

THE LAMPPOST

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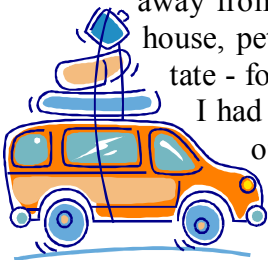
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The Dog Days of Life

Note: If you are a frequent reader of my newsletter you know that I usually keep my thoughts to a single page. I'm rather longwinded this month, so please bear with me

My family left on a road trip to Washington, D.C. during spring break. Since I was unable to break away from work I was left in charge of the house, pets, plants - the whole Hastings estate - for 10 days. During all that solitude, I had quite a bit of time to ponder some of the deep things of life. The really deep issues. I am now ready to come clean.



This may come as a shock to many of you, but I have a confession to make...I don't like dogs. It's not that I hate dogs, I just don't like them the way most people do.

It all started back in my childhood. I was one of those sickly kids with allergies to everything – dog fur, cat hair, grass, leaves, chocolate (yes, really), peanuts, peas, linoleum, chores...When my friends had birthdays at school and their moms brought in chocolate cup cakes I couldn't eat them. If a friend had a dog or a cat at home, I couldn't play in their house. Numerous times I was rushed to the doctor's office because my eyes swelled shut, or I had an asthma attack after petting a dog and then touching my hands to my face. I really wanted to pet or hug a dog, but my body rebelled against me.



So, my mother took me to the doctor and he gave me allergy shots that were so big the kids around me fainted as they saw the needle.

When I was 8 years old, a large, mean looking German Shepherd, named Hitler, chased me through our neighborhood. Hitler barked so loudly and snarled so angrily that I was sure he would eat me alive. He terrified me. So much so, that I began to fear all dogs, even little ones. Their barking would send me into a panic. A few years later my father and I were walking down the street as Hitler approached us. He was barking fiercely and I began to panic. My dad, looked Hitler in the eye and started yelling back at him. He really showed him who was boss. Hitler backed off and I learned that I didn't have to fear him or any dog.



When I was 12, sometime after I ended my 5 years of allergy shots, my next door neighbor invited me over to see his new dog. I wasn't thrilled about the idea, but, because he was a good friend, I went. I actually petted his dog, and Snuffy didn't bite me, growl at me or want to eat me. I didn't get an asthma attack and my eyes didn't swell shut. Although I was far from being a dog lover at that moment, my "dog tolerance meter" inched up a few notches.



The Dog Days ... continued



A few years later, I met the woman of my dreams whose family owned several dogs – one of whom had a skin disease and smelled like, well, he smelled really bad. You could smell him from 50 feet away. Not wanting to make a bad impression, I kept my mouth shut, but my “dog tolerance meter” shifted down dramatically.



After we got married, Eloise and I were firmly entrenched at opposite ends of the spectrum of aspiring dog ownership. She wanted one, I didn't. I came up with numerous excuses over the years not to own one – the apartment rules won't let us, our yard is too small, our children are too small, our budget is too small, we already have 5 children I don't need another... After 13 years of marriage and hundreds of dogged requests I finally broke down. I brokered a deal. The family could get a dog if I didn't have anything to do with it. They would be completely responsible for feeding, training and cleaning up after it. With rapidly nodding heads and eager promises, they agreed to my terms and soon I was driving 2 hours into Wisconsin to get Buster, the \$100 runt of a litter of black Labs.

He was really cute – until he entered my house. In his first year as the Hastings canine, Buster grew to 100 lbs. (some runt), tore up the linoleum floor in our mud room, destroyed my favorite hat, pooped and peed on all our floors, and woke me up with his barking. I thought having 5 children would groom me for having a dog, that I was prepared for just about anything that could come my way, but, I realized I wasn't ready for a dog.



Buster continued to test my patience. He dug up our yard, left special surprises for me as I mowed the lawn and then tore it up with his digging. He ran away every day, barked at anything that moved near the house especially in the middle of the night and shed his black hair all over my carpet.

He chased the neighbors, ate food off my table and tripped me as I tried to walk through any room in the house. He didn't listen, he wouldn't obey, he smelled bad, he slobbered all over my pants as I tried to leave for work...Uuugggghh!

Since I didn't grow up with dogs, I didn't understand dog culture. I took it personal. To me, this canine was out to destroy me. This was war. I glared and snarled at his happy advances. I ranted, raved, threatened, and issued ultimatums. One day, after yet another dog incident and yet another futile demand for my family to turn that dog into a rational human being, I looked down and saw the sad eyes of my children. Buster wasn't their enemy. They were on his side! They were secretly rooting for him. They actually *loved* him. Then it hit me. I had to make a choice.

I could actually follow through with my threats, demanding that we get rid of the dog and in the process, break the hearts of my wife and children, or I could learn to live with this smelly, lawn-destroying, barking menace. I looked into his slobbery, hairy face and conceded defeat.



Losing is not without its rewards. Slowly, with great patience and endurance, I began to see the up-side of dog ownership. Buster is consistently happy to see me; in his eyes, I can do no wrong. He provides cheap entertainment for my kids. And, when a kid needs a job to do, Buster is always ready at the leash. He provides security in ways I can't by ferociously defending us from the Schwan's man. He has recouped his losses in food and veterinarian bills by preventing Eloise from buying convenient frozen meals.

It is said that a dog is man's best friend. Though I can't say Buster is now my best buddy (he still smells bad) I have grown to appreciate him and he has helped me grow to be a better person. That's something we all could use from a friend.

