

My Greatest Teacher

Zeke lumbers uphill as winded as I. In dog years, he's pushing seventy-five and should have retired from guide work years ago. I have resisted recognition of his advancing age, not to mention my own. He looks up to assure himself that my breathlessness is within tolerable levels, ignoring his own huffs and wheezes. He sniffs at the weeds to make sure we climb the right street. A bitter scent boils up from the crack between the sidewalk and the curb. He ignores it to signal a change in elevation. He looks up, sighs, and says wordlessly, "When do you want me to cross the street?" I let the grocery cart rest for a moment after climbing the hill.

With silence in all directions, I tell Zeke to cross, but he refuses. Into my hearing range, at first muffled, then increasing to a roar, a car rushes too quickly. Raucous music announces a convertible.

"Sorry. I didn't see you," she says.

"I didn't see you, either." She doesn't get my disability.

"Amber, speak up." She's on the phone as the tires spit stones in a frantic forward thrust. The music lingers in the trees overhead until the whisper of leaves again dominates the intersection.

"OK, Zeke, forward." Again, he stays put, touching my leg with a wet whisker, head to the right. From behind, uphill, chugs a diesel engine I hadn't noticed.

Zeke says, with his shoulders and head, "Pay attention to the tick of his directional signals. We should wait." A nose touches my knee.

I acquiesce. The diesel growls a wide left turn, gears popping the way kids jump on bubble-wrap. Zeke pulls me out of the way. A whirlwind of exhaust follows. I lift the handle of the grocery cart and say, "Forward." Finally, we proceed. A slight tug to my left tells me Zeke thinks he should take a pee-break, but it's the wrong time. "Not now, Sneak. Remember the schedule." He defers his want, compliant all the way home, prancing like a pony.

We sit afterwards. Zeke looks at me, then away, making those deep, masculine groans he makes when he mimics speech. "Yeah, those drivers miss everything intimate, don't they?"

He tilts his head at me. "Do you think those busy people have anyone with whom they can just breathe?" His ears straighten. He swipes a quick lick of my chin with his thick pink tongue, puts his paw in the hollow of my thigh, exhales dog food breath, and looks away.

For eight years we have been meditating together next to an open patio door. He lies down beside me, sometimes with his head in my lap. He usually stays quiet as a monk, no wiggles or scratches. Sometimes, the breathing turns heavy, and sometimes he sniffs at hummingbirds or a cat wandering past the screen door. Otherwise, he is a serious meditator, doing *Vipassana*, I suspect, traditional, but not a snob about it. He respects my Zen rigidity and forms. When I finish my chant, he knows the time to stand up has finally arrived. He waits until I straighten up my sitting space, and when I turn around, he stands and bows a long, downward dog bow, stretching out his big Labrador vertebrae, curving his thick tail backwards over his rounded rump, front legs forward and evenly spaced

like a *Yoga* master, looking straight at me with the spark of wisdom and compassion in his eye. Nobody taught Zeke to bow. He simply does. He lives in the moment, so lovingly looking after me, with no concern for his own wants, selfless in the saintly rather than codependent meaning of the word. Nothing repressed, Zeke is genuine, open, and sweet natured.

Now, we've come this far, and I consider the repugnant, unwanted, and totally unfair way human beings and dogs have life spans that differ seven times over.

Zeke is the wise one, never to contemplate what I sometimes dwell upon. I get stuck, while he bathes in the sun, content, his glossy black fur soaking up all the heat and light he can handle.

On Tuesday, I climbed a ladder. He watched over me, silently creeping close to the bottom step, and laid down, the same way he guards me in the shower, leaning as close to the tub as he can get. So when I came down the ladder, I stepped on him. He yelped, and I lost my balance. We both rolled on the floor, but he started licking my face while I worried about hurting him. He had already forgotten any pain and had become about faces, tongue, and spit. That ability, of course, is why he's been my greatest teacher, and what he taught me was that to love him must be to let him go.