

IT'S NOT ABOUT THE DOG

DESHAE E. LOTT

In the summer of 1993, when Lance Armstrong won his first-ever stage in the Tour de France, my life also changed. My bed made room for an extra body; my face received a daily coating or two of dog slobber; and my clothes and hats and gloves became sprinkled with light-colored dog fur. That was the summer I met Ulina, a yellow Labrador retriever trained from eight weeks old to work as a service animal. Ulina was born two years before we met and on the very same day that my future husband interviewed for the job that allowed us to meet. I have to admit, in both cases, when I met the potential helpmates God and the universe sent my way, I was a little skeptical about granting them the roles they sought in my life. To put it most simply, these were not cases of love at first sight. Had they been, I would have done spiritual cartwheels and rejoiced to receive two of my greatest blessings. But I was a little slow on the uptake of God's Grand Plan. Good for me, Ulina and Jeff are persistent critters.

I'd been on a waiting list for a service dog for about six years, but as I prepared to move to graduate school in Texas, I almost threw away my service dog team application as I cleaned out my files one afternoon. After six years, it seemed unlikely I'd be matched with a dog. Moments later, the telephone rang, and a dog trainer from Canine Companions for Independence (CCI) asked to speak with me. She invited me to journey to California to train with a service dog that CCI trainers had been preparing for two years for partnership with someone like me. I consider it a miracle that on such short notice my parents could help me arrange to attend CCI's team training for three weeks, that I'd be teamed up with a partner just before leaving my hometown,

and that my dear friend whose wedding I was to be in welcomed Ulina as an additional bridesmaid, honoring CCI's policy that my new teammate and I not be separated during our bonding period. Divine order couldn't have been more elegant.

But even though I knew I wanted to work with a service dog, I felt aghast near the end of my first week of training when the dog trainers brought me Ulina as their choice for my teammate. I had worked with a dozen dogs that were in line to graduate and move from dog-in-training to team member status, but Ulina was the only dog that the methodical-me failed to take notes on as a potential match. In fact, she would have been my last choice. I knew all of the commands; I just couldn't get her to obey any. With an assertive tone, I'd say "Sit," and she would continue to stand. When I commanded "Down," she would continue to sit. And on it went. Soon I would confirm my southern drawl was not the problem. It was a trust issue. I felt like a failure when I first worked with her because a trainer could take her, whisper a command, and receive the desired response.

All I knew that day the trainers matched us up was that Ulina was one balky dog. And besides that, unlike two choices on my list, she wasn't a golden retriever with long red locks to match my own. Ignorant at the time, I wasn't too keen on teaming up with Ulina. I even considered leaving California and heading back to Louisiana without a service dog. And it wasn't that I typically was a quitter or a poor loser; I just couldn't see how this balky dog would settle into teamwork with me.

I suspect now that Ulina was tired of a group of neophytes such as me giving her the wrong commands, running over her paws with their wheelchairs, and being insensitive to her needs. She was probably even bored of reviewing, for our sakes, the same routines again and again. I say that, having heard about Ulina's educational history. She had mastered her commands at six months of age rather than the usual 18-24 months. I believe it now. I believed it a couple of days after we were matched up, when I saw her do an amazing thing.

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At the mall with our service dogs, each of us wheelchair users had to command our dog to lie down facing an enormous water fountain and to stay in that position as we moved twelve feet away. One by one each of us planned to call our dog's name, tell the dog to pick up its leash, come to us, and give us the leash. Ulina and I were sixth in line. After the second dog went through the routine, I saw Ulina place her leash in her mouth. At the first call of her name, she performed perfectly. My commands felt like a commentator's dialogue at a sporting event more than a coach's play call. It wasn't that I felt like Ulina would have ignored my calls; had I changed my command from the one she'd observed, she could have adapted. My point is simply that, starting with that moment in team training, Ulina had proven she anticipates my needs and wishes. That day, she listened for the routine and readied herself to comply on her turn.

She has been thriving on her 24-7 on-call status ever since we teamed up. When she hears a pen drop, she's on top of her job before I command it. She locates the dropped item, gently picks it up, holds it in her mouth and brings it to me, waits for me to get a firm grip on the item, and releases her grip over my lap only when I alert her by command to do so. She still works as my teammate and still passes her recertification examinations, though she is significantly past the typical retirement age for a service dog. Her movements can be a little slower nowadays, but she continues to help out when I am working at home and when I am in public.

While Ulina enhances my life each day that we've been a team, more recently, she helps save it. Last year when I came home from the hospital with a ventilator, she demonstrated one of her most remarkable efforts to anticipate my needs and proved herself literally heroic in the process. The first time she heard my ventilator alarming and realized there was no one coming to assist me during a respiratory crisis, she went and recruited help. Now whenever one of my ventilator tubes pops loose and no one comes immediately to reconnect me to the machine that helps me breathe, Ulina finds the person on call. She's adapted to our new lifestyle and discerned how to help, and—most amazingly—she's done this without any new training. Her years of working as my teammate have allowed her to intuit how to help me. Her nature makes her want to help me, even at age thirteen. I couldn't tell you whether Ulina understands that she has been helping sustain my life. She may just want someone to silence the alarm that aggravates human ears and must all the more aggravate canine ones. That said, I know Ulina is sensitive to all of my feelings. She knows when I am distressed, whether I'm silent or vocal about it. Any time she catches me in distress, she works to help restore calmness to our environment. In a way, she has a meditative quality about her, as if she's tuned in to when I'm tuned in to the universal ohm.

