

My Dad and My Dog

by Karen Henderson



This is a story about an old man with dementia and a scruffy black dog named Oreo. But before I begin, let me introduce the characters.

My father Ralph Henderson died on Easter Monday, 2000 at the age of 93. In fact, my friend Mimi said dad's timing was good, because God picked him up on the way through. My father suffered from Alzheimer's disease, aphasia (inability to speak) and dysphasia (inability to swallow). He had hearing and sight problems, suffered from incontinence and was confined to a wheelchair in a nursing home the last three years of his life because severe spinal arthritis destroyed his back. He loved it when I called him a tough old buzzard – because he was.

I adopted my dog Oreo two years before my dad's death, when his dementia was at its most severe. She was on sale for half price. As I grew to know Oreo and her world, I started to notice striking similarities between Oreo and my dad. I know, you're probably saying to yourself...Karen is really pushing the envelope here. But bear with me.

Sidewalk grates and other irregularities

The first similarity I noticed was how my dad – people with dementia – and dogs react to sidewalks and floors. Oreo fears grates; she doesn't know what to do about them so she avoids them by jumping over or making me walk around them.

People with dementia do the same thing; if there is a pattern on a carpet, they may not be able to understand if the floor is level and may attempt to jump or step over patterns or borders. Just like Oreo.

Every day is a new day for dad and Oreo

Even though we have followed the same route for our morning "pee-poop" for years, Oreo acts as though it's the first time she's experienced it. She is always excited, always exploring, never bored.

The same is true for people with dementia. Even though I pushed my dad in his wheelchair along the same neighbourhood streets and passed the same houses for three years at the end of his life, he was always seeing everything for the first time and never failed to make the same interested observations – that house needed a paint job, another had the most beautiful garden, yet another was poorly designed and looked uncomfortable.

A huge capacity to forgive

I adore Oreo but occasionally I hurt her. I have stepped on her feet, caught her in a door, and taken out my frustrations on her verbally. Okay, I've yelled at her. But she always forgives me when I apologize, with a kiss on my nose or a leap into my arms.

My dad was equally forgiving when I messed up. When I first started to assist him with eating, I would occasionally become distracted and put too much food on the spoon, causing him to choke. He never

chastised me. If I bounced him around in his wheelchair on the uneven streets, he never grumbled. And if I hurt him while turning him or transferring him, he grimaced but never struck out at me. The more his disease progressed, the more grateful and forgiving he became.

One of the most important similarities I noticed between my dad and my dog was this one. They both lived in the moment.

If Oreo misbehaves I have to correct her immediately; otherwise she can make no connection between the mistake and the correction. She lives for the now – the walk, the treat, the hug.

People with dementia also live in the moment; for them there is no yesterday or tomorrow but only today, which we

The year after my dad died I was sitting on the couch listening to some beautiful music and feeling low. Oreo had her head in my lap and at one point I looked down at her as she gazed so steadily up at me. In her amber eyes I saw such utter love, trust and innocence that I felt like I was looking into the face of God. I was literally speechless.

To me Oreo possesses that same state of grace. As Will Rogers said, “If there are no dogs in Heaven, then when I die I want to go where they went.”

My life changed when I adopted Oreo; she was a gift. My life changed again completely as the result of my 14-year caregiving journey with my father; I was given another huge gift.



as empathetic caregivers can – and must – make safe, secure and loving through our presence, understanding and acceptance. There is no one else to do it.

After my mother's death in 1986 my father was filled with anger and frustration. He treated me badly, abusing my love and my time. His verbal and emotional abuse wore me down completely. Neither of us understood what was happening in his brain.

But as my father's physical condition became worse he started to change in small ways. He began to say thank you. As his dementia progressed, he smiled more, he cried more. He softened. When I walked into his room his face absolutely lit up and it lit up only for me. I had reconnected with my father in an unspoken way. He became once again a father who loved his daughter unconditionally.

And I realized that Oreo loves me the same way; as Josh Billings said, “A dog is the only thing on earth that loves you more than he loves himself.”

No matter where I go or what I do, she wants to be there with me, be a part of it. All I have to do is walk through the door and her whole body wiggles with joy.

A special state of grace

This last similarity is a bit more difficult to put into words... but it means the most to me. I believe that old people who are near the end of their lives have a special aura about them; they have survived many years and many hardships. Many like my dad can no longer do, they can only be. And in that being they come into a special state of grace, earned from decades of living, loving and suffering.

My goal now in life is to be as good a person as my dog already thinks I am.

Karen's update:

My darling Oreo died suddenly but painfully of cancer in March 2008, the same year I lost both my cats. For a few months I lived in a deep daze, feeling so bereft and lonely without my livestock.

In July of that year I accidentally met a woman on the street who had a 3-month-old black cockapoo... a miniature Oreo. She needed to find a home for him... and you guessed it, he ended up with me. As many friends have said, it was meant to be. Sammy Sosa and I are now training to work with seniors, as Oreo did so beautifully.

Bottom Line: A moving story about dementia, a dog and a dad and the daughter that cared and learned from each.



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