

On the Positive Side: Fewer Words, More Presence

by Win Jacobs / For the Sun-News

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If you are the happy captive of your pet creature, you know full well the delights that more than compensate for the occasional aggravations, and so you will say “of course!” to the brief tale I tell here. If on the other hand you are deprived of such pleasures, your response may well be “Oh yuck! Another human slobber over another too-darling 4-footed nuisance!” Or maybe you had a dog or cat for your kids, but now the kids are long since grown and gone, and your own sense of responsibility needs relief, not further development, thank you very much.

Whichever profile fits, or even if none does, I hope you’ll allow me to share with you the brightness of a moment.

One gray and windy afternoon, I was visiting a housebound friend. Physical infirmities kept her, waking and sleeping, planted on the living room couch; infrequent trips to the necessary being accomplished only with help and by painful frustration. Not surprisingly, her outlook was shrinking, her once-agile mind slowing—and her visitors decreasing in number and frequency.

One friend, Sadie, had volunteered to serve as live-in caregiver for the duration. But she did not come alone. Wiggles, her little terrier-mix, came too—that was the bottom line of the deal. My friend had little choice but to accept the package.

By the time I visited, Sadie and Wiggles had been there for a week or so. And in that week, my friend had swung 180 degrees in Wiggles’ direction, from “pets are for kids and belong outside” to “Oh, isn’t he something!” Her eyes brightened and she grinned as she watched him licking my face and bouncing around my lap. “He’s a real lover!” He gave one bark, and she said “That’s to wake Sadie up.” (She was napping in her bedroom at the time.) He gave two barks, and “That means he wants to go out so would you...?” I opened the door to the fenced backyard, but Wiggles had changed his mind about “out.” I picked him up and put him out. He immediately ran back inside, jumping up on the couch to snuggle against his charge.

As she stroked him and tickled him, she murmured, “I never had a relationship with a dog before.” The flash was bright as the shutter clicked, in the camera of my mind. I saw salve applied to a cracked heart. With Wiggles’ return to her side, my friend’s spirit sat up straight. In that instant, it mattered a little less that her body would need human help to match it.

Not all friends can be caregivers, and not all caregivers come with dogs. Illness certainly entails discussions and decisions, medicines and many details, directions verbalized. Patience in all quarters is precious.

Wiggles’ wisdom is to know that presence is, too.

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