

Tasha's Diary

A year in
the life of
a rescued
Alaskan Malamute,
by Dick Austin



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In memory of Tasha (1998 – 2009)

Tasha's Diary is a record of the my beloved Alaskan Malamute's first year following her adoption from Chesapeake Area Alaskan Malamute Protection (www.CHAAMP.org). Tasha died on Saturday, May 16, from old age (for the breed), without great pain or complications.

1

Tasha, Come!

Sunday, November 12, 2000. As soon as I entered the fenced yard she rushed to put front paws on my chest in greeting. Three other Alaskan Malamutes had done the same on my way through the house. Most dogs of this breed will greet a stranger with unconstrained affection unless they are trained in courtesy. The Malamute comes from Eskimo villages where each family kept many sled dogs chained to huts in the yard. When a human appeared the dogs competed for attention.

Natasha exhibits a broad, handsome head with a black forehead over a white muzzle. Black continues down her back and white down her belly, with her flanks shading gradually from one to the other. At seventy pounds she is on the small edge of the Malamute range, but the white paws on my chest were large. Her forelegs and hindquarters were muscular. Later, when she walked briskly, her tail arched forward over her back in classic Malamute posture, displaying a flag of long white hair. [Note: Later I would decide that Malamute Rescue had over-estimated her age at two years, when in fact she was

probably 18 months old. At full growth she would pass 100 pounds.]

Soon she lay beside my chair while I scratched her stomach. Her "rescuer" had told me she loved this contact most of all. At two years old, Natasha was in the Fairfax, Virginia home of a member of the Alaskan Malamute Assistance League. The dog and I were each being interviewed for adoption.



This is the Tasha I met, being held by AC Vernor, her rescuer.

This hugely energetic puppy had been one of two dogs in the apartment of a young couple that was overwhelmed after the birth of their baby. They took the dogs to a kennel and then moved from their

apartment. When the kennel proprietor could not locate the family he contacted the Malamute rescue organization. This dog was brought to a modest home where four other rescued Malamutes already resided under the care of a middle-aged bachelor with "MALRESCU" on his license plate. She was given a full veterinary examination and, as with all rescued females, she was spayed. Her name was changed, for protection, to Natasha. I met her through the web-site, www.malamuterescue.org.

To account for my attraction to Malamutes I must tell a "shaggy dog story." In April of 1994 my wife Anne and I were driving from Anchorage, Alaska, north to Fairbanks where I was scheduled to lead a weekend workshop on Christian faith and environmental responsibility, my professional specialty. Tired and thirsty as we approached Fairbanks, we stopped at a rustic bar for a beer. While we were relaxing on bar stools, a Malamute crossed the room to engage me in conversation. Although Malamutes rarely bark, they often mutter softly to engage a human. Such was my experience with this large, handsome resident of the bar who "talked" with me for a quarter-hour. I was entranced.

A few days later an acquaintance took Anne and myself for a sled ride behind her long string of excited dogs. In their beauty and strength, the Malamutes stood out among the others. When we drove back toward Anchorage, I made a point to visit

the dog kennels in Denali National Park. Again, I found the alert Malamutes captivating.

A few months before I interviewed Tasha, Anne and I had buried her old and beloved collie, Mossy. Anne told me that our next dog would be mine to choose and mine to care for. My right leg was slowly recovering from the surgery to install an artificial knee. As I exercised daily to regain strength and agility, I remembered my encounter with Malamutes. I would need to resume a vigorous program of outdoor exercise. Such a dog would see to that.



Tasha being delivered to SW Virginia

My interview with Natasha featured a walk around her neighborhood. I held the lead. Natasha ran forward with excitement but responded to correction, not pulling too hard until we came to a barking female behind a chain-link fence. Natasha lunged so I had to use my full strength to snap her back. She ran around my feet searching for release. I pivoted swiftly to maintain control — this put the agility of my new knee to a test. We calmed, then proceeded.

I had been warned that Natasha's greatest

temptation was squirrels. Sled dogs in Alaskan villages may be required to forage small animals for food, so their predatory instinct must remain sharp. Yet later in the walk, when we spied a gray squirrel on a fence, I persuaded her to resist a lunge forward.

The interview ended with Natasha splayed on the floor beside my chair — legs extended in all directions, belly pressed to the cool tile. I held my hand to her nose so she might remember my scent. That

evening I gave Anne a full report and we agreed to adopt. The next day we were informed that following a successful interview, with references checked, the Alaskan Malamute Assistance League also approved.

Anne suggested that, if we wish to address a large, frisky dog and to secure her attention, it would be useful to drop that first, nearly-silent syllable from her name. So, "TASHA, COME!"

2

The Fall

Tuesday, November 21. Since I brought Tasha home yesterday she has revealed more prior training, and/or good manners, than anticipated. She sits on command. She appears to have remembered, from our walk the week before, that I don't like lunging on the leash or hard tugging, for she responds readily to a correction and refrains from testing my strength. Perhaps she is housebroken, or close to it. To test that I let her move through the house freely but tried to remain watchful. Frequently I took her out to the grass above our guest house where her run was under construction. After we got out of the car Monday evening I had led her there for her first urination. Now she returned to the same area unfailingly.

I had been told that Malamutes are intelligent and that they are eager to please, responding to positive reinforcement but less well to negative discipline. So I resolve to be positive in my training, lavishing praise for good behavior, and to reserve punishment for a housebreaking infraction. After her

breakfast we went for an interesting walk and, upon returning, Tasha urinated in the customary place but did not relieve her bowels. Not long after we returned to the house I sensed a disagreeable smell. I soon found her pile on a rug beside my bed. I grabbed Tasha by the collar and forced her reluctant body to the scene. Sitting her where she could see and smell the offense, I rebuked her and administered a sharp slap under her chin. I then returned her to her "crate" — the wire enclosure in my office where she had slept contentedly the night before — for a half-hour of meditation on her misdeed. I pointedly ignored her during that period, but afterward I led her on a quiet walk and resumed normal conversation. There were no more infractions.

We enjoyed a beautiful day — clear, windy and cold — exploring the farm and meeting horses. I fed her supper in mid-afternoon so we could afterward take a long walk while the sun still lent its warmth. Upon our return she urinated in her favorite spot and — it seemed to me from her movements — wished to relieve her bowels, but could not. All day she had

been so eager to please me and so sensitive to my moods that I wondered whether she had learned the wrong lesson: not that Dick objected to piles in the house, but that Dick objected to bowel movements as such. However, since her run was not completed, and since Malamutes cannot be allowed to roam free, Tasha would have no choice but to transcend her anxiety and to relieve herself in my presence.

I resolved to keep her under leash or in her crate until this was accomplished. I placed the feces from the morning on the grass in the designated area. Tasha and I returned there every hour. I continued to sense that she wanted to relieve herself, yet she could not do so in my presence. At last, when we walked to the area, it was fully dark. I could hear her movements but her form was dim. When the sound of paws on the leaves ceased, I thought I could detect a crouch, but I could not be sure. She arose, I praised her, and I decided that we should return to the house for a flashlight to verify what had taken place.

It was dark on the way to the house. Suddenly I stumbled and fell heavily. Pain shot through my right leg with its artificial

knee. As I moaned on the grass, Tasha crowded in to comfort me, so we rested together for a few minutes. At last I could stand up. My leg still ached, but I walked without difficulty. We continued to the house, secured a flashlight, and returned to the spot. In the beam we saw steam rising from the fresh pile. At the sight Tasha wanted to flee the scene, but I embraced her and praised her so profusely that she was convinced. We returned to the house, happy together.

Inside, I let Tasha off her leash. Anne arrived home a few minutes later, and Tasha ran to greet her at the door.

