

New Lessons From an Old Dog: A "Thank You" to Duke

By Glenn J. Applebee

Things often happen for reasons we can't explain at first. Every dog's master has the best dog and best hunts. When Maggie came up lame on the eve of my annual hunt with my brother, one of the few things we do together, I was quite dejected. The best idea was to invite my best friend, Sid Cleveland, along with his aged dog, Duke. Fortunately, they were able to join the hunt.

The two day hunt was excellent. Most remarkable was the courage, skill, and determination of the old dog. With numerous points the first day, he'd sometimes fall behind when his legs could no longer find the strength to cross a log or push through golden rod which had become obstacles to an aging body rather than mere cover for game. A brief rest and he renewed the tour for more points and bird adventures.

More points the second day during a two hour try. Duke pointed a downed bird that would have been lost otherwise. Six birds added to the brace, a pause to drink from a ditch and a whine came for assistance to move out of the ditch- strength gone from limbs and coordination lost. But still, Duke insisted on returning to the field. Determined to continue, he moved as well as he could through cover, sensing that the hunt was terminating. I follow closely, speaking as if he understood, imploring him to "call it good."

With tears, I pull the leash from my pocket to lead him back to the truck. Duke walks slowly most of the way; I carry him the last few yards. Too tired to drink, he lays down at the back of the truck awaiting the signal to start to the fields again. Lifted to the kennel, unable to stand or walk, he whines to go some more. "No mas," we say, "no mas today."

As we stand in the sun eating our sandwiches, reflecting on the hunt and his performance, memories come to the fore of families, of father, the last days of an old horse.... of attachment, caring, endearment, commitment, communication, sharing and understanding. Stories of love.

I give thanks for old dogs, our fellow



Photo: CLEVELAND

creatures, good friends, and family. They can teach us, if we allow.

Duke, for those two days, was a master teacher. I only wonder if when I am 84, I will have the courage to follow my passion. Will I go until my physical strength is completely spent, each and every day and still say I am willing and want to go some more? I give thanks for my gifts and talents, and for the gifts and talents of all of those around me, and for special times like these, when Duke can teach. Your lesson, Duke, was to live life; to do what you are here to do and do it to the best of your ability; to help others and share your gifts; give it your all until your physical strength is gone; and keep your positive attitude.

Thank you, Duke, for being here and for teaching us. And, Duke, you may just have brought two brothers a little bit closer. I'd like to tell you this, but I hazard a guess that you already know, and that this was part of your purpose here.

The picture that will remain with me always is you on classic point, my brother and your master, a best friend, at ready, in the emerald green alfalfa and clover, framed in the blazing colors of autumn... We all were really there and for those precious instants we all understood your gift of love, your sharing, your friendship. These two days did work out as they were meant to work out...

Two weeks later Duke died.

Glenn Applebee, of Trumansburg, is an avid outdoorsman who shares moments afield with his best friend, Lansingite Sid Cleveland.

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