

Something Wagging This Way Comes

Category: Healing

written by Laurel Hunt | February 3, 2021

For five years I had the privilege and honor of visiting hospital patients as a pet therapy volunteer with my springer spaniel, Baker. During those years, when I also cared for elderly parents, the smiles of patients and clinical staff and gratitude for the pet therapy visits sustained me. I couldn't stop my parents' decline, but I could brighten a stranger's day.

Pet therapy rounds required me to adapt to each patient's situation and allow the visit to unfold. When we entered the room, the mood became lighter; solemn faces broke into smiles. Some patients wanted to quietly stroke Baker's soft fur. I'd push a chair next to the bed, so Baker could sit within reach. Others wanted him to lie next to them on the bed, on a clean sheet I'd spread on top. It could be challenging to hoist a 45-pound spaniel on to the bed, avoiding monitor wires, tubes and catheters. But I managed, with liberal hand sanitizer applied to anyone who touched Baker. He'd been bathed and groomed that morning.

Staff welcomed our visits as well: a respite from their stressful routines; a means to comfort a patient struggling with despair.

I don't know what Baker thought of this gig: navigating crowded corridors with slick linoleum floors; beeping equipment; sickness and medication smells; and, occasionally, being mobbed like a visiting rock star. But, surely, he felt my joy, uplifted by the simple act of providing respite and comfort, moments of normalcy and warmth, of hope to be welcomed home soon by their own beloved pets. The visits humbled me and reminded me to count my blessings. The patients and their families, camped in the room hour after hour, were always so grateful. So much love was present.

One of our last visits was among the most memorable. The patient recounted a miraculous recovery from cancer following a near-death experience, years earlier. Now hospitalized for another health problem, she asked to join hands in prayer. She prayed that Baker would continue this healing work and asked God's protection on us. Three weeks later, Baker was diagnosed with early-stage cancer and retired from pet therapy. He survived.

Post-Covid, I look forward to resuming pet therapy when Holly, my young dog, is ready. A wagging tail is the best medicine of all.

Laurel Hunt

Asheville, North Carolina