I have learned not to take Tasha out at night without a flashlight. Tasha has learned that there is a place for bowel movements. Later that night we returned, guided by my flashlight, to the spot. I stood still and politely averted the beam. Tasha relieved herself again and then leapt for joy. My right leg ached. Yet would Tasha have overcome her fear without the cover of darkness? Perhaps my fall was the price I had to pay for a lesson that mattered more to me than to her. There is, indeed, a partnership in training.

3

Making Peace

Thanksgiving Day. When I awoke at 4 am to meditate on the day ahead I realized that the theme would need to be "making peace with other creatures." Taking Tasha with us for Thanksgiving dinner with friends would require that she deal with another female dog, yet both of her "rescue" persons had warned me that she would be aggressive and hostile in this situation. Nevertheless Tasha, if left for several hours in the kennel completed only yesterday, might feel abandoned to a strange place. The previous afternoon she had romped around the new dog run, free from the leash, with great delight; yet I believed that it would take several days of pleasurable conditioning before she felt comfortable there without human companionship. Tasha had made no further housebreaking mistakes, and we were making rapid progress together with "sit," "down," even "down-stay" for up to thirty minutes. I did not want to risk trauma on the fifth day of our relationship.

Directly after her breakfast I walked Tasha up the hill to our barn. While I served grain and hay to our three Percheron draft-horses, Tasha remained tied to a lead in an

unused stall from where she could see all yet be safe. Tasha had not met horses before Monday and relating to them has proved challenging. Her instinct is to frighten them with barking, but that earns the horses' hostility. This could prove dangerous when Tasha comes into direct contact with one of these large creatures with big teeth and hooves. So I have been trying to persuade her not to bark, with indifferent success. This morning, finally, I responded to the first bark with a slap beneath the chin which, for a while, reduced her barks to discontented growls. Upon our return home we went together into her newly fenced run where she romped, leaped, and ran free to release her nervous tension.

Then Tasha lay at my feet on down-stay while I washed dishes. When "Tigger" — our outside-the-house cat — appeared at the sliding glass door and looked in, Tasha jumped for her. While calling reassuring words to Tigger, I grabbed Tasha and forced her down. Tigger's appearance was no accident. She had fled at Tasha's arrival on Monday, but after several days she observed that Tasha was kept under

control and not allowed into the cat's favorite areas. Several years ago, when she arrived at our home, Tigger had carefully and deliberately won over our previous dog, a gentle Collie, until they could sleep curled together in the sun. Now, for the first time, she set her sights on Tasha. I was hoping that we might talk through the glass for a few moments but after Tasha's leap, Tigger fled to await another occasion. I sat with Tasha before the glass door and explained to her, in a gentle voice, that Tigger was also a member of our family. These relationships take time.

Later my wife Anne took hold of Tasha's lead while we walked together back to the barn. I sat with Tasha in the stall while Anne released each horse in turn and it walked past us toward the pasture. Under my firm reassurance Tasha decided not to bark, this time. The horses ignored her. Upon our return home, Anne and I both romped with Tasha in her new run. Then she was happy to rest for several hours in her crate that sits in my study across from my desk.

Mid-afternoon Anne and I drove to the historic town of Abingdon for Thanksgiving with friends. Earlier in the week, to bring Tasha to our home, I had put down the back seat in Anne's "new Beetle" and placed a protective wire behind the front seats. Tasha enjoyed this space and had, on previous days, been willing to wait there quietly for a few minutes while I did store errands. Now she would face a more extended test of her

confidence in us.

Anne dropped Tasha and myself at the entrance to the Virginia Creeper Trail, popular with walkers, bicyclists, and horseback riders. Here I planned that Tasha and I would have our first peaceful meeting with unknown dogs. We calmly passed one dog on a leash but then met families with children who greeted Tasha with delight. She responded with typical Malamute friendliness while I tried to restrain her from jumping up. A male dog roaming free, smaller than Tasha, approached us. Tasha found him attractive and they quickly became friends and trotted together for a while.

At last we climbed the hill to our hostess' back yard. "Dixie," her small collie-like female, is notorious for agitated barking. Earlier I had asked our hostess if she might bring Dixie to the Creeper Trail so the dogs could meet on neutral ground. She assured me that Dixie considered even this trail to be her territory. On daily walks Dixie greeted every dog she met there with agitated, defensive barking.

Dixie met us at the back gate of the fenced yard, barking furiously and baring her teeth. Tasha returned the insult while I held her tightly by the choke collar and lectured her that attacking a dog one-third her weight should be beneath her dignity. The wooden gate-slats separated two snarling muzzles. Dixie at last concluded that she had met more dog than she was prepared for, and backed away. I opened

the gate and held a tight grip on my rigid-but-silent dog while we walked around the house and down the driveway to our car. I helped Tasha in through the hatch and put water in her bowl. Once Tasha was safely confined, Dixie advanced, barking. Tasha circled warily within her tight quarters until Dixie tired of the charade.

After an hour, just before the guests were summoned to Thanksgiving dinner, I returned to the car to present Tasha with her special treat: a pound of deer meat, frozen solid. We each enjoyed our own feast. It was dark when a friend and I released Tasha from the car so we might walk beneath neighborhood streetlights. Dixie followed us but Tasha paid her no mind. All the dogs in this neighborhood were crated or tied, but there were many of them. As we passed by houses the darkness would fill with barking:

sometimes high-pitched, sometimes deep-throated, once a sled-dog howl. Tasha ignored them. Before long the free-running Dixie grasped the advantage of walking through a hostile neighborhood in the company of a big dog, and she drew closer to us. We were halfway home when Dixie ran up alongside Tasha, Tasha turned to her benignly, and Dixie approached to rub noses. Their tension resolved.

We returned to our farm proud of Tasha and she seemed, to me, to be proud of herself. We found a movie on television. Anne sat on the sofa and I on the floor beside her with my legs outstretched, for the quad muscle above my artificial knee still ached from my fall two nights earlier. Tasha lay beside me. Soon she was asleep, on her back, with her legs in the air.

4

Calling Animals by Name

Sunday, November 26. Anne and I drove Tasha to Pulaski in Anne's "new beetle." The back seat was lowered and wire-mesh installed behind the front seats to create the mobile kennel that Tasha enjoyed. Our sadness at leaving Tasha was tempered by knowledge that she had already met this fine "rescue" family and their six Alaskan Malamutes. She would be well tended while we vacationed in Siena, Italy. Before we parted, I assured Tasha that I would return.

Interlude. Most of the pleasures of that trip do not fit this diary but one does. I re-read Adam's Task, Calling Animals by Name, by Vicki Hearne. A decade ago when I was working with horses, this book had a profound impact upon my understanding and upon my ethics, so I wished to review it as I entered dog training.

Hearne manifests a unique combination of gifts: she is a professional horse and dog trainer and also a professor of English at Yale University. In truth she is a philosopher. Her book is a discursive meander among great thinkers and

"noble" dogs, horses, and cats — knit together by her own brilliant insights. Her wandering style would be frustrating if her vision was not so stimulating.

Hearne is persuaded that the training relationship between a human and a domestic animal enhances the knowledge and the capacities of each. It need not be abusive. Indeed training by, and work with a human can bring out the "nobility" in a dog or a horse. This partnership not only assists humans with important tasks but also helps to cure our anthropocentrism. We open, I would add, to life beyond the human; this facilitates our relationships both with nature and with God.

Training builds a common language between person and animal: verbal commands, body language, visual cues and smells. Developing this language expands the skills and enriches the intellectual capacities of both partners. It can be deeply satisfying to both. Each can be proud. Together we grow as we work and as we achieve.

Hearne argues that animals are capable of moral behavior: Fido learns that he should not pee on the bedpost and then is able to decide at each tempting moment whether to do so or not. And — despite all the abusive evidence to the contrary — humans are capable of moral behavior toward animals and are therefore obligated to practice such behavior.

