

Innate Characteristics

BY MAY MON POST

One of my best friends (a somewhat jaded attorney) likes to joke that my dog, Bella, digested more law than we ever did when we were in law school. Bella – a mix of American bulldog, Boston terrier, and pug – once ate the cover to Erwin Chemerinsky’s “Constitutional Law” book and most of the introductory material, which included the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution, the Articles and about half of the amendments. (She also ate a few of my most expensive shoes and purses – but that’s another story.)

Bella, or “the Bear” as my husband Mark affectionately calls her, is a rescue dog. Mark wanted a purebred Labrador retriever to remind him of the AKC-registered labs of his childhood, growing up along the banks of the Susquehanna River in York, Pa. I wanted a rescue dog. I grew up in Rangoon, Burma, where if you catch a glimpse of a dog it is not a portrait of a pet surrounded by love and affection and a well-manicured lawn. Instead, it is an image of a flea-ridden, rib-bearing beast scavenging for scraps of food at one of Burma’s ubiquitous monasteries.

Bella is no beast. She has snuggled her way into our hearts – and onto our bed every night. (Yes, we are dog people.) She cost us about \$600. (Who said rescue dogs are inexpensive?) She weighs around 60 pounds and has big round eyes and a shiny, reverse-brindle coat. She loves her squeaky toys and hates getting her nails cut. When she drinks water, some of the water drips off from her jowls as she wanders away from the bowl. And she is protective of our 2-year-old son, River. When River cries and we are not quick to respond, Bella is the first to appear crib-side, like a reminder: come quickly, something is wrong, you really can do better.

She obeys most of the commands we have taught her. She has “sit” down pat. On leash, she “heels” relatively well, for a quasi-bulldog, unless “inspired” by a squirrel or other critter. “Come” is a different story. In Bella’s constitution, there are several exceptions to this command. She responds based on her worldview at the moment. It is impossible to understand the calculus of a dog’s worldview, so it basically boils down to whether it is more desirable at that moment to heed the command, or to continue to do whatever it is that dogs do. The wonderful thing about most dogs is that they appear to be driven by a perpetual pursuit of happiness.

It is often said that dogs were the first animals to be domesticated. What this means, I think, is that dogs were the

first member of the animal kingdom to cross the threshold of the night and join men and women around the fire. Now, centuries later, we cannot get our hairy friends off the couch or away from the hearth – unless it is to play or go for a walk. Where once we carried spears or knives and had a visceral fear of the unknown, we now transport “doggy” bags and stop for traffic. One way or another, we have all been domesticated, and the dog will continue to be our furry companion into our unknowable future.

The long history of this peculiar relationship should not surprise us. One of the oldest known “texts” – Homer’s “The Odyssey” – nearly 3,000 years old, speaks fondly of a dog named Argos, roughly translated from Greek, meaning “Great Dog.” After 20 years struggling to get home to Ithaca, Odysseus finally arrives at his homeland, disguised as a beggar and

preparing to attack his wife’s suitors and reclaim his home. As Odysseus approaches the outermost gate of his house, he finds Argos lying neglected on a pile of dung. Unlike everyone else on the island, who is fooled by Odysseus’s disguise, Argos immediately recognizes his master. Argos does his best to wag his tail and move nearer. But he is too feeble to move. Unable to approach and properly greet his beloved dog, as this would betray his disguise, Odysseus pauses long enough to ask his escort to describe the dog’s better days. In the moments of this private reunion, two things happen: Odysseus wipes away a tear, and old Argos dies.

But that’s the thing about some dogs, the great ones never really die. Every dog person has splendid stories to tell about their furry companions. They have wagged and chewed and slobbered their way into

the very fabric of our lives. They have crossed the darkness and become our friends and have retrieved and presented us with the profoundest gift of all: their unconditional love. Josh Billings once said, “A dog is the only thing on earth that loves you more than he loves himself.”

There’s that nifty phrase – may I be the kind of person my dog thinks I am. But perhaps it should be: May I be the kind of being my dog is. John Grogan, author of “Marley and Me: Life and Love with the World’s Worst Dog,” said it well: “A person can learn a lot from a dog, even a loopy one like ours. Marley taught me about living each day with unbridled exuberance and joy, about seizing the moment and following your heart. He taught me to appreciate the simple things – a walk in the woods, a fresh snowfall, a nap in a shaft of winter sunlight. And as he grew old





and achy, he taught me about optimism in the face of adversity. Mostly, he taught me about friendship and selflessness and, above all else, unwavering loyalty.”

Woof! Woof!

Now, if there are any cat-lovers who are still reading, I apologize. Please, put

this down and go pet your cat. If you can find her. ■

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The Philadelphia Lawyer, printed with soy inks on recycled paper, is published quarterly in March, June, September and December by the Philadelphia Bar Association, 1101 Market St., 11th floor, Philadelphia, Pa. 19107-2955. Telephone: (215) 238-6300. E-mail: tplmag@philabar.org. Subscription cost for members is \$5 which is included in annual dues, and for nonmembers is \$45 yearly. The opinions stated herein are not necessarily those of the Philadelphia Bar Association. All manuscripts submitted will be carefully reviewed for possible publication. The editors reserve the right to edit all material for style and length. Advertising rates and information are available from Don Chalphin, Sales Director, ALM, 1617 JFK Boulevard, Suite 1750, Philadelphia, PA 19103, (215) 557-2359. Periodicals postage at Philadelphia and additional locations. POSTMASTER: please send changes to The Philadelphia Lawyer, c/o Philadelphia Bar Association, 1101 Market St., 11th floor, Philadelphia, PA 19107-2955

The Philadelphia Lawyer

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