The CCI trainers knew something I didn't. Ulina, you see, is a lot like me, despite our non-matching hair. She wants very much to do well and to please others and to be the best that she can be. She craves a challenge, but she's also discerning about whom she closely connects with, particular about doing things in a certain way, and sometimes even stubborn about wanting to express her autonomy and creativity (typically in harmless ways). It took us a couple of days of working together before we learned one another's habits. She had to learn my wheelchair, my Southern drawl, and my physical limits. I had to learn to deliver commands in a way with which she was familiar and to learn how to read all of her nonverbal cues for communication. Our trust in one another and desire to please one another burgeoned quickly despite our cautious start. By CCI graduation day, I felt I had the best service dog around. I still do.

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Back in 2000, shortly after cancer survivor Lance Armstrong won the first of the six consecutive Tour de France cycling races that he participated in from 1999-2004, he wrote an autobiography subtitled *My Journey Back to Life*. He acknowledges that "We each cope differently with the specter of our deaths," but states that he believes "we are supposed to try to face it straightforwardly, armed with nothing but courage. . . . When you think about it, what other choice is there but to hope? We have two

options medically and emotionally: give up, or fight like hell. . . . Pain is temporary. . . . If I quit, however, it lasts forever. . . . So when I feel like quitting, I ask myself, which would I rather live with?"

Many human beings and certainly many who face critical health situations must ask themselves how they will choose to deal with the physical and emotional pain of deterioration and limitation: whether they will choose apathy and fear or passion and hope. Armstrong argues that the pain of cancer and the specter of death motivated his journey into a richer life far better than athletic discipline did, making him more aware of himself and others. While training as a cyclist prepared him in some ways to endure pain and to push himself through it, in the end, the title of his first autobiography makes clear his belief, *It's Not About the Bike*. The pages of that book expand upon Armstrong's argument that, more than other factors, character and attitude determine whether one wins or loses at living, the most important, and really the only, race before any of us.

As a service dog's partner, I've had to learn a lot. I learned how little I knew about dogs and working with dogs, despite having grown up with them. I learned that sometimes other people know better than I do what's going to be best for my life; I have to trust the experts. I learned how to love in new ways, laughing rather than grimacing when a dog slimed me. I learned about being a partner and how partners complement one another in who they've been and who they're becoming, bringing out the best in one another, offering joy to one another. Ulina has changed my life by increasing my wisdom and my joy and my safety. She is my beloved partner. My great love affair with this canine ranks among my greatest life blessings, but my life is not about a dog.

My life is about moving from ignorance to knowledge, about learning new ways to love and to trust and to self-express, about welcoming blessings and being humbled, about feeling grateful for revelations rather than resentful of change. Ulina has been present for many of my life-altering moments, including the process of earning my two graduate degrees, my moves to Texas and Illinois and back to Louisiana, countless university lectures, flights to and from conference presentations, my mother's death, and my own respiratory collapse. Ulina's been with me more than any

human being, except perhaps my mother. I deeply value Ulina's companionship. Just as when I'm with a friend, the intensity of my pleasure magnifies when Ulina shares the moment with me. Thank goodness someone else knew and insisted she was the dog for me long before I ever did. And, thank goodness, I didn't fly back to Louisiana without her over a decade ago. Even at that, I never want my life to be scripted around or entirely focused upon this wonderful creature. It's not about the dog.

To me life is about our ability to claim the resources we have at hand and to use those in maximizing our unique creative expressions in this world. It's all about learning who we are and who we can become. A bike or a service animal can be constructively life-transforming, but only if we so choose. We ready ourselves to receive those gifts the universe presents when we maintain our hope and receptivity. That takes a lot of trust in God and the benefits of a partnership with God. We have to stop being fearful and balky, a little like Ulina in teaming up with me. Trusting like that takes courage. Hope, receptivity, and courage, in and of themselves, don't necessarily benefit us long-term unless those concepts motivate our *behaviors*. Laziness always stymies us. Yet, if we push through our fear and accept that we can learn how to fully utilize opportunity, we set ourselves up for a grand adventure. That is, a present such as Ulina can only help us when we notice its presence and welcome a partnership with it: when we embrace it; when we let it lick our face and cover us in fur; when, in whatever ways we can, we integrate it into the amazing, unique adventure of our personal lives.

All that requires effort—often great effort—on our part. Receptivity, readiness, courage, endurance we must call forth; we must persist in hope and love and learning. We must trust in God. This process is not about the gift: it's not about a bike, and it's not about a dog. Certainly the people, animals, tools, and activities in our lives guide our self-expression; with loving communities and available resources we establish a wonderfully healing and creative space for ourselves and others. But, in the end, it's about how we work with the tools and gifts allotted to us, whether skills or objects or ideas, however few or many those are. It's about whom we choose to be and to become. It's about those everyday choices we make to fulfill our creative promise. ♦

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