Moral responsiveness is part of the challenge, and part of the reward, from a working relationship with a dog or with a horse.

Friday, December 8. When, outside Pulaski, I emerge from the car and call to Tasha she jumps up and rushes to the gate of her pen. When I open it she leaps all over me — this time I permit her to do so — and then runs in excited circles. I am equally happy to be reunited with her.

Thursday, December 14. When we walk down the farm lane to collect the mail it is clear that Tasha and I experience different worlds. This morning I saw a squirrel leap to the side of a tree and scamper up. If Tasha had seen this she also would have leaped — for the squirrel.

But this morning she dwelt in the world of scent. I don't know how many dogs, cats, deer and other creatures had passed down or across this lane since yesterday. But Tasha, following each scent easily, must her self know — about yesterday and several previous days as well. She has met

most of the likely dogs, several cats, my horses and our neighbor's as well, and she has seen a deer. She probably attaches many of the scents to particular creatures that she recalls.

Humans navigate our environment primarily with our eyes. Dogs lead with their noses. Scientists claim that only humans remember the past and anticipate the future; animals, they say, live in the present. Yet walking the farm lane, Tasha can smell the past and decode much of it, drawing from it useful information. On our walk together it is I who seem locked in the present.

Later, while Anne prepares supper, Tasha lies on the kitchen floor, respecting the "Down! Stay!" commands. She is eager to be there, surrounded by wonderful aromas, even though she has already eaten her supper and has learned that none of these preparations are for her. Alaskan Malamutes, we have discovered, keep food on their minds at all times.

Normally the aroma of food anticipates eating: dogs may in this way experience the future. However, here on our kitchen floor something more complex may be happening. I can't be sure, but I suspect that Tasha is fantasizing: living not in the present, the past, or the future, but imagining that she bites and tastes that which she smells. So we dream of our beloved when the object of our affection is not in our arms.

5

Dixie and Tigger

Friday, December 29. When I leashed Tasha and led her out, "Dixie" and little "Milly" were waiting at the foot of the steps. The dogs belong to our neighbor and farm manager, Patsy Osborne. Patsy was in our kitchen helping my wife Anne prepare for a dinner party.

I had been observing Dixie whom I believed might become a companion for Tasha — despite the hostility to female dogs that Tasha manifested during her "rescue" months. Dixie is a German Shepherd about the same age, similar height and length, though without Tasha's weight, breadth, and the heavy musculature so typical of an Alaskan Malamute. Dixie had just weaned her first litter of puppies and, standing there with her tail wagging, seemed to be looking for an adult companion. She and Tasha had met before, cautiously, but never touched.

Tasha moved toward Dixie. She also wagged her tail so I let her continue. Dixie, now nervous, crouched submissively as they touched noses.

After a few moments I led Tasha up the

hill toward the horse barn. Dixie followed. Both dogs seemed eager for more contact. So I paused on the grass, released the lock on Tasha's long lead, and watched.

Dixie crouched facing Tasha, then rose to place one paw, tentatively, on Tasha's shoulder. Tasha responded by gently pawing Dixie's shoulders with her two paws. Then they ran round in circles together, stopped, sniffed each other, and ran round again. Dixie extended her paw again and a similar cycle repeated — over and over.

Dixie did not join us in the horse barn for feeding, but she met us when Tasha and I walked back down the hill. I opened the gate to Tasha's fenced run and watched to see if both would enter, and whether Tasha would accept this. She did. I watched them play for a while, and then called Anne and Patsy to observe. We left them playing together for almost two hours.

That afternoon Tasha was exhausted, not from the exercise I would guess, but from the excitement of achieving a type of relationship that she had resisted for so

long.

Monday, January 8. A wet snow covered the ground and coated every branch before Tasha and I walked toward the barn. After I turned the horses out to water, we walked into the woods so I might see more of this fresh beauty.

The ground was white, the sky a leaden gray. There were muted tones of brown-to-black on tree trunks, on the wet undersides of branches, and on fallen leaves.

As Tasha walked ahead I noticed how well she matched the surrounding colors. Her stomach and the inner sides of her legs are white as the snow. Shades of gray begin high on her legs and deepen upward as her outer coat lengthens to silver and then to black along her back. Shades of light brown, like fallen leaves, lightly accent the outsides of her hind legs. Her eyes shine with the same brown.



I thought that in the depth of the Alaskan winter — around Kotzebue Sound in the far northwest, bisected by the Arctic Circle, where the Malamute Inuit tribe bred this larger-than-usual sled dog — the gray sky above the white snow might

darken toward black even in daytime. In that season the colors of vegetation would be rare. Tasha might blend in perfectly.

Thursday, January 25. It is notoriously difficult to read the mind of a cat. When Tigger — our gray, slightly striped, outside-the-house feline — approaches Tasha, is she (1) trying to acquire a dog-friend like Mossy whom she once cuddled affectionately, (2) trying to get a rise out of Tasha in the knowledge that I will restrain this agitated beast, or (3) reminding me that my cat also deserves attention. A little of each, I suspect.

Usually when Tasha and I walk up the lane from the mailbox in the early afternoon — Tasha walking smartly at "Heel!" as she carries letters and newspaper in her blue backpack — Tigger will appear in front of the house or on the lane. Tasha's concentration snaps and I must "Sit!" her to recapture her attention. When Tasha is in her fenced run Tigger will walk by until Tasha claws the fence, eager to pursue. Recently, when Tasha and I climb the hill to the horse barn at sunrise, Tigger has taken to following behind — at a safe distance for her but close enough to agitate the dog so I must struggle to control her with the leash.

This morning a light snow fell as we climbed the steep lane. Footing was slippery. When Tigger ran up behind us, Tasha lunged toward her. My feet would not grip the slick asphalt. To keep from

falling I had to release my hold. Tasha took off with leash trailing behind.

Tigger was agile enough to disappear safely. Perhaps, I thought, the warning scare will do her good. I did not worry, either, about Tasha. On previous occasions when she slipped her lead she tore around with great delight, chasing a cat or tracking smells. Yet she had not run away.

I continued to the barn to feed grain and hay to Emma, Cranston and Russell, our three Percheron workhorses. As I finished Tasha approached, so I called her to me. I was careful to show pleasure and not to scold — I don't want Tasha to associate returning with punishment.

"All's well that ends well."

6

The Red Wagon



Thursday, February 1. The Radio Flyer little-red-wagon was ready, equipped with special dog shafts in place of the handle, and Tasha had been fitted to her new harness. Patsy Osborne arrived to help ready the house for Anne's return from Ireland, but it was easy to divert her to work with me and the dog for this initial trial. We put the harness on Tasha and then, awkwardly, lifted her between the shafts and fastened the harness to the shafts and to the traces.

In two weeks three of my grandchildren

planned a visit with their parents. Lydia 10, and Murphy 8, are eager to ride Patsy's horses again, but I want a special treat for Faith 4, as well. I also want to help Tasha discover real work.

When we were ready I told Tasha to walk beside me at heel. At first she was confused, and spooked by the noise of the wagon behind her, but as we moved up our steep driveway toward the barn she settled into the task. As always when Tasha works, we stopped now and then for a tiny dog treat. Food treats help to keep her

attention focused while she works.

Pulling the empty wagon up hill was easy, but returning down was more of a challenge, for Tasha had to brake with her paws as the shafts pushed her forward. I stood beside to guide her while Patsy held the rear of the wagon so it would not push too hard against her while she learned the appropriate motions. By the time we made it down to our house she was walking smoothly, and with pride.

Saturday, February 3. In her crate in my study, Tasha waits every morning without a sound while I arise, shave, shower, exercise and dress — 45 minutes until she hears me pour her dry food into her bowl. Then she is a bundle of excitement as I lead her to where she must pause for a moment until I release her to eat.

