

One Man. One Dog. Sharing their life's journey together.



We've all heard the saying "A dog is man's best friend." They are great companions, greet us each day with wagging tails and unconditional love. They bark when they're happy, bark to protect and sometimes bark for no reason at all. They enrich our lives, filling it with meaning and purpose.

I am not a dog owner myself – I've opted for a big fluffy cat who sometimes though reminds me of a dog, but I've had dogs growing up and have loved my parents and sister's dogs like they were my own.

But what happens when they die? What happens when they depart from our lives and leave an empty void to fill? The death of a dog can be heart breaking and the grieving process can be very sad and maybe even overwhelming.

Oftentimes, an effective coping and healing strategy when a pet passes away is to write out your memories. Before those memories fade away, try to remember and cherish all the great times you had with your dog. It doesn't have to be long. It doesn't have to be formal. Just jot down thoughts, feelings and emotions you shared with your furry friend.

Ernest, the owner of 7 Airedales, knows all too well what it means to have loved and lost. After the death of his fifth Airedale named Annie, he felt devastated and lost. He had shared an important time in his life with Annie and when she succumbed to cancer at the age of ten, Ernest felt a large part of his world was gone – forever.

But one day, while sitting at his computer, he started to write about his 'sweet little girl', as he called her. The words poured onto the page and before he knew it, he had written over 10 pages of memories. He felt a little better getting these thoughts out on paper, creating lasting memories, to be saved and cherished.

Ernest shared this story with me. I opened the document at work once I received it and started reading. At first I laughed, remembering all the funny things Annie did and her gentle behaviours. But as I continued to read more, I cried. I cried because I too remembered how she grew weaker when her illness started to attack her body. And I cried too, for what it meant for Ernest, for his life, as his dog was dying.

Ernest shared this story with me and now I want to share this beautiful, touching story with you. You might laugh too or maybe you will cry. Maybe Ernest's story will inspire you too to write your own special memories from your life, whether it's with a pet, a friend, your spouse, child or grandchild.

Our Sweet Little Girl

Since 1991 six Airedales have shared our lives and our homes. After Jake passed away, Heidi, Toby and Nikki shared our lives too and passed as well. I have the strongest memories of Jake, more so than I have for the other Airedales - Heidi, Toby and Nikki. I wrote about Jack after he died and when I finally stopped crying. After Jake passed away, Heidi, Toby and Nikki did as well. Their remains are buried under ancient lilac trees on the front lawn of our farm. Annie will soon join them.

Annie left us in August 2016. I loved her dearly so I wanted to write down what and who she was and what she meant to our family before more years will have passed all too quickly and the memories would be lost.

Maybe because I lived with Annie for over ten years and maybe because I am 72 and prone to more sentimentality than is good for one, but Annie's death was very hard to bear, even more so than Nikki, a dog I always considered a bit of a hard luck dog and so deserving of more affection than normal.

To digress for a moment, Nikki followed Toby into our home and lives. Toby had succumbed to cancer at age 4. An enormous black hole was created in our home when he died. Toby had the most perfect ending to his life, on a hillside at our farm, surrounded by our children, Heidi (our second Airedale), my daughter Heather's dogs, and the horses standing silently by the fence looking on. The vet came to the farm to put Toby to sleep as his body was riddled with cancer and his time had come. The vet had trouble finding a vein. Sweet Toby held up a paw finally to show her it was okay to place the needle there. We all cried. This could have been a picture painted by Turner or Osborn.

Days following Toby's passing, I made a call to a breeder and found Nikki in Flamborough. He was the second last of the puppies to be adopted from this breeder. I saw him in his cage jumping up and down, wanting, it seemed, to come home with me. The other pups were equally exuberant but there was something about Nikki that caught my attention and my heart. I call him now as I did then a bit of a hard luck dog. He was not adopted early. Others did not want him and the reason was easy to see. His ears would not flop over in classic Airedale style.

They remained stubbornly pointed like a Dobermans or even like a deer. The breeder said they tried gluing them down twice but both times failed to remedy his pointy ears but I fell in love with him, pointy ears and all. In fact, I fell in love with him because of his pointed ears. He was a tall, lanky, elegant Airedale, taller than Jake, a bit taller than Toby, the recipient of many admiring comments when we were out for a walk. People would stop in their cars on the street to tell me how beautiful Nikki was.

