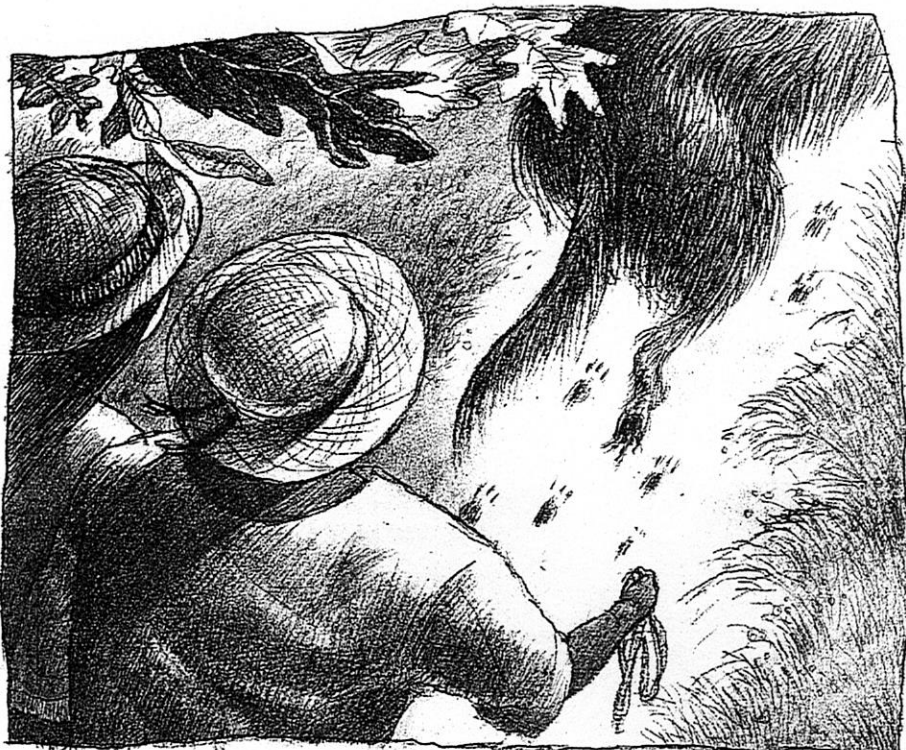


# The difference in dog years

*Wisdom unleashed by my old faithful friend*



**A**N OLD DOG has white eyes and patience. My dog, Lutz, also has ears that sometimes fail. After 10 years of living, he can barely hear whistles and car engines — or even my footsteps on the hallway stairs at night.

My bare feet on carpet used to wake him with a start. At the sound, he'd crash through the kitchen ready to play, tail wagging, even at 3 in the morning.

Now when I come down the stairs, walk by his bed and open the refrigerator door, he looks surprised: Where'd you come from? I see the question in his sleepy eyes, in the tilt of his large, heavy head. He was deep in sleep, buried in his dreams — his muffled memories, his nighttime visions — that leave him serene and content now for hours.

In these dreams, he doesn't chase squirrels or fire engines or whatever once lured him during sleep. Now, his legs lie still in his dreams. They don't pump the

air. Even his breathing is still. His are the dreams of the aging, or the wise.

But wisdom can't ease the pain of old age, so I start my dog on a regular exercise plan. A one-mile walk every other day, I figure, will loosen his joints and rev up his heart, or surely his spirits.

A neighbor joins us, pushing her toddler and baby in a single stroller. The dog walks beside them, liking the feel of the toddler's soft hand patting his back.

Years ago, Lutz didn't much tolerate little children. His big dog's boldness perceived small kids as tiny pests — maybe even as prey. It scared me. He would stand at the front door and bark angrily through the glass at any children playing outside.

But years pass, and so does annoyance. Now he licks the toddler's face once quickly when we meet on the driveway in the mornings. Is this hello? The toddler thinks so. The little boy grins.

The dog glances at the baby sister in the stroller. The child's legs pedal the air. But the dog doesn't bark. He sits back on his haunches, watching the baby get tucked in, waiting himself to get leashed, enjoying perhaps the sun on his head, or the morning breeze.

I take off his leash and he trots in a nearby field — even with one bad hip — to sniff grass and the odors of other dogs. After a sniff at a certain shrub, he reminds us to turn left. In this way he sets our pace and our direction.

We follow — two mothers, one young, one older; one white, one black — neighbors who, after many miles of walking, dis-

## A walk with my old dog taught me new lessons about life

cover we're now confidantes and friends.

The dog can't hear our conversation, but he seems to trust us and the situation. Watching him, it's clear he doesn't miss the noise and blare of life. The look on his face is confirmation that, indeed, the sages were right: Silence is golden.

At the top of a hill, our little party turns for home, following my dog down our familiar trail. There's no urgency in our pace. Lutz doesn't rush us. An old dog has bad ears. But also patience. So he's a good guide. A good teacher, too.

And by watching him and walking by his side, I've learned some rules for life, and they are simple: Patience and tolerance and a friendly greeting in the morning will start a day off right. And for good measure?

A quiet walk with friends will clear the air. And ease old pain. Then lead back home. **□**



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