But not this morning: For weeks two feral cats have lurked outside our house to steal Tigger's food, so I can only feed our cat at times that I can watch protectively. This morning Tigger appeared outside the glass doors in our dining room when I went there to exercise. So, quietly as I could, I put dry cat food into her bowl and passed it out to her. But not quietly enough, for Tasha erupted in yips and whines from her crate two rooms away. Her constant alertness for food, combined with her undiminished jealousy toward Tigger, overcame her patience. I ignored her, so she quieted after a minute.

By now I have learned many of her sounds and, by trial and error, have adopted the appropriate response. Tasha rarely whines, and when she does I ignore her; it doesn't last long. However, from the safety of her barn stall she barks and whines more loudly and excitedly as my three large work-horses walk by her on their way to pasture. She wishes she could run among them — a truly poor idea. When I do allow her, safely leashed, to approach horses closely, she remains quiet and submissive. Tasha has learned a little "horse sense."

On the other hand when, from her crate in the middle of the night, Tasha emits one loud bark followed by low whining and the sound of agitated feet, I leap from my bed, throw around me whatever I can grab, and rush her to the dog run. This has only happened three times. The first time I did not respond, but after spending half-and-hour cleaning up the mess, I learned. So one acquires "dog sense."

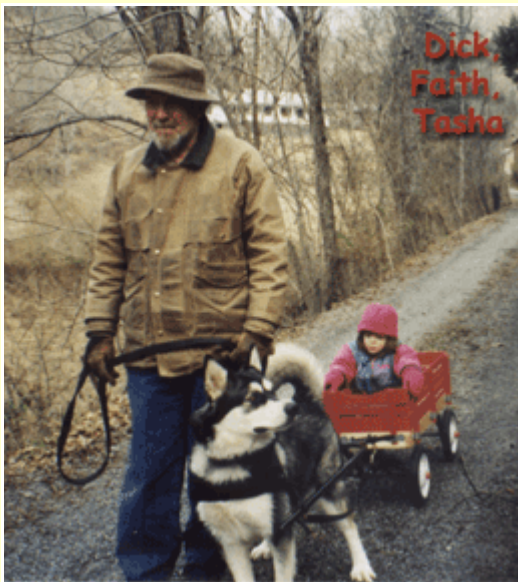
Friday, February 16. At dusk the family arrived from Michigan and piled into our small living room: my son John, his wife Tracy, Lydia 10, Murphy 6, and Faith 4. In the middle of the excited group Tasha absorbed pats and hugs, but she did not jump up. After a while I put Tasha on "Down, Stay" to reduce confusion.

A moment later, when Faith approached her, Tasha could not resist rising to engage her. The eyes of the two-year-old dog and the four-year-old girl were at a level as

they considered each other. Then Faith pointed at the dog and said sternly, "Down! Tasha." Tasha dropped to the floor.

We moved to the dining room for pizza. Murphy put Tasha "down" in a corner where she remained through supper. At home, Murphy told me, their little Welsh Corgi dog, Griffin, would not obey the children but only their parents. So Tasha was an instant hit. This dog that weighed more than any of the children was polite and cooperative.

After supper we walked up hill to the horses. Murphy and Lydia helped me with Tasha's lead. The next day they took turns leading her, without my assistance.



Saturday, February 17. After breakfast we rode horseback. Then we

turned to the event for which Tasha had been rehearsing. I pulled the red wagon out of the woodshed, seated Tasha, and gave her a small dry treat to signal that time for work was at hand. I put the cart harness over her head and buckled it beneath her chest. I backed Tasha between the wagon traces, slipping the traces through loops in the harness, and I fastened tugs from the harness to the rear of the traces. Surrounded by family, Tasha and I walked carefully down the steep hill — the wagon pushing us from behind — to where the lane leveled out.

Faith climbed aboard the wagon. "Tasha, Heel!" I said, stepping forward with my left foot. To get the wagon rolling the dog executed a quick leap into the air with her forepaws and came down hard. We moved forward at a walk, gravel crunching under the wheels, children and parents behind and before, cameras clicking.

Every few minutes we pause to rest and to concentrate on the task amid the confusion. "Tasha, Halt!" I come to a quick, firm stop. Tasha stops, sits, and looks up to me for her treat. In a moment we proceed. After 300 yards there is a grass opening where we can make a looping turn to head back up the lane. Now there is a slight upward slope, so Tasha must work harder.

At the end of this run Tasha seems fresh, so I decide we can try another. 35-pound Faith is replaced with 55-pound Murphy. Down the lane is still easy, but this time

the return is truly hard work —as strenuous as Tasha should attempt with her present conditioning. Nevertheless, Tasha recovers with a few moments rest. There are no cuts or scrapes on her paws. I decide that Lydia, 75 pounds, can have an outbound turn, while Faith can ride return. With the completion of this lap, Tasha had pulled a loaded wagon for more than a mile. Tired and proud, she seems ready for some rest in her dog run.

Sunday, February 18. When I removed Tasha's harness after my grandchildren completed more turns riding the wagon, I felt the muscle in Tasha's upper foreleg. It was as large and hard as the muscle in my arm!

The next day, at the veterinarian, Tasha weighed 85 pounds, a 10% increase from two months earlier. It was all muscle; though she is broad, she is lean. I thought, "This dog needs regular work."

7

Running Free

Sunday, March 18. Dixie showed Tasha where she might slip beneath the barbed-wire fence to our side; then the German Shepherd backed away. As Tasha crouched to crawl under the wire, I moved toward her and, when she emerged, I reached for her collar. With a wiggle Tasha eluded my grasp so she might reach Dixie. I lunged, grabbing the dog's broad shoulders between my arms. As I hit the ground and rolled, I pulled Tasha on top of me, then down to earth on the other side. I pinned her with my body while I secured the leash.

This episode began a half hour earlier, about 7 a.m. For the past four weeks, since Tasha's success pulling a wagon with my grandchildren, I have focused her training on learning to cooperate with me while off leash. Late each afternoon, just before Tasha's supper, I put dog treats in my jacket pocket and walked Tasha into the pasture below our house, near the pond.

"Sit," I instructed. After she sat and looked up to me, I gave her a treat. "Stay," I commanded. I backed away the length of the long lead. "Come." Tasha came. "Sit."

She sat. After we made eye contact she received another treat.

I repeated the exercise three or four times on leash, and then tried it off leash. On a typical day Tasha cooperated two or three more times, but then she would be distracted. One day a squirrel caught her eye and she raced after it. I walked calmly toward the house. The squirrel disappeared safely, so Tasha ran in joyful circles for a few minutes until she noticed me on the porch preparing her supper. Up she came. "Come! ... Good Tasha."

After a week or so we each began to vary the routine. Sometimes when Tasha was carrying mail home in her backpack I would take off her leash and ask her to continue walking at heel. This worked well in the part of the lane where there are few distractions. On another afternoon Tasha decided that free play was more interesting than supper. She dashed up hill to the horse barn to look for cats. Another time she ventured as far as Patsy's farm, to visit Dixie. I never treated such excursions as disobedience.

A week ago Anne and I were each away for several days, so Patsy took care of Tasha. During this time Tasha learned the safe and pleasant route from our home to theirs. Run up our farm lane, past the horse barn, across the hay meadow, under the fence near the hilltop, down the steep logging road that Orby made on their farm, alongside Patsy's pond, past her garden, on to her yard, and around to the front porch where Dixie usually waited. About a mile, a splendid run!

This morning, after Tasha's breakfast, we set out as usual toward the horse barn. As we started up the hill I had Tasha sit, gave her a treat, and released her leash. She bounded away happily, then returned to play with me, bounded off, and again returned. I planned to leash her on the third return, but I did not have the opportunity. When the barn came into view Tasha ran toward it, made a quick check for stray cats, and then headed across the hay meadow to visit Dixie.