He was with us when Heidi died and greeted Alfie and Annie when they made the short trip from Alliston to our farm. At that time all three dogs travelled weekly between Walker Avenue and the farm until I moved to the farm permanently in late 2006.

Our response when a dog died was to replace a male with a male and a female with a female. We always wanted to have two Airedales at a time, male and female. I learned from a friend that a breeder in Alliston had a large litter, and none were spoken for. The drive to Alliston is only forty minutes. We drove to his house and were taken to his backyard kennel where 12 tumbling, tripping, barking balls of brown and black fur came running towards us. I don't remember how we ever chose the two we did. I looked for a girl that was more slender than the males, less aggressive, a lady if you wish and I chose Annie. My wife did not originally want a second pup but she saw Alfie, a robust, energetic ball of energy and knew she had to have him. I think Alfie reminded her of Jake.

A few weeks later we went back to the breeders to bring the pups home with us. We bundled them in the car, with my wife in the back seat, the pups climbing all over her and kissing her until she could not stop laughing. We arrived a half hour later at the farm and showed Nikki his new cousins. As expected, Nikki was polite but not overjoyed. The sad reality was that while the three would get along without fights or tussles, run as a pack together, Alfie and Annie were a close pair, one mind, always together at meals, sleeping, outside playing, chasing the horses, while Nikki was an outsider, on the fringes watching, trying to become part of a threesome but not quite succeeding.

For five years I lived with Nikki, Annie and Alfie at the farm. The crate training was a great success. No furniture was ever damaged. I think the distraction of the outdoors and the horses fully occupied their doggie minds and left no room for mischief. They were unforgettable years, happy years full of joy watching these three beautiful animals romping about the farm, in each other's company. My eyes following them with love and pride.

They loved being outside especially in winter. My best memories are of the three of them sitting in the snow, me thinking their tushes would get cold, sitting still like sentinels keeping a lookout for intruders or guests, the latter had to be two-legged or they would be in trouble. Then coming into the kitchen, paws and snouts covered with snow, shaking themselves off and then lying down on a rug or couch. What a life we all had.



A few years ago I converted the dogs to Judaism. We celebrated Shabbat with wine and challah. I read the blessings and lit the candles. The words, "Annie, Alfie, Nikki Shabbat" got the dogs into the kitchen and sitting in a respectful semi-circle around me. Annie sat on the floor waiting for her piece of challah with her tail pressed tightly to the floor, swinging back and forth with great speed and vigor. I never got around to fitting her with a yarmulke. Nor Alf or Nikki.

Annie and Alfie were like two peas in a pod, together most of the time. If one strayed from the other, he or she would receive an admonishing tirade of barking. Annie was forever scolding Alfie when he ran through the invisible fence.

Annie displayed traits and qualities I want to capture in this remembrance. She was fearless and tenacious. I always thought of her as being like the female in a pride of lions except here the two males were Nikki, who I think was quite happy to follow her about and Alfie, who was quite happy to stay home. But Annie liked to be out and about. It was only in later years she stayed close to home on our property. I may be reading too much into it this, but in her last years, Annie liked to lay on the driveway or in nests she made in the garden. Was she getting old and was this normal? Or was she trying to relieve the pain from the cancer that was growing in her?

Annie was always the first out the door in the morning with Nikki and Alfie, and I mean out! It was an explosive exit, each vying to be the first, barking at the top of their voices. Here I must mention that for reasons we cannot to this day understand, Alfie and Annie along with Nikki decided they wanted to be out of the house at five in the morning, do their business, come in and have breakfast, rest for an hour and then go outside for a longer run about. After Nikki died Annie and Alfie favored leaving by the bedroom door. Once out they immediately greeted the morning in the form of an extended and full-blooded howl. Sometimes they would start the howl while still in the bedroom. Sometimes they would howl anywhere in the house, for some reason only they understood. It was always amusing. The neighbours heard the morning howls too. They may have been annoyed but never told us.

I cannot write this part and not mention the scrum at the kitchen door when the three Airedales, along with my daughter's two dogs (whom would often visit), Edgar and Lily, all

rushed out in the morning at the same time. It has never been clear, as I said why they were so eager every morning to run out, nor was it clear where they were going. I suspect they believed that some critter was lurking on the front lawn and as a baying pack they would surprise the critter and subdue him. It never happened. Edgar during his last few stays at the farm was game but fragile and ran out with the rest. I always smiled when he stood in the pack waiting to get out, but in the mad rush they knocked him over, and being built a bit like a beach ball, he literally rolled onto the porch like a ball, righted himself and took off after the pack at his top speed which could not be described as blinding. No harm, no foul. He was a game and a darling little fellow, loved by everyone for his courage, character and loyalty.

