bring us joy and bliss when we most need it; others teach us about relationships and emotions, showing us how to overcome some of our challenges through simple actions and neutrality. They appear in our lives with perfect timing to help us work through these lessons, enlightening us with their humor, wisdom and devotion.

Life Lessons

Unconditional love

Our dogs are amazing teachers of unconditional love. The flipside of loving us in spite of our faults is forgiveness. These two concepts, paired together, help us realize that our dogs understand our good intentions, giving us permission to be human. When we make mistakes, they let us know that we can move on, and that they love us all the same. Balancing unconditional love and forgiveness can be a human foible.

We know how to give and receive love, especially with our dogs, but forgiveness can be troublesome. We tend to take ourselves very seriously and our feelings are easily hurt. When this happens, we may hold on to our anger, storing it in some hidden place within.

But working with our dogs, we notice that when they growl, bare their teeth and get angry, they are done. We notice they don't hang on to a grudge, but move on to the next fun, pleasurable emotion as soon as possible.

Gratitude

The universe loves gratitude and it's quite a simple philosophy. When we acknowledge some form of daily gratitude, we send out a vibration into the world that says "thank you." In turn, our gratitude reaches others, and they can feel this light coming from us. Gratitude plugs us into universal consciousness, the oversoul. It is felt in our energy centers, our chakras, and moves energy out into the universe.

All dogs are masters of gratitude, for this principle is ingrained in every cell of their bodies. Whether they are the purest purebred or the rescued mixed breed, dogs love to show their appreciation for all that we do. A wag of the tail, a smile, and a wiggle say it all. When they take to their comfy beds for the night, we know they are truly relaxed and grateful for a warm place to rest. And that puts a smile on our faces.

Patience and balance

Some dogs are easy to train and some dogs "train" us. Living with dogs might be easier than living with people, but interacting with them can require patience. We think of training them to do what we want, such as obedience, agility trials, showing, or just walking on a leash. It's actually more about cooperation, finding balance, and figuring out what our dogs like and dislike, and the best way to be together that works.

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When we allow their individual personalities to unfold, along with each dog's unique gifts, magic does happen. Being a good observer of our dog's "job" is a journey in itself; joining them in this mission can be a joyful and exciting experience for both of us. Our preconceived ideas of what they are meant to "do" or "perform" can be transformed into their own personal message, which can open pathways for us to have more fun, ease and flow in our lives.

We might find out that our Aussie agility dog doesn't especially enjoy competition but prefers herding sheep. Or our rescued mixed breed is quite the athlete, jumping off of each and every rock and high place in our yard. Maybe this one is suited for agility rather than couch surfing. Sometimes what we expect of them is not what they desire to do; patience is the key to figuring out what makes them tick and to developing a happy and healthy relationship, while balancing our mutual talents and goals.

Trust

Our dogs place their trust in us, totally. We are responsible for their diet, exercise, healthcare and emotional security. Knowing they rely on us to make such enormous decisions can feel like a huge responsibility but their trust in us knows no limits. Our dogs help us learn to trust ourselves; once we venture away from practices that no longer serve us or our dogs, we gain confidence that we are doing our best for them, and they reflect this back in their health and attitudes.

Trust goes beyond the physical needs we provide for our dogs. It factors into our "read" of their emotions, how they fare in social situations, and when we ask them to step out of their comfort zone to perform new moves, be a better listener or simply look to us for guidance in challenging situations. So trust spans the entire breadth of lessons we learn about with our dogs.

Lessons that Mirror Us Facing our fears

Our Bahamian Potcake, Simon, arrived in Colorado in 2005. He was a very skittish and fearful seven month old pup who became unglued around brooms, loud noises, men and even bicycles in the park. We kept him close at hand on a leash in case something spooked him and he took flight, pulling backwards out of his collar. I would crouch down, wrapping my arms around him to comfort him. When he froze with fear, his first reaction was to flee; when he felt physically threatened, flight was the response.

During this same time period, I was also facing fears about my physical safety resulting from multiple horse riding accidents. Riding is a lifelong passion, so I was unhappy about my emotions, impatient to move on, and quite self critical. Yet, I could feel the fear

inside when it came time to saddle up. I now realize that helping Simon work through his fears helped me acknowledge mine. Having empathy for his emotions enabled me to be gentle with myself and less judgmental. The compassion I felt for Simon also made its way into my own heart, which gave me permission to recognize that my fears were real, and could not be denied. As I helped Simon heal, I healed too.

Living each day to the fullest

Our senior dog, Tucker, was diagnosed with bladder and rectal cancer in October 2011. Our first reaction was shock and sadness, wondering if Tucker would suddenly crash and die. Holistic veterinary care, energy work and cutting edge supplements have kept his tumors at bay, extending his life beyond all expectations.

