Another Dog

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“You know,” I tentatively announced to my wife, “what we need around here is another dog.”

My wife looked at me and then rolled her eyes, a mannerism she had inexplicably acquired from *my* mother. Then, with unexpected suddenness for someone who only a moment before had been visually examining her own medulla oblongata, she fixed me in her sights and let me have both barrels.

“What we need around here is for you to fix the roof or to clean out the garage. What we need around here is for you to shovel the snow. And we definitely need you to put your dirty socks in the hamper and to do the laundry once in a while. What we *really* need around here is for you to get a second job if you have so much empty time on your hands....”

Did I say both barrels? She had a Gatling gun and her cranking arm showed no signs of tiring.

“What we definitely do *not* need around here is another dog! The one that we have is perfectly fine and more than enough. And besides, it’s nice having only one dog to clean up after for a change, not that you would know anything about *that*.”

As she paused to reload, I saw my opportunity and fired off my single round. “I think Modi misses Pashenka.”

My wife didn’t miss a beat. “Pashenka was the most useless dog that ever lived. That couple at the art fair in Evanston tried to buy him because they thought he was a rug. The only time he ever showed any signs of life at all was when he remembered that he was a wolfhound and he mistook Modi for a wolf. Modi doesn’t miss Pashenka one single bit. He can finally go out in the yard to pee without being grabbed by the neck and slammed into the ground.”

I had to admit that my wife had a point. Pashenka was a Russian wolfhound that we had agreed to keep for one year while a buddy of mine traveled abroad. Six long years later we still had Pashenka, who finally died of old age. For some strange reason, never fully explained, the fifteen hundred acre ranch in Alberta where my buddy lived upon his return did not allow pets.

The couple that my wife mentioned, at the Northwestern Art Fair in Evanston, Illinois, had actually given us one hundred and thirty-five dollars for what they thought was a hand woven rug. We would have banked the money except for the fact that Pashenka uncharacteristically woke up when the husband threw him into the back of their station wagon. The man’s screams brought the Evanston Police, who would have arrested us had not the Art Fair officials, at that very moment, awarded Pashenka first place in the Performance Art category. I was afraid that Pashenka might wake up again when the official pinned the blue ribbon on him, but he didn’t.

“I still think we need another dog around here,” I wittily retorted. “Doesn’t that hurt your eyes when you roll them like that?”

I resolved to begin a widespread, systematic search for just the right dog. Money was no object. Three months later I selected a puppy named Jake.

“You can have that one for free,” the breeder told me. “Ain’t no one else wants him.” I was overwhelmed by the man’s generosity.

Jake was a Chocolate Labrador Retriever. For anyone who has ever owned or been acquainted with a Chocolate Labrador Retriever, enough said. You can probably go on to the next story. For all others, I will continue.

Jake was a Chocolate Labrador Retriever. He was powerfully built, tipping the scales at a taut eighty-five pounds. His muscles rippled. His hips were square. His chest was broad. And his head was thick. His tail had *“Louisville Slugger”* stamped into it and did untold damage to life and property. In fact, in 1985 Jake was highly recruited by the Detroit Tigers, who were always on the lookout for a good designated hitter, but he was kept out of baseball by a technicality in the rule book that limits performing ass-backwards to owners and managers.

Jake was a Chocolate Labrador Retriever with a heart of gold and absolutely no nose. His body sensitivity, or lack thereof, was measured at Western Michigan University and found to be somewhere between that of a white rhinoceros and a sequestered sea turtle. The official report, the publication of which won tenure for three professors, stated: “That damn dog don’t feel a damn thing!”

Jake was also stubborn. In fact, his stubbornness was legendary. So much so that he frequently received invitations from various associations of mules, donkeys, goats, and other assorted politicians and bureaucrats to put on symposiums in that important professional skill.

Above all, Jake was dumb as dirt. Years ago, when the breed was first developed, duck hunters were looking for a dog that would be invisible from the air. They tried painting their dogs various schemes of camouflage but were discouraged because they had to change colors every time they hunted a different blind.

“I got it!” announced one shrewd hunter who had been studying the problem for years. “What’s the one same thing we see in every blind we hunt?” he asked his comrades.

“Beer cans!”

“Jack Daniels bottles.”

“Besides that,” acknowledged the shrewd hunter, exasperated because he knew he could never breed a dog to look like beer cans or Jack Daniels bottles, which would have been perfect. The other hunters were stumped.