On every occasion Annie was first or second out, but the last to return. It was morning and breakfast was awaiting these early risers but despite that Annie had to be called for her breakfast and sometimes it would have to be put aside for her. "Annie, breakfast, Annie!!" Eventually you would hear the sound of her nails clicking on the flagstones as she made her way to the door.

Annie loved her morning hug before going out the bedroom door. As a young dog she was very agile and would easily place her front legs on my knees and lean in for a hug, where we touched head to head. Her tail wagged throughout. It wagged like a metronome when she sat and waited for me to open the bedroom outside door. She had a smile on her face I swear in anticipation of her hugs or going out. Annie spoke to me through her eyes and the shape of her mouth. She gave a similar tale wag, a rapid back and forth sweep along the floor when she sat in the kitchen to receive a treat she and Alfie always got when they came in from an extended romp outside. She did the same when waiting for her food bowl to be put down, her sitting demurely waiting for dinner to be served, a guest with good manners. I gave them treats to reinforce their coming home as they had over 20 acres they could explore if they chose for hours or days. Annie respected the fence, but Alfie would run through if a jogger ran by or a car slowed. But never did he go through the fence so that we could never see him and a stern "Alf, come" usually got him back for a treat.

Annie and Alf had breakfast at five. Without fail they would stop whatever they were doing at 3 pm and let us know it was dinner time. We never bothered to change these times. Breakfast began our day conveniently especially since I had to attend to the horses which I wanted to do as early as possible and the 3 pm dinner left the time clear for our dinner preparation. Of course, we sometimes missed the 3 o'clock deadline if we had been out but they didn't mind the hour or two wait and we knew we would never be very late.

As Annie got older, the morning hugs were not quite as enthusiastic as I believe she got stiffer and had arthritis. We treated her for arthritis in her last year, always worried about kidney. Perhaps we should have been less comfortable with the anti-inflammatories and steroids, the latter for her skin condition she developed every summer. She lost fur in patches.

Annie had a look that was at once beseeching, gentle, loving, woebegone, adoring, and mischievous. I got that look whenever I tended to her wounds, scratched an itchy spot or made sure Alfie didn't eat her dinner. It was her look and those adoring eyes that gave her claim to being our sweet little girl. This will be on the stone we will prepare for her in the ensuing weeks.

Alfie thought he was ruler of the house but Annie was the alpha figure. She led in most activities, whether chasing a rabbit across the lawn, dashing in, out and around the horses feet while they were eating, checking the stalls every morning in the hope a mouse or rat would show itself, climbing the barn steps to check out the maw, getting rid of raccoons, and so many more activities. Annie was the first to show up for hugs and kisses until pushed aside by Alfie. But she didn't seem to mind. She would give a doggie shrug and wait her turn for a later special Annie hug. Annie walked close beside me to the barn every morning, loving the hugs and tickles I gave her, laughing all the time. Her day had begun.

Annie and Alfie...love was all they had to give.

Two faces staring through the kitchen window when I came in from outside.

Two faces staring down at me from the top of the stairs as I came up from the basement.

Two dogs waiting for me on the porch.

Asleep on the kitchen floor or in their beds, their bodies in the exact same configuration.

Two bodies, one mind.

But then Annie left us...too soon.

It began the last week of July 2016 when we left for the cottage we rented. No sooner did we arrive than we had a message from a friend who was looking after the dogs, that Annie was throwing up and not eating. He got her to the vet and she seemed to recover, our worries dissipated until the day we left the cottage to return home. Our friend told us she was not eating again. We went into high mode vet care, first to Nottawasaga where she was diagnosed with terminal kidney cancer and would be leaving us in days. They kept her over night to see if fluids would help but they didn't, and we were left to take her home where she could die.

On the day chosen, Annie got up from the porch where she had been laying to greet the vet. Annie was happy to see the vet. She greeted her as she did any visitor to the farm.

Annie. Our sweet little girl.

Note: Following the writing of this blog, Alfie lived an additional three years but sadly passed away on June 13th, 2019. He died of natural causes. He was an old but happy dog. Ernest now has Charli, a mischievous, daring but loving little girl who also adores hugs and kisses each morning.

© Ernest Rovet