

Growing Old with Sunny

Who would have thought? Who could have predicted? That the adorable wriggling, energetic, highly-strung and extremely intelligent yellow Lab who seemed the eternal puppy would ever grow old? But so she has. And, actually, we have grown old together. Many of the characteristics of aging that I have are equally demonstrated by my adorable, cuddly swimming, retrieving and diving dog, Sunny: including osteoarthritis, decreased hearing, sight, and mobility; an increasingly grey muzzle; skin conditions; gastrointestinal problems, and so on. She is on more medications than I can enumerate. But Sunny is a trooper and we both Keep On Keeping On. She refuses to be a victim of her old age, limited mobility and brittle bones. My Sunny thrives in adversity and is a magnificent example of mind over matter, spirit over flesh, and determination over submission.

Sunny has faced many challenges, including physical abuse, during her eleven years. She was kept in a traveling crate that she was unable to move or even stand up in as a puppy. Her head still bares scars as a result of many beatings she received for exhibiting behaviors her owners found inconvenient and simply didn't understand. They had purchased her from a breeder at six weeks old, seemingly having no concept of the amount of time, energy, and the lifetime commitment she would require. They simply didn't understand how much interaction, love, affection, discipline, socialization or obedience training she would deserve and require.

The "human parents" who bought her for their young children didn't have the remotest idea that Sunny would require care, understanding and compassion. They hadn't researched the breed or done any of their "homework" regarding the care and responsibilities associated with pet "guardianship", They, as well as their children, were busy from morning until night with other responsibilities: work, school, after-school activities, sports, music lessons, homework, housework, social obligations, etc. The lovely and lively little puppy that they brought into their home had no idea what it was like to be a beloved member of the family. Instead, she was regarded as a "nuisance", a "bother". She was alone 98% of the day and was let out into their zero lot line back yard for only a few minutes throughout the day. She was kept a virtual "prisoner" in their home, and no one had "time" or "energy" to play with or care about her. Inquisitive and full of life, she was bored and frustrated.

Having learned of her plight from a workman at our home, we visited her and her family. Sunny leaped into my lap and licked me all over the face. We adopted Sunny on the spot. She was about seven months old. Intelligent, loving and extremely affectionate, she was so hungry for activity, exercise, love, interaction and attention.

Fortunately, we were able to provide her with all of the above. Sunny had health issues that needed to be addressed including an inverted eyelid which interfered with her sight and a skin (fungal) condition, thyroid, gastrointestinal problems and other conditions – which we handled as quickly and as well as we could. The vet that the family had used referred to Sunny as one of the most hyperactive dogs he had ever treated. Yes, it was

hard to calm her down. But she was so loving, demonstrative and playful, we could not find it in our hearts to be upset with her. We simply loved and appreciated her spirited nature and exuberance.

As she and I grow old together, I truly understand how our aging animal companions mimic and mirror our own aging process. There are so many parallels between their illnesses and limitations and our own. Sunny has slowed down a lot. She runs awkwardly and with discomfort and difficulty. She is no longer the agile, energetic puppy, but, rather, the clumsy, arthritic old lady. However, she still loves to swim in our pond and pool and is as loving, happy-go-lucky and beautiful as ever. Only, she is so much more fragile now than throughout her youth and adulthood. Sunny still has a zest for life, but has calmed down considerably. She rests more often and sleeps for longer periods of time. She does not play with the same intensity or athleticism as she did in her youth. Still, she remains my one and only -my irreplaceable Sunny – my funny, joyful, easygoing, engaging and lovable girl!