“Mud! Dirt!” the shrewd one finally explained. “Let’s breed us a dog that looks like dirt!”

The other hunters fell silent. They knew they were in the presence of genius.

At first the project progressed slowly, some say because those primarily involved were reluctant to use techniques that both Charles Darwin *and* Gregor Mendel might approve of. Eventually however, through the biblically acceptable practice of trial and tribulation, the stalwart hunters and would be dog breeders succeeded in developing a dog that not only looked like dirt, but that also thought like dirt, and often times acted a lot like dirt too.

“What should we call these dang thangs?” asked one of our heroes as they sat around a wood stove, drinking coffee and hot cocoa. “They’re Labs all right, no doubt about that. But they ain’t exactly black. And they ain’t exactly *yaller* neither.”

This question provoked much discussion. The unanimous favorite for a descriptive name was Liver, this being the preferred sustenance of all present. Alas, this fine descriptor had to be discarded, in part because it was already being used by the Doberman people, and in part because our staunch woodsmen were afraid that the use of alliteration, as in Liver Lab, would be unacceptably prosaic.

“Oh dang!” complained one hunter by the stove. “This dang chocolate got spilt on my pants.” And thus a breed and a breed name were born. Had it been another member of the hunting party who had spilt his beverage, the breed would today be known as Coffee Labrador Retrievers.

Because Jake had no nose, he was next to useless for hunting even if he was invisible from the air and did blend in perfectly with all the beer cans and Jack Daniels bottles in our duck blind. I felt obligated to prove to my wife that I had made an astute selection in picking out Jake. Consequently, I was faced with the problem of discovering a purpose in life for a dog with no nose, who was stubborn as a mule and dumb as dirt.

In a moment of true inspiration I proudly announced to my wife, “I think Jake would make a good blind dog.”

“He doesn’t even make a good sighted dog,” she replied.

“No, no. I mean one of those dogs that leads blind people around.” This time her eyes rolled so far back I thought she would fall over.

Having approached six or seven reputable guide-dog schools throughout the country with my dog and my idea and having been rebuffed by as many, sometimes quite rudely, I reluctantly concluded that these venerable institutions were too pedestrian to be objective when it came to assessing canine quality. I should have known that the only way to get something done right was to do it yourself, and so it was that I decided to undertake the formidable task of training Jake to guide some lucky blind person. It was true that it had taken Jake a good forty days to learn his own name, but that included the ten days it took him to realize that his name was, in fact, *Jake* and not *Jake, No!*

It was also true that it had taken nearly six weeks to housebreak Jake, even though all the books we had said that two to three weeks was normal. But I just assumed that the authors of those books were just boasting and trying to make me feel badly for not following their methods. Besides, that was then and this was now. I was certain Jake’s learning curve had improved. We embarked upon our mission cheerful, confident, and proud.

Although I was cheerful, confident, and proud, I had no illusions about how easy it would be to train Jake for the important tasks at hand. Training Jake to do anything presented several immediate problems. For one thing, Jake’s interpretation of what he thought you wanted was usually diametrically opposed to what you really did want. Another definite problem was Jake’s incredible lack of body sensitivity. It was absolutely impossible to administer a meaningful physical correction to that dog without resorting to such force that inevitably some well-intentioned neighbor or passerby would call 911, and I would have to spend hours explaining to everyone from the local police to the ASPCA to the FBI that I was merely teaching my dog to be a blind dog – I mean a dog that would guide the blind.

Perhaps the biggest problem encountered when training Jake was that Jake consistently interpreted any attention he received as positive attention. This meant that the entire time I was exhausting myself correcting this dog (while listening to the sirens of various law enforcement agencies converging on the spot where we stood), Jake’s tail was merrily wagging back and forth as he happily and endlessly repeated the very behavior he mistakenly thought he was being praised for.

Eventually, through a complex regimen of training that included the biblically accepted practice mentioned before and a devious system of reverse psychology, suggested by a nefarious CIA agent who had taken a curious interest in my project, I miraculously succeeded in teaching Jake the things he would need to know to become a qualified guide-dog. At least I had succeeded in teaching him that under most circumstances it was preferable not to be under the wheels of an eighteen-wheeler, and that if I fell down an open manhole or elevator shaft, he was darn well going down with me! Close enough. Now all I needed was a blind person.

