

Life Lessons Our Dogs Share With Us

Guemes Island Community Church – August 17, 2025

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Readings

The Dogs at Live Oak Beach, Santa Cruz, by Alicia Ostriker

As if there could be a world
Of absolute innocence
In which we forget ourselves

The owners throw sticks
And half-bald tennis balls
Toward the surf
And the happy dogs leap after them
As if catapulted—

Black dogs, tan dogs,
Tubes of glorious muscle—

Pursuing pleasure
More than obedience
They race, skid to a halt in the wet sand,
Sometimes they'll plunge straight into
The foaming breakers

Like diving birds, letting the green turbulence
Toss them, until they snap and sink

Teeth into floating wood
Then bound back to their owners
Shining wet, with passionate speed
For nothing,
For absolutely nothing but joy.

From Dog Songs, by Mary Oliver

He puts his cheek against mine
and makes small, expressive sounds.
And when I'm awake, or awake enough

he turns upside down, his four paws
in the air
and his eyes dark and fervent.

“Tell me you love me,” he says.

“Tell me again.”

Could there be a sweeter arrangement? Over and over
he gets to ask.
I get to tell.

Good morning.

About three months ago, Birch and I adopted a dog. She had previously belonged to Larry Verbano, who passed away unexpectedly. The Guemes Island Fire Department knew we had recently lost our beloved pooch, Inky, and contacted us to see if we were interested in adopting another dog. Birch and I have always adopted rescue dogs, so we agreed to meet her and see how it went.

We both instantly fell in love with her. Her name at the time was Rosie, but given our close friendship with Rosie Cayou James, we decided we needed to change her name. So we named her Thuja, which is the first part of the Latin name for Cedar Trees. She immediately took to her new name, and responds when we call to her with a happy face and wagging tail.

Thuja instantly felt at home with us, and we with her. She very quickly fell into the rhythm of our lives, and we also observed and supported her own ways of being with us. She now sleeps on the bed with us every night, and sits with us on sofa when we are in the living room. She is very friendly with other dogs, and enjoys meeting them on the trails in Dog Woods.

Our time spent with Thuja reminds us to slow down, enjoy what is around us, and make sure that we are living our lives in a rhythm that embodies the calmness of the world around us here on Guemes Island. She shows us what it means to walk slowly through the woods, savoring the sights and sounds and smells of the forest. Indeed, our four-pawed friends are particularly adept at showing us the priorities in life, and the beauties of this natural world that we all call our home.

I am very curious what our world would be like if we paused to enjoy the small things around us that give us so much joy, in ways similar to how our four-pawed family members show us how to do this every day. What would our experiences be like if we chose to always live in the moment, and savor everything around us with all of our senses? Would there be more neighborliness in our communities? Less global conflict? More time for joy and play and less

for worry and sadness? Our dogs show us how to do this, and it's up to us to listen to what they are trying to tell us.

To take this even further, what would our planet look like if we followed the examples of our canine family members and sought to play with others rather than to pursue conflict centered around national borders, racist beliefs, and overall disrespect for others based on race, nationality, gender, or sexual orientation? I suspect that our lives would look very different, and we would tend to enjoy everything around us more than we do based on our human tendencies to discriminate, isolate, or condemn others for who or what they are.

Is this a unlikely fantasy? Perhaps. But, that said, what steps can each of us take in our own lives to move us closer to this possible future? I contemplate that question often, and I'd like to share a few thoughts about this here this morning.

Part of me can imagine a world in which this actually can be the way we interact with each other. As Rodney King said in 1992, after the police officers who brutally beat him in Los Angeles during the race riots there were acquitted, *"Can't we all just get along?"* This phrase, which has become a powerful reminder of the human desire for peace and unity, also highlights the challenges that get in the way of achieving this goal. These challenges include social and political divisions, media influences, limited opportunities and systemic issues, and psychological factors that include prejudice, biases and fear.

And yet, Rodney King's words continue to hold their place in our hearts as we try to imagine the future that he was envisioning. What, indeed, would this world look like if we could all just get along?

Let's travel down this path together for a few minutes. What would our nation and our world be like if we were able to see things clearly through the eyes of others who have had different experiences than our own? What would it mean for us to embody the vision of everyone getting along? When Thuja sees a dog who looks different from her, she doesn't back away, she doesn't distrust, she doesn't do anything except enthusiastically greet that dog and enter into play mode.

