

Don't Be Afraid, I'm Here
By Maureen Ross, MA
A short story of how dogs help us overcome fear
From the Living and Learning with Dogs Series – [Daily Dog](#)

Dogs make me a better person. More so, they keep me from being a horrible person. I temper myself when I'm around dogs and people. I care more. When I around people only, I find myself more conflicted – dogs help me assess me and the people I'm around.

As far back as I can remember I have been privileged to reach down and touch a living being that made me feel less afraid of the dark. Those unfamiliar, spooky things that go bump in the night, whether in our child-like imagination or fear from life circumstances, can be scary.

Fears can be real or imaginary, magnified or minimized. We all perceive fear in a different way. For some it can be paralyzing, while for others, an opportunity to slay the dragon. Each baby step we take to overcome fearful responses/reactions to new situations, challenging goals or inevitable ones like aging, illness and dying, can empower us. Fear won't be GONE – but it will be manageable.

Creating some time and space for ourselves is essential -- and our right. Those few carved out moments of laughing with a friend, a comforting hug, a mentor's encouragement, a partner's nod or a pet's presence, engages our minds in a way that changes our brain's chemistry from fearful to reasonable fear. What seems like a mountain can shift into a series of small, but climbable hills.

Listening to dogs breathe is relaxing and comforting -- for me. They are not doing anything special, just being and breathing. Regardless of what life has flown our way, dogs need to eat, play, love.

For longer than I can remember, I have heard my dogs speak to me – not in English, but more in subliminal tones and nuances. I hear, “we will do this together” -- off we go, down a new path, with a wag and a head held high. I've know for a long time that I am okay by myself, but prefer to be with dogs. Maybe they have hypnotized me into thinking that my life would be far worse without them.

Knowing dog(s) are present encourages me to move from introvert to extroverted-introvert. Sometimes, we all need to curl up in a ball and pretend the world away. We can put most things off for one more day or a week. When weeks blend into years, and years become a blur, we need to decide if we want to continue seeing the world through wax paper or clearly. Dogs chew the wax paper away, like windshield wipers removing the rain.

“Don't be afraid, I'm here” I heard when I said goodbye to a father, a mother, my first marriage, a dear friend and many pets. “Chill out” I heard when I went back to college later in life, frozen with fear that I would not make the grade. Not only did I make the grade, I surpassed my wildest expectations by integrating what I am passionate about “pets in therapy” into a career. All stressed out, my dogs would say, “be cool, let's go for a walk because we still need to eat and sleep don't we? It's okay, take this time for yourself, don't be afraid, I'll be here.”

Dogs keep us grounded in reality while teaching us to discover new ways of viewing the world. I may be an excellent student / learner, but everything I am successful at connects back to dogs.

No sympathy – only empathy and the stark realization that life goes on in any situation. “Don’t be afraid, I’m here” my dog said when I decided to write a book. Me? It echoed when I came to a few bad slumps in my life, opening the door and viewing the world as an untamed jungle. Maybe this was more – “we have to go pee. I do not care if you smell – or I’m a mess, let’s go out wag-wag.”

A helpful mantra is three steps forward, two steps back and always one step ahead. Oftentimes, I sing this to myself or chant it out loud while driving. I know, I know, it isn’t the usual Yam, Yam, Lam Lam, Om Namah Shivaya or all is well mantra, but it works for me.

I no longer cringe at what someone might think or say, especially about my relationship with dogs. It is freeing. Relationships with people are valuable, but even more so if they are attached to dogs, cats or horses. Ruminating has become a source of amusement and oftentimes, a waste of energy. As my dogs say, “what’s the biggy -- everything I do has a consequence.” I’m glad they have finally figured this out.

Loving dogs is easy, losing them unbearable. I have held many dogs in my arms while the life slips out of their physical body, saying “never again.” I have sat with endless numbers of grieving dog people who find it indescribable. “When will the pain go away they ask or why don’t people understand?” People say, “get over it – it is a dog, you can get another.” Wait, listen, I hear my dog, the “natural” therapist saying, “don’t be afraid, I’m here. Can’t you see that this is life and this too shall pass? We are grateful.”

