

Point of View

by Ralph Pohlman



THE PERFECT DOG, AND NOW SHE'S GONE
Eventually, all things come to an end.

That's one of the hard things about having a pet you love. Maggie, my old springer spaniel, had reached that time. She had been a perfect dog for all of her 14 years and there was nothing of real importance I could teach her.

She didn't steal or tell lies and had no standard of beauty, creed or colour. All dogs she met were the same, no matter what their lineage. With a flick of her nose, she read all the news she needed.

When she jumped in the car she didn't know whether we were going to the store for some milk or to Florida. She didn't know or care how long we would be gone or what to pack. The term "self-esteem" was without meaning to her.

But she had been going downhill lately, especially after she started going blind a couple of years ago. She no longer patrolled the fence, protecting us from squirrels and passing joggers. She didn't sing on command like she used to, either. Mostly she slept on the deck.

In many ways, I had

become a seeing-eye person. She couldn't get up or down the stairs by herself, had to be helped into and out of the car. And then, a few weeks ago, things got worse.

The morning after we came back from Thanksgiving weekend at the cottage, Maggie seemed unbalanced, disoriented and confused. She was leaning to one side, sometimes falling over, staggering around in circles.

One of the nice things about having a daughter who is a veterinarian is that I can phone her for advice. I called her at home and told

her the story.

"Does she have nystagmus?" she asked. (Nystagmus is lateral eye movements, flicking quickly to one side and slowly back. As in humans, the quick flick is to the side of the lesion.) I didn't know.

"Go look," she said. After looking, I said, "Yes, she does."

Lisa then said, "She has what we call 'old dog vestibular syndrome.' The vestibular nerve travels from the inner ear to the brain. When it malfunctions it disrupts the dog's sense of balance and orientation. The disturbance can be in the inner ear or in the brain."

Lisa went on to say it was possible Maggie might start to improve in a couple of days but hard to predict. But over the next week she got worse, the poor girl. She had trouble standing up, would bump into walls, and had to be carried outside to do her business.

She weighed about 45 lbs., so that wasn't easy for an old guy. She was terribly anxious, couldn't stand

being left alone and my wife and I were taking turns sleeping with her in the family room. After a few days and nights, it was clear that neither Maggie nor we could go on like this.

It is always a terrible decision to make. I phoned Dr. Paul Westermann at the Stouffville Veterinary Clinic. Could he come to the house and help us out? (Maggie hated going to the vet.) Yes, he would.

Dr. Westermann and Jennifer McGrath, his technician, appeared at 8:30 on Tuesday morning. Lois had spent some time giving Maggie a final brushing so she would look good on her last journey. Then we carried her out to the deck where she had spent so many hours watching the gate, surveying her domain or just snoozing in the sun.

It didn't take long. We cuddled her as Dr. Westermann slipped the needle into her vein and in seconds she laid her head down and slid into that permanent sleep.

Yes, I know, Maggie was "just a dog." But somehow

she served to remind me we are all biological machines that inevitably can, and will, break down. All flesh and blood is mortal.

No matter how much we may love someone, we stand powerless against the death of the ones we hold dearest. At some point they will never again see Christmas, watch a leaf fall or hold our hand. Never again will Maggie try to share my pillow, sing for me or beg for the last bit of my ice cream cone. The more we love, the more we chance to lose.

Oh, my lovely Maggie. Will you join Tippy and Lucky, the dogs of my childhood, and Gus, Shucks, Sophie and Millie, your sister, killed by a passing truck when she was only a year old? Will you one day greet me on that Rainbow Shore or will I lose you in the vast and swirling crowds of eternity?

Till then, I will surely miss you, your liquid trusting eyes, your attempts to take over the front seat of the car, your very presence and all you taught me.

FAITH & LIFE

A MENNONITE PERSPECTIVE

by Denis Taylor



Exiled In Markham

Did you know that last month there was a refugee camp on the Ninth Line, as well as landmines and armed rebels?

Fifty-three high school age youths can tell you all about it. Having them experience the horrors of being stateless and exiled was part of the program, on Saturday, November 15th, at the Mennonite Central Committee Ontario annual meeting.

They were snug in their sleeping bags at Rouge Valley Mennonite Church when, well before sun-up, they were rudely wakened by shouts and loud whistles. Blearily-eyed, they were herded onto a bus and driven to the back of a local farm where they were ordered out and divided into two groups, then told to stand and wait.

One of the groups was soon picked up by a smuggler (me), who offered to lead them to a refugee camp, for a bribe of a watch or two. Off we trudged through the muddy fields. Over the next five hours we experienced what many exiles live with day in and day out.

While skirting around a mine field a woman came screaming towards us imploring us to help her and her mother, who had been badly wounded by a landmine. We couldn't stop to help; we had to reach the refugee camp today. The victim would slow us down and looked like she would probably die anyway.

Next we were forced to stop at an army checkpoint and made to lie face down in the mud while our papers were scrutinized, questions asked and bribes demanded. We lay there for another fifteen minutes then let go at the soldier's discretion. On we marched.

After crossing a swollen creek and travelling through some woods we were accosted by a small band of armed rebels. Again we were made to lie in the mud while they rummaged through our bags and took our remaining valuables.

Our coats and shoes were taken off and strewn about. All through this ordeal we were yelled at and threatened.

After the rebels ran off we regrouped and proceeded to the border crossing, where we were separated into two groups, men and women. Again we were interrogated, "Who are you? Where did you come from? Where are you going? Why do you want to enter this country? What are you going to do here, how will you live? Are you a terrorist?" The questions yelled at us were not always in languages we understood. Their contempt for us was obvious. Many of us had had our papers stolen. Men with papers and their families were the first to cross, and some were arbitrarily turned away.

At last we trudged into the refugee camp, again lining up, showing what documents we had and having to explain and justify ourselves all over again. Finally some food - a small cup of rice and lentils.

We lived it for a day and gained some insight of the life of a refugee, right on the Ninth Line.

Feedback? We'd love to hear your comments. Please contact us at:

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May all your news be good news in the coming year. Happy New Year and many thanks for your valued readership.

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Whitchurch
Stouffville this month