

On the Positive Side

A spring story of renewal for Dilly

By Jo Ruprecht, Ph.D. For the Sun-News

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Whether we show it through celebrating Easter, Passover, the vernal equinox or some other spring event, we humans want to believe in the possibilities of renewal. We want to know that starting anew, particularly after a time of darkness or struggle, is possible, if only the stars align properly and we try hard enough. In honor of our hopes, here is a true story of a bunny who gained a new life.

Dilly was born a Siamese satin rabbit with a beautiful brown and gray coat and a dark gray nose. Weeks later, she was hitchhiking near midnight on Alameda Boulevard as I started to drive by. I wasn't sure what I had seen, but there was something in the gutter between two openings for the storm drain. I turned back and found a small bunny frozen by my headlights.

When I gently picked her up, her hind legs were badly askew, as if she had been hurt. So the next day she met Dr. Carol Calista, who did an exam and an X-ray. It turned out that there were no sockets to hold her thighbones in place. The sockets had grown closed, and she was now "fly-legged". This can arise from genetics or poor nutrition, but most often happens when a bunny is raised on a slick surface and cannot gather itself to sit properly. Once this condition has developed, there is little that can be done and fly-legged animals are often destroyed.

Dilly had another idea, and so, there she was hitching. I ran an ad in the paper ("Found pet rabbit..."). The only respondent offered me basic care information from the House Rabbit Society (see www.rabbit.org). Over time I learned that rabbits are not easy pets despite the sweet images we have of them hopping along with smiling children.

Rabbits will ingest almost anything that looks right, but they cannot regurgitate, so they are prone to poisoning and digestive problems. They have an affinity for chewing electrical cords and other noxious items, so any space available to them must be carefully bunny-proofed. Rabbits are not all that similar to cats or dogs and require a specially trained vet, especially when it comes to anesthesia. And most alarmingly, their spines have a weak area just below the shoulders where damage easily occurs when a rabbit is held by its upper body. These are not the makings for a beginner pet. We are wrong to think of them as easier to care for as a dog or cat.

Meanwhile, Dilly settled in, told me her name, and taught me to speak rabbit. She lived in the grassy yard during the day and slept in the warm kitchen at night. She enjoyed the St. Augustine grass with its broad soft blades and would nap outside under the yellow jasmine with her breakfast cups. She loved to play ring-around-the-rosy when I wanted to bring her inside. And she would nap with me on a towel on the floor after her bath.

One of the big disadvantages of being fly-legged is that the rabbit can't hop; it can only scoot, pulling itself with its front legs and assisting with its rear legs. This creates constant hygiene problems. Dilly tolerated the frequent baths and fur trims to keep her bottom clean and seemed to enjoy the vet-approved ointment to sooth her skin. In all, it was a peaceful life for her, even if labor-intensive for me. And so Dilly lived the rest of her days with me and with Homer, her duck companion, who would rest her beak across Dilly's neck when it was time to go to sleep. But that's another story.

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