Dogs need care, love and training. Otherwise, they can cause us heartache. Having lived with dogs all of my life and sharing my dogs as a therapist, I am positive that they possess a sixth sense. They are instinctive while I am intuitive. It is a nice partnership.

Dogs help us overcome fear by putting life into perspective. I have no choice but to slow down when my dog needs to pee or is too old to walk fast. And, dogs get scared too. Separation anxiety is one of the most over diagnosed maladies that can be prevented. Dogs get scared at changes in lifestyle and atmosphere (thunder). They need to be desensitized and socialized to everything, everywhere because they live in the present -- right down to the nanosecond.

“Don’t be dumb or mean, teach me, I’m here.” The things that dogs do to piss us are oftentimes the same things we love about them. Think about that. Puppies or older dogs may pee in the house, but we love them when we have taken them out in time and they pee outside! Dogs may chew our slippers, but we love it when we’ve had the brains to safely confine them, so that we are greeted with a wagging tail and toy, rather than bits of shredded sofa.

Giving a little attention to their needs, a dog’s calm and simple presence makes us feel safer. They give us a sense of well-being, boost our ego by making us feel special, while at the same time, taking the focus off of “self” so we can venture into the world.

We can protect ourselves, by imaging a shield of energy around us. I named mine after one of my dogs – it is my Sage Shield. When I’m surrounded by Sage Shield, no-one can penetrate. I have found that my dogs know when I have been at a computer too long. They let out a sigh and stalk me until I get up and say, “Okay, you’re absolutely right, we need a break, let’s go out.”

Taking a dog for a walk can be a connection to nature and other people. It is an easy way to train, get vitamin D, and clear the mind. It helps me get over writer's block. I thought of this short story while walking my dog. I have more clarity when I pay attention to what really is important in life like sniffing, dumb-balls, tuggy, dirty buffalo or buried treasure. Romping happily up to me, my Newfie says, "Have you ever seen such a great jolly ball?"

I do not believe that dogs are unconditional. Please breathe. This I know for sure: dogs aren't judgmental like us humans, but wolves and dog packs have hierarchical conditions for survival. Dogs are predators. It is pure fantasy to think that our dogs need to be squeezed to our cheeks or kissed all over. This is a gift from our dogs -- because we need it. I no longer believe that they couldn't live without it. Dogs love being with humans, so have a tremendously high tolerance level for our emotional idiosyncrasies. Just ask any Veterinarian or Canine Massage Therapist – not all dogs want to be touched! Some prefer a quick "hello", now bug off.

We condition our dogs. Living with untrained dogs is like waiting for a train wreck to happen, especially if children are involved. An older dog that is use to uncontrollable emotion and stimulation may be resilient enough to handle almost anything. Younger or more sensitive dogs will quickly age from clusters of emotional stress, just like us humans.

As accepting as dogs are of our high levels of emotions, theirs are much simpler. Living and learning with dogs teaches me to be gentler on myself and others, and take the time to appreciate the simpler, less complex and overwhelmingly electronic part of life.

Letting go bad experiences (fear) is a valuable lesson that dogs teach us. They do not get mad, and stay that way for 4 years, but humans can hold grudges for lifetimes. We can experience a trauma and take 2-weeks or a life time to overcome it. Dogs are resilient – they bounce back.

Dogs live for a few things: eat, play, sleep, be with us -- and sex if we let them. Aside from that, they are mostly content to be explorers of the simple pleasures of life in whatever amount we will give to them.

With respect, as long as I can care for dogs as they deserve to be cared for, and allow them to be dogs, doing what they enjoy like digging, sniffing, chewing, jumping for joy or "free – be a crazy dog", I will always share my life with them.

When I am 108, I know I will reach down and touch a dog. I will listen in the dark for their breathing. If I cannot, then I am positive that someone will bring that being to me and that dog will say, "Don't be afraid, I'm here."

Enjoy the Journey and your dogs!