After feeding the horses I climbed into my old Toyota pickup and drove to Patsy's house. Dixie came off the porch to meet me; her human family was asleep. In a minute Tasha appeared at the back fence. I am surprised that I chose a flying tackle to bring her down. Had I paused for thought, I would have realized that this might injure my artificial knee — happily it didn't. Furthermore, Tasha would be easy enough to secure after she had played with Dixie for a few minutes. My tackle, however, was a friendly, playful wrestle

while I fastened her leash.

Friday, March 23. After Tasha's late-afternoon supper I surprised her by letting her out the door unleashed. She bounded onto the grass, then turned to wait for me. As I came around the porch Tasha headed toward the barn, but I did not follow. Instead I oiled the reels on my hand lawnmower so I might try it on the newly emerging grass. Tasha returned, attracted by the smell of oil and intrigued by the mower. I think she liked, as I did, the clipping sound as I pushed the mower across the grass. But she remained, cautiously, beyond its reach. When I finished a brief mowing trial I told Tasha I was going back into the house. She ran onto the porch to join me.

This was the last of several off-leash experiences on this particularly happy day. On one walk to the barn I had let Tasha run free. She walked along with me until I placed her securely in her stall before releasing the horses from theirs. Later I let her wander while I split some wood for the stove and brought it to the house. Tasha came along.

Her favorite walk of the day was a leashed excursion on the Virginia Creeper Trail in Abingdon, after we had completed some errands. Tasha enjoys riding in the back seat, often with her nose to the wind out the window. And she looks forward to certain stops, like the feed store where folks make a fuss over her when we walk in together. "That's a beautiful dog." Tasha

accepts the compliment and the stranger's petting that accompanies it. Each time we visit Abingdon Tasha enjoys the scents of many dogs on the Creeper Trail. This is the highlight of her excursion. I keep her on leash.

Only at home do I let her run free, and

then only when I am present to notice her activities. On a day like today she chose to enjoy my companionship rather than to run off. Such companionship is not yet "obedience," but it lays the foundation for cooperation and then the reliable obedience that will, I believe, follow in due time.

8

Teaching Assistant

Thursday, April 5. Never before had Tasha ventured into a college classroom, yet here she was as Dick's "Teaching Assistant" for a course on "Loving the Earth, from Awareness to Ethics." With no prior consultation, I had decided to draw a dozen seminar participants, the director of the College for Older Adults, the staff of the Southwest Virginia Higher Education Center, and Tasha herself, into an experiment in human-animal engagement. One advantage of teaching in retirement — without fee, in this instance — is that I feel comfortable doing exactly what I want.

As we drove onto campus well ahead of schedule, Linda Campany, the college director, drove in behind us. "I was wondering who that was with a big dog," she said as we hugged. When I told her that Tasha would be assisting me, I detected a flicker of astonishment that quickly hid behind Linda's cool capacity to cope with 'most anything.

The classroom held tables forming a rectangle with chairs around the perimeter. There was an opening between

the tables at either end. I decided that Tasha could lie on the floor in the center of that rectangle, on "Down, Stay." I would allow her to rise to greet those who approached her, but I would not allow her to move toward people. So I placed Tasha and, before people began to arrive, I also placed interesting books on the tables — books that might assist participants to prepare reports for the seminar. At least one report, I hoped, would be on "ethical relations with dogs."

A dozen students arrived over a period of twenty minutes. Most came forward to greet Tasha, commenting on their own dogs, cats, or llamas. I held Tasha's leash until she understood the routine, then was able to remove it. She loved the attention and responded eagerly, yet she soon accepted my rules for the occasion. The men and women moved about the room examining the books on display. There was none of the typical pre-class awkwardness. Tasha, and the books, facilitated a warm atmosphere of friendship and curiosity even before the class began.

The building superintendent arrived. "We don't allow dogs in this building."



I rather suspected that — had I been blind and Tasha my seeing-eye guide — no question would have been raised. "Tasha is part of the environmental curriculum for this class, here to assist me."

"Did you talk to anybody about this?"

"Yes, I just spoke with the director of the College for Older Adults."

Then, uncertain of his ground, the building superintendent departed.

Tasha settled down as the class began and people directed their attention toward me rather than her. I explained briefly that the dog had a role that would gradually become apparent, particularly in the third and final session. Meanwhile she needed to accustom herself to the class.

We took a break after forty minutes. Tasha

and I walked down the long, open hallway. Several people greeted us with interest. During the second forty-minute session Tasha fell asleep while I introduced global warming, biblical symbols of environmental relationships, the notion of sustainable economy, the poetry of natural relationships, and other topics that participants were invited to research for an oral report during one of the succeeding sessions.

After a second break we went outdoors to a sparsely landscaped "nature trail" beside the interstate highway. There I led an exercise to stimulate sensory awareness of the natural environment. Tasha, of course, much preferred this part of the class. As we wandered she detected many more aromas than human nostrils were capable of. Yet when we returned to the classroom to process students' experiences it was remarkable how richly many of them had experienced that place, and what memories and feelings had been aroused.

As soon as the class dismissed, three young women from the maintenance staff appeared, eager to meet Tasha and to play with her. They romped together while I packed up books and papers. News of Tasha's presence had spread through the building. As we exited we were greeted with smiles and accosted with, "What a beautiful dog!" Tasha held her head, and her tail, high.

9

Enforcer of the Peaceable Kingdom

Thursday, May 10. Upon my return home from a two-day absence, I called to Tasha as I walked toward her fenced run. She twirled and leapt, as usual, until I opened the gate to let her run free. Under these circumstances she will run circles around me as I greet her and then circle the house before meeting me at the front door. Running free will dissipate some excitement so Tasha can calm herself inside the house.

However, this morning she did none of those things. Instead, she raced along the brick walk to the farm lane, then up the lane toward the barn. A minute later I heard loud, persistent barking. Since Tasha rarely barks, I wondered whether another dog, perhaps a stray, had met her in the lane. When Tasha did not return in a few minutes, I climbed into the farm truck and drove up hill to retrieve her. Half way to the barn I saw Calico, our old barn cat, lying in the road. I stopped the truck and went to her. Calico's body was still warm, but she was dead.

When I retrieved Tasha I stopped again, and seated Tasha beside Calico's body. I

did not punish the dog, but I did express my affection for the cat and tell Tasha how much I would miss this friendly barn companion. Tigger, our outside-the-house cat, was also missing. She had not been seen since I departed two days earlier. I remembered that, the day before I left, Tigger had been treed by Dixie, the neighboring German Shepherd and Tasha's best friend. Since Tigger was safe in the tree, I had made no attempt to rescue her. Now I felt that this had been a mistake.

I needed to review my performance as farm "alpha" or, in the ironic phrase I now use frequently, "enforcer of the peaceable kingdom." I had made progress in persuading Tasha not to bark or lunge at Tigger while the cat ate outside the glass door. My goal, still uncertain, was to achieve peace between these two by mid-summer. Tasha was also learning more respectful behavior toward the horses, though she would sometimes bark at them inappropriately. The horses, in turn, wanted to give her a well-earned kick, so I never let Tasha off the leash while the horses were free in the field.

I had signed a contract with Alaskan Malamute Rescue that stipulated I would not allow Tasha to run free. Malamutes have a reputation for running miles, and for harvesting small animals. Now I daily violated the letter, though not the spirit, of this agreement. Tasha relished moments to race around the field pursuing aromas. I only permitted this, however, when I was prepared to keep her in mind and retrieve her if necessary. Before releasing her I would place her on "Sit, stay," offer her a treat, and tell her our destination. Often she would appear at the house in fifteen minutes. Sometimes I needed to drive the truck up the hill into her favorite meadow, or next-door to Dixie's yard. Tasha loves to ride in back of the truck, so when she hears it she comes. I again ask her to sit, then give her a treat, leash her, and load her into the truck for the ride home.

