

Death and the dog tax

There is a dog tax that has nothing at all to do with licenses and everything to do with a tacit agreement that you make the moment you bring a dog into your life. You bring home a puppy and you have stars in your eyes, dreams, hopes, plans. This one dog, this is the one that will be the salvation of your breeding program, or the start of it. This dog will be your best in show winner, it will be the dog that you take into the group ring as an owner handler, and make the pros sweat and worry that maybe, just maybe, they won't get a piece of the action because of you and the lovely dog on the end of your lead.

You are so wrapped up in the joy and excitement of your new puppy that you pay scant attention to the non-corporeal being holding a contract made up of your hopes and dreams in one hand and a lancet in the other – 'Just a drop of your own heart's blood, that's all that is required, and you can take this dog home'.

You wave the being away while the puppy licks the blood from your finger – puppies have such sharp little teeth (because surely that is where the drop of blood came from), we need to work on 'no bite!' - and you head off into the rest of your life with your new best friend while the angel (or is it a demon) puts a seal on your contract and files it away in some celestial cabinet, to be pulled out at a later date, generally 10-15 years in the future.

Time passes and you take classes together, you go to shows and trials and add titles to the dog's name. If the dog passes all its health testing, maybe you raise litters from him or her. Perhaps the dog helps you raise your own children, sees you through relationships, jobs, the loss of parents. As with all things, there are bumps in the road, but you adapt.

You get the bad news that the dog has hip dysplasia, but by then you've got so much emotional capital invested that you choose to keep the dog and take half the purchase price back instead. Or like me, you tell the breeder that you are fine with keeping the dog and they don't owe you any replacement.

Your hair gets greyer. The dog's muzzle gets frostier. You both get a little slower. Some of the joint supplements that you both take have the same labels. Old dogs know the routine. They're always there at your feet during meals to pick up the crumbs that fall. They can't make it up onto the bed any longer, so you buy a fancy dog bed that you place right next to yours or you buy doggy stairs so they can still climb up the bed to be with you.

One day you notice he's dragging his rear a bit. Then you see that his rear completely falls out from under him as he races across the yard, but being a tough breed, he manages to pull his rear under himself and keep on going. You call the vet and talk to her about it. Yes, he's got bad hips. You up the supplements, keep him lean, add pain medication when needed. You do all that you can to forestall that fateful day when some angel (or demon) comes and taps you on the shoulder with a contract in hand.

That tap on the shoulder, the one I did my best to ignore for so long, like a bill I didn't want to pay, came at 2:00am this morning when I had to help my old dog up to go outside. It came with the heavy realization that I have to help him up most of the time now. He knows that if he barks and wakes me I will get him up and put him on his feet so he can walk to where he wants to go. But lately he's been looking confused and fearful. He's trying less to get up on his own and relying more on me to lift him.

Sometimes there is a definite sign that it's time to let a dog go – cancer, some disease that can't be managed, injury that can't be treated. Sometimes it's just old age.

Knowing when to let go and say goodbye is the hardest thing, and it is so very individual. I always regret that decision, even when I know I'm making it for all the right reasons. The best I can hope for is a feeling of peace. Taking a life, even for the best of reasons, should never be something lightly done. Listen to your dog, and don't be afraid to make the decision to let go sooner rather than later. Better a week early than a day late. Talk to your vet about the process and ask their advice. Find the balance between your head and your heart. Remember that quality of life always trumps quantity.

The contract has an end date. For us it's 5:00pm on Tuesday the 21st of January, 2020. I signed the contract early in the summer of 2004. By the time you read this, the sharpest pain of grief will have passed for me. I know from having walked this path with other dogs that the pain will always be around, but it will fade from an ugly gash to a silvery scar.

Instead, I will try to remember the national specialty trips that we took together, the way we learned rally obedience together when it first came out, the three times that we won the group and got to run around the best in show ring together, the last national specialty that I took him to where he hobbled around the ring at 14 and a half and basked in the clapping and the praise. I will recall the friends I have made in the breed as a result of this one, awesome, amazing, flawed, but ultimately perfect, dog.

But right now, right this very minute, my heart is breaking. I am feeding him buttered toast as I write, and trying not to think of the last bath he will get tomorrow, before we make that last car ride together. He was my beginning in the show ring for the breed, my hopes and dreams. He is a lifetime of experiences. He is my heart. I don't want to let him go.

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