

BowWOW!

Facts, observations and musings about Our Best Friends

The Healing Power of Beagles

Two years ago, at age 12, my beagle Sally (aka The Bea) underwent TPLO (Tibial Plateau Leveling Osteotomy) surgery to repair a torn ACL. For weeks afterwards I attended to her basic needs, accompanied her on frequent short walks and sat by her side while she stared through a pain and fentanyl-induced fog.

Ten days ago I began my own orthopedic adventure with a total knee replacement. When I returned from hospital The Bea assumed her position as primary caretaker. She is always at my side, parking herself just within reach should I need to make contact with her, she patiently accompanies me on my shuffles around the neighborhood and she sits with me as I stare through my moments of percocet haze. She gives me reason to laugh every day and has given me reason to hurry up and get better so I can go for a real walk. My speedy recovery is, in part, due to her care, her compassion and her patience.

That animals feel our pain, our joy, and our stress should come as no surprise for anyone who has a dog. Historically, dogs have been associated with goodwill and healing from early native and shamanic cultures and later early Christian societies. Asklepios, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Roch, and St. Guinefort were all healers of their day and were all depicted in the company of dogs. Centuries later, the close companionship of a "*spaniel gentle or comforter*" (a small lap dog) was recommended to ladies of Elizabethan England as a remedy for a variety of ills. It was believed that a dog held close would absorb disease. From the perspective of emotional healing, during the 18th and 19th centuries compassion and care for animals was recommended to instill an ethic of kindness and gentility, particularly in male children. Today, there is a resurgence of interest in animals as healing tools initiated by a single study that demonstrated the life-prolonging effects of pet ownership among heart attack sufferers.

The emotional benefits from animals are difficult to measure, meaning that dogs help humans without anyone knowing exactly why. What experts know, however, is that animals allow humans to focus, even for a short period of time, on something other than them.

Dogs relax and calm. They take the human mind off loneliness, grief, pain, and fear. They invoke laughter and offer a sense of security and protection. Contact with dogs has been shown to lower blood pressure and stress levels, give a patient a reason to interact, offer a chance to exercise and provide a sense of security and/or intimacy. They encourage communication, and offer continuity in life.

And dogs, being the social critters they are, will only broaden the circle of one's acquaintances.

Studies have shown that dog owners make 30 per cent fewer visits to doctors, have lower cholesterol, blood pressure and heart attack risk than those who do not have pets. There are stories of dogs warning their owners of seizures and of dogs alerting their diabetic owners of impending hypoglycemic incident. Dogs help anchor Alzheimer patients to the present moment and can also be trained to alert others should an Alzheimer patient wander into harm's way.

Dogs are a source of expectation, hope and communication and, as such are an antidote to depression and loneliness, especially in the elderly population. Dogs have proven to be of great therapeutic benefit in convalescent and nursing homes often giving patients a reason to "come alive". More recently, studies have reported that ordinary housedogs can identify and differentiate breast, lung and ovarian cancers.

I believe sharing a life with a pet can only enhance a person's life. For the last 14 years The Bea has given me reason to look at life in a more positive way, to be a better human to the other humans in my life plus she has always given me a reason to laugh. I am, very much, looking forward to the day in the near future when she and I can once again take a *real* walk.

BowWOW! Is a production of Tracie Korol and wholeDog.
Comments, questions? Call Tracie at 846-0804 or send a note to her at letstalk@wholedog.biz or visit www.wholedog.biz