Now, with Calico dead, I resolved to tighten procedures. Anne suggested that

Tasha may have wished to punish me for my absence. I did not let her run free again that day, but I gave her a lot of attention.

Saturday, May 12. Tigger returned this morning for breakfast. Anne and I welcomed her warmly.

The next week Tigger would again disappear during my absence, to return promptly upon my return. I will keep in mind that the cat relies upon me to be "enforcer of the peaceable kingdom."

Wednesday, May 24. During three free-runs today, Tasha ran around nearby while did chores. Each time she came on call when I was ready to depart. In the evening she watched calmly through the glass as Tigger ate her supper — until, with Tigger finished and my back turned, she gave a playful lunge.

10

Dogs at Prayer

Wednesday, June 13. Rays of evening sun sent long shadows across this handsome chapel. Tasha lay on the floor, hind legs spread wide, belly pressed against cool slates. She held her head alert, however, for a dozen other dogs and also a few cats were scattered among the hundred people seated in rows. Tasha was leashed, but the leash was slack. We rose for a hymn and Tasha rose with me. After the hymn, when people sat, I turned my palm toward her face and, without a word spoken, she lay down again.

Tasha was on her best behavior at her most challenging teaching assignment to date. We were at Mars Hill College in western North Carolina where I was leading a Baptist conference on Christian relationships with nature. Patsy Osborne had delivered Tasha to me that noon so the dog might assist me with a twenty-four hour portion that emphasized human relationships with animals.

I had been assigned a ground-floor student apartment with a sliding door opening onto trees and a wide lawn that sloped down to the chapel. When Patsy departed

I walked Tasha to our quarters, secured her to a twenty-foot lead, placed a water bowl nearby, and let her explore both inside and out while I read and napped.

Later that afternoon, our first assignment was to conduct an outdoor exercise to improve sensory awareness. Tasha had previous experience with this exercise. The day was hot and sultry. As fifteen participants spread silently across the lawns, alert to natural life about them, I let Tasha pick our route while I studied her responses. The college landscape proved a disappointment to her. The industrial-strength fescue lawn felt like Brillo pads beneath one's feet. It had been sprayed so often with fertilizers and with herbicides that it no longer yielded aromas from living organisms. At last, after we climbed a hill, Tasha turned her head into a cool breeze and held still to let the wind ripple past her nose. This was her happiest moment.

It was later that evening, in the chapel, that we joined a worship service, "Blessing the Animals," led by the Rev. Howard Hanger and members of his

Jubilee Community Church from Asheville NC. This was a beautiful event filled with relevant scripture and appropriate songs. Eventually the time came for the climax, the blessing itself.

People who brought pets were invited forward to form a semi-circle around the altar. I sat Tasha at the end of this circle where I felt I could maintain control. After I put Tasha "down" on the floor, I sat on the floor beside her, rested one arm across her back and maintained a firm grip on the leash with the other hand. A circle of creatures formed to our right, some sitting, some lying on the floor, some held in arms. In this setting Tasha was fascinated by the other dogs but didn't even look at the cats — a wise choice, I thought. Beside us was a little Scotty, eager to make Tasha's acquaintance. The dog's mistress held him firmly.

As the congregation sang a gentle hymn in

the background, Howard Hanger greeted each animal, learned its name and something of its story. I was fascinated to hear that almost every animal present had been "rescued," or secured from a shelter. Before moving to the next, he laid hands upon each — in another context this would be called "petting." Tasha watched with interest, and when he came to us she rose to greet him, eager to receive the blessing. Then the minister sprinkled everyone — women, men, dogs and cats, with a little water.

I signaled Tasha to lie down again, and she did. However the atmosphere had now changed. A sense of communion softened our earlier caution and wariness. Scotty renewed his eager efforts to reach Tasha, and Tasha responded by crawling across my lap as far as I would permit. They touched noses happily. Following the benediction we visited with many more people and dogs.

11

The Holy Spirit

Thursday, June 14. I was scheduled to present a lecture, "Toward a Peaceable Kingdom: Our Experience of 'brother wolf' and other animals." While we walked toward the chapel several participants visited with Tasha. "You're not going to keep her on a leash during your lecture, are you?" So challenged, what could I say?

I held Tasha beside me on her leash during the opening worship, for she was now the only animal present. When the time came for my presentation, we moved to the center. I had Tasha lie down on the floor, placed a water bowl beside her, removed her leash, and seated myself on a nearby stool. "Tasha, stay," I said, loud enough for all to hear. "Others here are not on leashes, so there is no reason for you to be. But the others will not wander around during my talk. I want you to stay seated also." For the next hour, while I talked and answered questions, Tasha rested on the floor — sometimes asleep, sometimes awake.

During the break that followed we walked outside and ran around on the grass to release some nervous tension. I find that

this is always helpful following a period when strict obedience had been requested. People came to visit with Tasha who was, by now, a popular member of the group. She loved the attention but, as she had been trained, she remained the receiver, not the initiator. She did not jump up or lick an offered hand. Instead, she accepted the words and the petting, responding with an alert gaze and her swinging tail held high above her back. Sometimes she might entice a person to come closer by lying down and rolling over, inviting more petting.

We then returned to the chapel for a service, "Prayer for the Wild Things," led by a local psychotherapist and spiritual leader. She had arranged our chairs to form several concentric circles. On a rug in the middle she had placed a collection of totem objects from the wild — feathers, bones, etc. I sat in a chair by the aisle and placed Tasha on the floor beside me, removing her leash. Tasha remained quiet through a variety of spiritual exercises that followed.

Eventually we were requested to meditate while a recording of wild animal calls was

played through a loudspeaker — it was located on the ceiling directly above us. At the first of these calls, Tasha looked toward the speaker — attentive, excited. She tilted her head with wonder, then looked around to see if any such animals were near. But they were not. After several moments of attention, Tasha gave up. Nothing made sense. She lay down and closed her eyes.

The leader brought the service to a climax by asking us all to join choral and responsive readings of a long, graphic, and bloody poem about the slaughter of whales. I found the poem depressing. It lacked a hint of forgiveness or a suggestion of resolution. At length, when we had worked our way through the final verse, our leader informed us that we should close our eyes to listen to the entire poem, again, over the loudspeaker. It had been set to music by a Scottish singer-songwriter. Fortunately, she sang in a pleasant voice and was supported by an ensemble playing a sprightly Celtic tune. With eyes closed, I tried to ignore the words and enjoy the melody.

When the music began, Tasha arose and walked to the center of the circle to sniff the various totem spread there. Then she quietly visited several people who were happy for distraction from the vocal gore.

Soon a theological student was moved to rise from her chair. She walked quietly to

a far corner of the large room. She began a twirling dance to the music.

Tasha followed. When Amy twirled, Tasha barked an excited request to join with her. I looked up in alarm, and most of the group also opened their eyes to see.

Amy opened her arms to Tasha and they began a dance together, touching hands and forepaws for a moment, then twirling independently but in surprising coordination. Young woman and young dog spun around in matching circles, guided by the vigorous music. Tasha barked joyfully as she twirled. Everyone was watching, smiling with delight.

The whales were forgotten. Rather, something more vivid took their place. It was as though the Holy Spirit — speaking through woman and dog, through seminarian and malamute — provided a sign of reconciliation and redemption. We watched a hopeful witness that humans and other creatures might yet dance together with joy.

I cannot count the people who came to Tasha afterward to say that this moment was the high point of the service. Days later some would still witness that this remained, for them, the peak experience of the week. For a happy moment, communion with other creatures was celebrated.

Amy's Journal

“You have turned my mourning into dancing” -- Psalm 30:11.