I knew from the vast amount of research I had done on the subject that a key rule of thumb when matching a blind person with a dog-guide was that the person should always be smarter than the dog he or she was paired with. This was our trump card. There wasn’t a blind person in the country that wasn’t smarter than Jake. But this also created a paradox because once a blind person actually met Jake and was told about my plan, the only ones who would willingly work with him were the ones who were less intelligent than he was and, as I have already indicated, there weren’t any. (One person suggested that Jake might be used to guide blind horses or cows, but I didn’t give this proposal serious consideration for more than a few minutes.)

I decided to capitalize on the fact that Jake, at least on an IQ basis, could work with any blind person in the world. Rather than give him to one particular blind person, I would offer his services to many blind people in the form of a demonstration dog. Now, any interested blind person would be able to have actual hands on experience with a real, live guide-dog. This way, I reasoned, people could make an informed choice as to whether or not they really wanted to obtain a guide-dog of their own. The possibilities were enormous. I decided to approach the Michigan Commission for the Blind with my plan.

Unfortunately, my wife felt it her civic, patriotic, and moral duty to approach the Michigan Commission for the Blind first and to warn them of my impending plan. While she was there, she apparently also gave the Commission staff, and some of the clients, a brief but precise in-service program in the fine art of eyeball rolling. When I laid out my ingenious ideas before the Commission officials, it was immediately quite apparent that they had all paid close attention to my wife’s in-service training.

It soon became clear that the only way the Commission for the Blind would even consider my proposal was for Jake and me to provide a real life demonstration of Jake’s expertise with me under blindfold. We decided that the demonstration should take place along Michigan Avenue at high noon, the peak of the lunch hour. As I fixed my blindfold securely into place, I wondered what else I should have taught Jake about guiding besides not wanting to be beneath the wheels of an eighteen-wheeler and not letting me fall into an open elevator shaft. It seemed there might be some things, but for the life of me I couldn’t think what they might be. Oh well, it was too late now.

I proudly held onto the harness handle with my left hand and with great pomp and flourish commanded Jake, “Forward!” signaling with my right hand as I had seen professional guide-dog trainers do. (Under my breath I secretly whispered, “Heel!” which to Jake meant pull as hard and as fast as you can.) And off we went.

We raced east along Michigan Avenue proud and secure and not knocking down more than five or six elderly people as we negotiated the block. That didn’t seem too bad and I figured that it was probably my fault for not following Jake closely enough. But I knew that our first big challenge was coming up. Church Street!

To my eternal astonishment, to say nothing of our observers, Jake came to an immediate, accurate, and complete stop the very instant that he hit the curb at Church Street. I could not believe our good luck and success.

“He’s peeing on the stop sign,” one of the Commission officials called out.

Not wanting to cause a convergence of law enforcement agencies at the corner of Michigan and Church Street during the height of the lunch hour, I was somewhat limited as to the type of correction I could administer. In the sternest voice I could muster, facilitated by my deep humiliation, I told Jake, “Phooey! Don’t do that! Put that leg down!”

To my everlasting surprise and amazement, Jake did exactly what he was told the very first time. He lowered his left leg.

“Now he’s peeing on....”

I really did not think it was necessary for the official to point out the obvious. Even under blindfold, I had no difficulty whatsoever discerning exactly where Jake was peeing. But I didn’t care. Jake had finally obeyed me and way before I was anywhere close to being arrested. I felt so proud I nearly cried. “Put that leg down too,” I corrected, less sternly than before, and then I commanded, “Heel!” and across the street we flew.

Because the State of Michigan Civil Service Rules permit state officials and bureaucrats to function similarly to baseball owners and managers, Jake was hired as the official demonstration guide-dog for the Michigan Commission for the Blind. Just as I had predicted, Jake became a natural at his calling. He never met a blind person he did not like (or who wasn’t smarter than he was) and he never refused to work with anyone. Over the long course of his career, Jake worked with literally hundreds of blind people, many of whom still remember him fondly. In 1993, Jake was declared Michigan State Employee of the Year. I’ll never forget Governor John Engler’s moving words at the award ceremony. “Jake,” he said, was “living, breathing proof that you did not have to be smart to be successful in the Michigan civil service system.” It was true.

Jake worked for the Commission for the Blind for ten wonderful years, eventually earning upwards of fifty thousand dollars per year for his services. He retired in 1996, purchased a small condo in Grand Haven and later moved out, choosing to winter in South Carolina near Hilton Head.

The other day my wife and I were sitting around the fire, watching the snow come lightly down, and enjoying the peace and quiet of the moment. “You know, dear,” I observed, “what we need around here is another dog.”