

Canine Comfort

Category: Animals

written by Ronna L. Edelstein | September 2, 2018

According to family legend, my mother took me for a walk in my stroller on one of those dog days of summer—high humidity, flopping flowers, lackadaisical leaves. I was happily singing along with the birds when a neighbor's demonic dog rushed my stroller and tried to Eskimo-kiss me with its snout. I screamed, the dog howled, and thus began my lifelong fear of all furry, four-legged Fidos.

Sadly, I allowed that fear to extend to other parts of my life and to affect my health. As a child, I would wake up gasping for breath. As an adult, I developed full-blown panic attacks—the kind that so closely mimic a heart attack that I would camp out in emergency rooms, convinced I was inhaling my final breath.

Then, while tutoring a new student, I met Maggie—an 11-pound Yorkie Tzu and a therapy dog. Something about Maggie—it might have been her quiet demeanor or the kindness emanating from her velvety brown eyes—motivated me to get to know her better. One day, when I arrived at her house feeling dog-tired and consumed with angst, Maggie trotted toward me and stared at me as if trying to communicate her understanding of my physical exhaustion and mental/emotional anguish. She then circled me once, lay down on her back, placed her front paws over her head, and silently begged me to rub her tummy. With a courage I did not know I possessed, I did. Maggie rewarded me with a smile and a lick of my hand.

I am not naïve enough to suggest that Maggie can solve the physical and emotional problems that still plague me, but I do know that the time I spend with her soothes me in a way that my iPod, elliptical, and favorite books cannot. Maggie's trust in me leaves me no choice but to trust myself; her devotion motivates me to put aside my doubts and demons in order to take care of her—and to venture outside my very narrow comfort zone. I am a master at turning molehills into mountains, but with a lick of her tongue and a wag of her tail, Maggie helps me find hope in despair.

Thanks to Maggie, I now allow myself to bury my fears and to believe that I can cope with the pain of loneliness, old age, and a chronic jaw condition.

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