Sitting in a worship circle at the Spirituality Gathering. We are engaged in “Prayer for the Wild Things.” Songs, silence, scripture, poetry – witnessing to the beauty and awe of the wildness that is in nature and in us all. More silence. Then we read together “Last of the Great Whales” by Andy Barnes. “My soul has been torn from me and I am bleeding ... I am the last of the great whales and I am dying.”

For me this is a time of indictment, confession and repentance. But where is the grace, the good news, in this horrifying reality? Then the music begins. The words are repeated, but this time to rich, primal rhythms. My first instinct is to get up and dance. “This is not the time, Amy,” I tell myself. “You barely know these people. Dancing is not an appropriate response to tragedy.”

The second of five verses reverberates

through the chapel. My heart is pounding and my stomach (the center of my spiritual knowing) is urging me to move. I don't want to be a distraction. A back corner of the room is empty. Perhaps if I get up quietly no one will notice ... Off goes the name badge from around my neck and I'm dancing, arms in the air, hips swiveling, feet stepping to the beat.

“Ruff! Ruff!” I turn to find an enthusiastic dance partner. Tasha. I reach down, stroke her face, and continue the dance. “Ruff! Ruff!” So much for anonymity! Tasha is spinning with me. She raises up onto her hind legs to reach for my arms. I can sense the gaze of the worshiping community, but it feels warm and supportive.

And so we continue, circling around aware of each other. It is our response to the dilemma of the destruction of the wild, and to the segregation of the species: We commune together. We recognize joy in the present moment. We dance.

-- Amy Babcock

12

The Parade in Dungannon on July 4, 2001



Above: Patsy Osborne, our neighbor and helper, with her grandchildren on the "Mann Family" float.

Left: Tasha, led by Dick, pulls her red wagon in the parade.



A pause.



Anne Leibig on the bandstand, after the parade, preparing for speechmaking.

13

Bike-Trot



Friday, July 20, 2001. Tasha trots ahead of my bicycle, keeping within the parameter of the 16-foot retractable lead. We each try to accommodate the pace of the other. When she slows, I brake. When she stops to sniff, I stop also and wait a moment before urging her onward. If I ride alongside her, she speeds up. When we reach a gentle downhill slope, we both speed ahead. Tasha's legs stretch and her mouth opens as she runs flat-out. At the bridge crossing Sinking Creek we stop to rest. Each of us takes some water.

All week, early in the cool of humid summer days, we have been learning to bicycle together. The first day we went

two hundred yards, today we went a mile, before turning around. The Humane Society warns against this exercise as dangerous for the rider, but we have been trying it anyhow. It seems to fit the cooperative relationship that we have developed. Alaskan Malamutes have a poor reputation for "obedience" but an excellent reputation for "cooperation." Tasha fits that profile: she is obedient most of the time though not infallibly so, and she eagerly cooperates on any project that holds her attention.

I slide the hand-grip of the lead over the right handle-bar and rest the case on the handbrake. There I can reach and control

it easily. Tasha has an excellent sense for the limits of this lead and, when instructed, she does not tug at it. She didn't that is, until this morning when we encountered an irresistible rabbit crossing the road ahead.

Tasha leapt forward. Fortunately there was enough slack in the lead to provide me two seconds to stop the bike and drop my

feet to the ground before she hit the limit. "Tasha, Stop!" I called as her collar forced a sudden halt. She was still eager for the rabbit, but I reeled in the lead as I moved up to her and then ordered her to "Sit." In a moment she was calm. We proceeded without further incident. It will take several more such encounters to confirm the lesson.



14

Cats and Dogs

Monday, September 17, 2001. As I approached the barn Tasha trotted freely nearby. Galina, our new barn cat, jumped down from the loft to guide me to her food bowl. Tasha walked toward the cat. "Tasha, Down!" I commanded. Tasha lay down. Galina rubbed her flank against Tasha's snout while the dog wagged her tail. For a minute or two Tasha received affection quietly, but then it stimulated her. She jumped up and poked Galina, asking for more vigorous play. "Tasha, Down!" I repeated. Down she went. "Stay" I commanded as Galina and I entered the workroom to place food in her bowl. Tasha waited obediently until I returned.

This happy event — the first time Galina met Tasha off-leash — had a history. Four months earlier Tasha had killed our previous barn cat, old Calico. Tasha chases Tigger, our outside-the-house cat, at every opportunity. Tigger is much too fleet for Tasha and always escapes; indeed, sometimes she baits the dog into a race. But when Dixie, our neighbor's German Shepherd, comes to visit Tasha, Tigger hides, for Dixie had once treed the cat for several hours until I called the dog

off.

At Dixie's home, however, roles are different. Patsy Osborne keeps a couple of cats that Dixie leaves alone. When one of these cats had kittens we were concerned how Tasha might respond, but she did no more than peer into their box with curiosity. On visits to Dixie's yard, Tasha's courtesy toward cats improved. So late in August Patsy offered a kitten to me for barn patrol. Since I had good expectations for this new cat-dog relationship, I named the kitten after the second of our two Russian friends Natasha and Galina. These women met each other when they escorted Anne and myself around Nizhni Novgorod in 1998. Since then strong bonds of friendship have developed among the four of us.

It was apparent from the first day at the barn that Galina had no fear of Tasha. Tasha, however, required some conditioning. I introduced them gradually, always with Tasha under control. I petted Galina and carried her in my arms to meet Tasha. Tasha enjoyed this. Then, a couple of days ago, I had Tasha lie down, under

my control, and let Galina approach her. Because little Galina does not run away, Tasha does not chase. A new relationship has formed.

Meanwhile, outside our house, progress between Tigger and Tasha is sluggish. Tigger cuddled our previous dog, Mossey, but she finds it hard to break the habit of running from Tasha, stimulating a chase. When they are on either side of our sliding glass door they will regard each other peacefully and even rub against the glass.

I have sat between them, slid the glass open, and held both animals. They have touched noses. But then Tasha gets excited or Tigger decides that enough is enough. Tasha would no longer hurt Tigger deliberately, though she might do so accidentally. Despite all my encouragement, Tasha hasn't learned that the way to court a cat is to lie down quietly and let the cat approach when ready. Tigger, likewise, is not yet ready to take a risk and stand her ground, even in my presence. Some day...

15

Tasha Grows Up

Saturday, September 22, 2001. Tasha will be three years old. The date is arbitrary, for we don't actually know her birth date, but this day will be the first anniversary of her "rescue," and ten months since her arrival on Chestnut Ridge Farm.

Tasha is now an adult. This happened quite suddenly. I noticed the change when I returned from Russia the last week of August. She has "put away childish things." She is calm, relaxed about our comings and goings. She rarely needs to be leashed around the farm. Usually she walks beside me as I move about the farm. If she wanders off by herself, nine times out of ten she returns to our house in thirty minutes. Only once has Tasha gone where I disapproved, and that was months ago.

Now and again Tasha decides to visit Dixie. We have a ritual around that. I drive my pickup truck over to Dixie's yard. Both dogs come running, and Dixie leaps into the back of my truck. Tasha puts her forepaws up on the tailgate but needs my assistance to climb in. When both are

loaded and the tailgate is shut, the dogs turn to me expectantly. I put a treat in each hand and spread my arms wide so each dog may take one. They ride with me back to our house and romp in our yard for a minute. Then we go onto the porch where I anchor Tasha to a leash and fill the water bowl. Dixie stays to visit for a while, and then returns home.

Over our ten months together Tasha and I have become partners. We communicate with each other with words, signs, and gestures. We can read each other's expressions. Cooperation is now more prominent than obedience. With encouragement and clear guidance, Tasha learns quickly. Only occasionally does she need stern commands. I too learn more about her limits and her interests and I try to accommodate them.

Last week, when we drove past the veterinarian's office, I stopped to walk Tasha in to the scale. When she arrived on Chestnut Ridge she weighed 75 pounds. In January she weighed 85. This time she was 100 pounds exactly. She is no taller, but she is now broad, with strong muscles.