Since it's winter now, I often see blood in the snow around the yard and on the trail. I know it's coming from Tucker. One day, I commented out loud, "Oh Tuck." I immediately heard him say, "It's just my body."

Tucker is living in the present moment, and not dwelling on his tumors. He is not uncomfortable or in pain; if he were, he would show that to us. What he was relaying to me is that his journey on earth is more than physical. It is spiritual, emotional and mental, too. I realized he is telling me that he is much more than a body; his soul is the greatest part of who he is.

Tucker will be 15 years old in May. He takes each and every day in stride, never missing an opportunity to enjoy a hike or a treat. He has shown us that life is precious, no matter how his body fares that day. He simply takes life one day at a time, focusing on joy and love.

Willie is a 13 year old blind Samoyed. Rescued from the streets of Wisconsin four years ago in the middle of the winter, he is the ultimate survivor. Undernourished, infested with parasites, and sick with Lyme disease, Willie's strong life force and determination helped him heal from these illnesses. His real personality emerged as he grew strong, confident and outgoing.

Willie never allowed his blindness to prevent him from enjoying his daily walks, or vocalize his joy. He greeted another Samoyed rescue, Tarka, with eagerness and enthusiasm when Tarka came into their lives. Willie helped welcome Tarka by bringing him all of his toys, one at a time, to alleviate Tarka's insecurities. Tarka must have known he had "come home" because the minute he saw Willie, he ran up to him, giving him kisses and showering him with affection. They remain best friends today, and have a humorous give and take relationship.

Tarka took on the role of being Willie's guide dog, using his body to tell Willie when he needed to stop or turn around at an impasse. He instinctively knew how to send Willie messages of caution and care. The symbiotic relationship was also very interesting around food. While Willie devoured his food quickly, Tarka relished his and

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savored it throughout the day. Willie figured out he could “steal” Tarka’s bones, despite Tarka’s protests. Tarka eventually hid his treats; although Willie unearthed the buried ones and found all of the others in Tarka’s hiding places.

Now paralyzed from spondylitis, Willie lives in the area in front of his owner’s desk. He does not feel stifled or ashamed that he is incontinent. He spends his days and nights on top of a multi-layered pad system that keeps him comfy and dry, barking enthusiastically for food, treats, and attention. And it is Tarka who makes off with Willie’s bones.

Willie has shown his owner that his time is not yet up, despite his enormous physical difficulties. He is still full of his incredible life force and mental strength. His paralysis is not a factor for him in the overall picture. He is living well, not surviving. And so his owner waits patiently for a sign from Willie letting her know he is ready to go.

Detachment and neutrality

What is the lesson that Tucker and Willie are teaching us? The lesson is a hard one: stay out of their space, remain neutral and allow them to live their lives in joy as long as their bodies will allow. This is a lesson of detachment - a very difficult task for humans.

Dogs know all about death and dying and are not afraid. It is we who worry, projecting our anxiety about their comfort and suffering on them. Dogs do let us know when they need help or are ready to die. When we watch for signs from our dogs, they are clear. When we fret, we can confuse them, inadvertently putting our emotions into the mix.

From an energy perspective, when we hover over our dogs emotionally, worrying each day about their wellbeing, we may inadvertently send hooks into their energy field. Perceived by them as a reason to stay, these hooks can prevent them from dying since they are attached to us. We’ve all seen dogs hang on to their bodies well beyond what seems like a reasonable quality of life. This may well be because they are worried about us, sensing our grief that can precede their death.

As hard as it is, allowing our dogs to process at their own pace is the healthiest way to help them. They do not want us to worry because they know intuitively when their life is done, and when the contract with us is complete. This means that the best way we can help our dogs is to remain as detached as we can be. This doesn’t mean we won’t grieve their death; it simply means we give them permission to die in their own time and at their own pace.

To experience the love, devotion, trust and joy that our dogs bring into our lives is a humbling experience. From puppyhood to old age, they remind us of our humanness and our greatness as we grow in our own spiritual awareness. Their lessons are monumental; gratitude, forgiveness, unconditional love, fear and living each day to the fullest. With our canines by our sides, we can reach the heavens with them as our guides. It’s an awesome journey. 🐾

Ellen Kohn is an Interspecies Communicator, Healing Touch for Animals Certified Practitioner (HTACP), Reiki Master and teacher, Meridian Practitioner and Spiritual Counselor. She frequently uses Bach Flower and Alaskan Gem essences for her clients. She is also a certified aromatherapist and uses crystal energy for her healing work. She is the founder of The Kohn Foundation, a Colorado non-profit which helps children and animals on Grand Bahama Island, The Bahamas.

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