

Commentary

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Looking back, I'm glad I didn't let that dog go

The Romans called the first month of the new year January because, like the two-faced god Janus, we look to things ahead even as we glance back at where we were. If you're like me, with over 50 years of



tail wind, you might share my feeling that whatever you choose to do, you'll somehow be wrong and right at the same time. And you'll later wonder.

Here's one thing I wonder about. I made life choices for over a decade, when I was 30 to 43 years old, centered on a cocker spaniel. My first wife had wanted a dog, so we got one. When we got divorced, I got the dog, living in New York City on a barely survival-level liberal arts professor's salary.

A pragmatist would have told me to dump the dog, that keeping her was just sentimentality, an odd vestige of misplaced loyalty. Well, I kept her. I lived in some bizarre areas because of her, curtailed my social life, strained my meager finances. She died, and her ashes are now in a little box on my bookshelf.

What does all that mean? Did I do right? Did I do wrong? Should I have spent so much money and energy on an animal when there is so much human suffering, right here in the United States?

Would I be happier now if I had not devoted so much time, money, care and hours to a dog? Would I have twinges of guilt now — ever — if I had said to my first wife in 1981, "You wanted the dog, take her." Would my next 13 years have been better, or worse?

I don't know.

I do know that I would not have had one sorrowful day at Auditorium Shores watching the 16-year-old animal I loved run, despite a large cancerous tumor, in the sunshine for the last time — watching her bark excitedly at ducks, and later feeding her a last meal of sliced steak and petting her as a kind veterinarian named Dr. Henry Meyers of Riverside Veterinary Clinic put her to sleep on the oak

floor of my old house.

And I wouldn't have had her corpse with me overnight to feel the loss and be calmed by her peace. And I would not now feel some human things I think we all need to feel.

For one, I have never forgotten the kindness of a veterinarian who went out of his way to put my dog to sleep in my house, leave her overnight and come back in the morning to take her. Why did he do that? He had a family. He was a busy man with a busy practice. He charged me nothing extra.

That was one big lesson in human kindness. But maybe I would have experienced all those thing some other way. Who knows?

I also think that I probably would have gone to live in a shared apartment in Hell's Kitchen in New York City for over two years whether I had my dog or not. Without my dog, maybe the drug dealers and pimps and prostitutes and other unfortunate people and criminal types who hung out there would have seen me as someone to rob or beat up. Instead they took me for a naive young innocent who lived in that old printing building and who, get this, walks his cocker spaniel at 1 or 2 a.m. right in the car-trade and drug zone. That dog made me a simpleton, one of the fellow unfortunates, one of the locals, someone to be accepted and protected, rather than targeted.

And maybe without the dog, I would not have needed to reach out for help to other people to take care of her. Maybe my naturally introspective personality would have turned in on itself. I certainly would never have had the experience of seeing hardened street prostitutes change into little girls as they petted that cocker spaniel and asked her name and maybe remembered dogs they had had or always dreamed of having. They certainly wouldn't have had a few minutes of normal life every so often.

As the new year starts, don't forget to think about all your past maybes and to be easier on yourself and on others. The older I get, the more I see that life is very, very big, and we are all so small.

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