Since we have been doing our daily bike-and-dogtrot excursions, vigorous exercise and heavy breathing have expanded her rib cage.

Usually we just bike-and-dogtrot for a couple of miles. Once, on a bright cool morning, we covered seven miles together on the Virginia Creeper Trail. This outing stretched her endurance. We took several rests, and over the final two miles we moved quite slowly. Tasha would lie down, and I would wait for her. Then she would walk beside my bike for a while until something ahead caught her attention. Then she advanced to a slow

trot. She slowed down in the cool shady patches, or where there was cool mud beneath her feet. When we came to warm sunny openings she crossed them more quickly.

Every night Tasha carries a large carrot into her kennel for a bedtime snack. Anne has offered to make carrot cake for our Saturday celebration — longer on carrots, shorter on sugar. I will ask Tasha to share her cake with Anne and myself, with Dixie and her spaniel partner Millie, with Galina and Tigger. Happy Birthday, Tasha!

16

Companions

Saturday, October 6, 2001. A little past seven in the morning, I walked out on our porch and across the yard to open the gate to Tasha's run. Usually, the slap of the screen door awakens Tasha and she emerges from her kennel while I approach, yawning and stretching. This morning was no different — except that, directly beneath the 100 pound black-and-white dog, there walked a 3 pound black-and-white cat. Tasha and Galina had spent the night together. An odd couple indeed.

The evening before Tasha, Anne, and I had walked together up to our barn to enjoy the air and to feed Galina. I wanted to show Anne, still skeptical, that Tasha and Galina were friends. The dog ran free beside us. As we came 'round the barn, Galina ran out to greet us and lead to the workroom where she is fed. Tasha bounded toward her. Galina rubbed calmly against Tasha's nose. Anne was impressed, and I was proud. Then the cat guided me to her bowl where I put out food.

Normally Galina addressed her food eagerly while the rest walked back down hill to our house. However, this evening she decided to leave food untouched and follow us. It's a bit lonely in the barn now that all the horses have departed. When we arrived at the house Tasha entered while Galina trotted around to the big glass doors before the dining room. In a few minutes we saw Galina rubbing this glass from the outside while Tasha sniffed back from the inside. Clearly they enjoyed each other.

Tigger, our outside-the-house cat, was nowhere to be seen. I expect her nose was out-of-joint.

The next morning, as Tasha trotted toward house and breakfast, she looked around to Galina several times. Galina followed. However, this was not her place. After spilling dogfood into Tasha's bowl, I gathered up Galina and carried her to the barn for her own breakfast. This time she ate, and remained.

17

A Review of the Clinch River Bike Trail



Sunday, October 7. Grand opening is scheduled for Tuesday. Like those who review new movies, we decided to try this new biking trail two days ahead of time. The "we" is an old guy who really depends upon biking for recreation now that his artificial knee limits his hiking; also a 100 lb. black-and-white Alaskan Malamute. Tasha, I figured, would smell, hear, and try things I would not. Together we might achieve a more thorough evaluation.

I was not prepared for the beauty of the Clinch River Trail even though I live just ten miles downstream and have enjoyed other streamside biking trails in these mountains. Trail signs west of St. Paul,

Virginia, lead you to parking beside the low Oxbow Dam. Then pedal half a mile along the smooth Sugar Hill Trail atop a former railroad bed, until you see signs that lead you down to the riverbank. Here a trail, different from any I had ridden before, begins.

This trail looks primitive: just a grass and dirt track. But looks are deceiving. The thick brush and roots that once entangled this track have been artfully removed so the view, beneath sheltering trees and across the placid river, is not obscured. The work that went into preparing the trail-bed is also largely invisible. We arrived just 36 hours after a heavy rainstorm, yet I met only one puddle in two-and-a-half miles. Likewise, I met only

one spot where my bicycle bogged in sand.

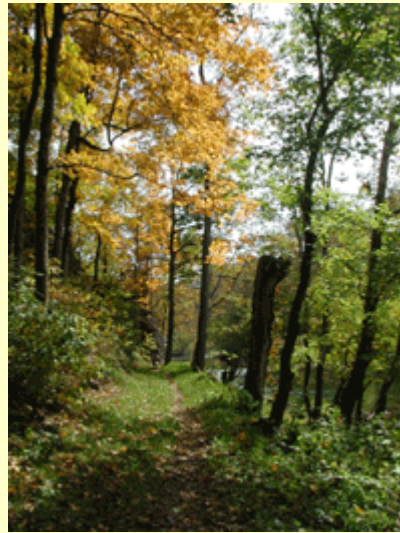


The track is irregular and requires a slow ride, but it is always soft and comfortable. Tasha enjoyed padding along the middle of the trail on her large paws rather than seeking grass beside the gravel of other trails. The slow pace allowed me to gaze to the bottom of the clear waters in this placid river that flowed no faster than we. Soon my mind, so often full of projects and responsibilities, had slowed to the pace of the river, of turning tires, of Tasha's padding feet.

Leaves were beginning to yellow. There are points of red above us; purple and white wildflowers beside us. Tasha picked up interesting smells; these were wildlife, for as yet here have been few people and their pets along this route.

Midday in October the air would have been quiet were it not for the river itself.

Most often there was a gentle gurgle as water passed over and around boulders. Every few hundred yards the river bounced over a low rock shelf and gave forth a more joyful sound. Then, a few moments later, the total stillness drew my attention to the smooth surface that revealed no sign of motion. Soon the beauty of this river — never more than a few feet below the trail — held me captive.



This reverie was broken by rumble from the other side that built to a roar as a loaded coal train lumbered by on the tracks of the old Clinchfield Railroad, heading toward an ocean dock so far away. The river flowed beside it, seeming to move in the same direction. But appearances deceive. The train's journey was toward the Atlantic coast, but the river was heading westward to join the Tennessee River, the Ohio, and the Mississippi. Here this mattered not.

Shifting tree shadows beneath the bright sun showed me that the meandering river, the trail on one side and the tracks on the other, heading toward every point of the compass at one place or another. These beautiful oxbow bends below St. Paul drained railroad and river, cyclist and dog, of all sense of direction until we just meandered, happy and free, in the midday sun.

Two-and-a-half miles of trail have been completed, part of a track that may eventually reach the confluence of the Clinch and Guest Rivers, ten miles further downstream, and connect with the bicycle trail the climbs through the Guest River gorge. That, however, is in the future. Here we just stopped for lunch on the riverbank.



I had kept Tasha in the trail during the outbound journey, but now I let her run

free. She waded into the shallow river, deep enough to cool her belly. Malamutes have a double coat sufficient for Alaskan winters but quite a bit warmer than is necessary in Virginia. So Tasha enjoys cool water. She emerged to "tell" me about it, ate a snack, and returned to the water. Her spirits rose with each playful round until she was romping in delighted circles, as joyful as I have seen her all summer.

For most of the return trip I let Tasha run free. She checked every point of access to the river. Next summer, when people want to swim, I may rent her out as a guide. After each dip she would race to catch up with my leisurely bike, then trot before me until another passage to the river enticed her. Tasha, I am confident, gives this trail her very highest ranking. So, when you try the trail, bring your dog along as well.

Our leisurely round-trip, including lunch and Tasha's many swims, consumed two hours — the most delightful two hours of this Fall. Since Tasha and I live just twenty minutes from the trailhead, I am sure we will return often as the leaves turn and then fall upon the trail. So, if you see a large wooly dog, with a handsome black-and-white face, bounding toward you on this path, it's Tasha. She is gentle, friendly, and well mannered. She won't jump up on you, but she might try to shake off the cool water. Just to be safe, carry a towel.

This review appeared in *The Coalfield Progress*, Norton, Virginia, on the day the trail was dedicated and opened.