What would the world be like if all of us did the same thing with those who look different from ourselves, or live different lifestyles than those with which we are individually familiar? My own parents really helped me on this front, as they were both labor organizers who worked with union workers who were often different from me. In the early 1970's, my father ran a strike against the Farah Pants Company in El Paso, Texas. The workers were there were all Mexican Americans, and my father took my sister and me with him to visit with the strikers and walk the picket lines with them. That was truly an eye opening experience for me.

Similarly, my mother organized and launched the Institute for Education and Research on Women and Work at the Cornell University School of Industrial and Labor Relations, which had an office on 43rd Street in New York City, where I grew up. Through my mother, I met many women who were struggling to be recognized for the work that they did, and the rights they had to organize and protest when they were undercompensated or forced to work longer hours than their lives outside their jobs would allow. In fact, my mother wrote the first history of working women in America, called *"We Were There: The Story of Working Women in America"*.

It was the influence of my parents that enlightened me to issues of social justice and freedom, and although they both died much too young, (my father was 53 and my mother was 57 at the times of their deaths), I am grateful to them for pointing me towards a life dedicated to social justice issues. It was this influence that led me, after graduate school, to work for the New York City Gay & Lesbian Anti-Violence Project, which was, at the time, working to promote the visibility and a justice response to the epidemic of violence against the LGBTQI+ communities in New York City. That work also led to my appointment as a New York City Human Rights Commissioner, and in that role, together with Marie Wilson, a celebrated lesbian, we were able to ensure that New York City protected the civil rights of our community, especially during the AIDS crisis when so many individuals in New York City – and across the nation – were facing hostilities related to the AIDS epidemic.

So, you may now be asking yourselves, how does this relate to the theme of this morning's talk, *Life Lessons Our Dogs Share With Us*? Let me dive into that here with a little more depth.

Unlike people, dogs don't seem to discriminate against each other or other species, unless they are being abused or harmed by their owners or other animals. Thuja looks adoringly at both me and Birch, and appreciates us both without any judgment about who we are, our lifestyles, or how we interact with her, our neighbors, and our community. I think that is because we show nothing for affection for her, for each other, and for this beautiful little island community we call home. I think she senses this, and that – in turn – helps to shape how she herself interacts with those around her.

There is a lesson here for all of us. In the most basic ways in which we show up every day for ourselves, each other, our communities, and our world, we create a context in which, when we do it well, we allow everything and everyone around us to thrive. This is something, I think, that others – including the animals with whom we share our homes and our lives – can sense and can respond to in like manner. This also is one of the foundational principles behind Dog Woods, which Birch and I have created as a sanctuary for the animals, plants and trees that call Dog Woods their home. It is also the reason that we welcome the community into Dog Woods, to experience what it means to appreciate and hold in our hearts the intricacies and beauty of the natural world.

For example, science tells us that a cubic yard of soil contains billions to trillions of living organisms, including bacteria, fungi, nematodes, and larger creatures like insects and earthworms. The exact number varies greatly depending on soil type, health, and location. When we are able to appreciate this, it means that we can absorb what it means to respect all living things with whom we share this rock hurtling through space and orbiting around the sun. It's when we fail to acknowledge that we share this planet with so many different living things that we become disrespectful and destructive towards the environment, and ultimately each other.

And so, as I wrap up this morning's talk, I encourage each of us to think about the ways in which we interact with the world around us. Do we show respect for our neighbors, be they other people, animals, or plants? Do we pause to reflect on what we are doing to preserve and protect the beings with whom we share this planet? Do we live our lives in ways that help to preserve and protect the rights of others, including the animals and plants that thrive around us?

What does it mean for each of us to prioritize these efforts, and to help to ensure that those that come after us – including both our descendants as well as all the species with whom we share this planet – will be able to thrive in ways that reflect the love and concern we need to share for all living things?

And, not surprisingly, this brings me back to Thuja, and how it is that our dogs provide for us a model for how to interact with the world. Thuja greets each day with enthusiasm, and loves meeting our neighbors and their pooches as we walk the roads and the woods. In her own way, we can see her doggy smile as she moves through her day, and know that she is both reflecting the happiness of the world around her, and projecting her own happiness for others to see and appreciate.

What are the ways that each of us could do the same thing as our doggies? How can each of us project outwards the joy and the appreciation we have for the world around us?

To quote that wonderful song, *This Little Light of Mine, I'm Going to Let it Shine*:

This little light o' mine, I'm going to let it shine.

This little light o' mine, I'm going to let it shine.

This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine.

Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.

Everywhere I go, I'm going let it shine.

Everywhere I go, I'm going let it shine.

Everywhere I go, I'm going let it shine.

Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.

Thank you.