

COMMENTARY

Doggone it



Somehow, I've inherited six dogs.

We had two, and then we went to Animal Services, the pound, to adopt one more.

Three is a lot, way too many we told ourselves, but it's good for the boys. And we like dogs, too, my wife Amy and I.

At the pound, 12-year-old D.P. saw another he liked, a handsome, wheat-colored creature temperamentally more remote than the typical social canine. Like D.P.

A no-grinner, it seemed to look at humans with a mixture of resignation and high-octane skepticism, holding itself back like a Buddhist at a Marine Corps recruit depot. Maybe it was a teenager with four legs and a tail, and if you called it, it would come — when and if it felt like it.

D.P. sidled up beside his mom when I wasn't looking, got within about 12 inches of her, and brought tears into his green eyes. "Please, Mom?" he whimpered, his voice trembling like the newly bereaved.

Lucky for him I wasn't standing close, because that never would have worked on me. I'm a man, that's spelled M — A — N, and men don't do tears. Crying does nothing but waste water and salt, and take up time.

All around us in clean cages gnarly old dogs awaited the needle, but I remained inscrutable. I'd seen it once before in Colorado, when my brother took a job with the pound there. I used to go home and help him capture escaped peacocks, or backyard rattlesnakes, or stranded raccoons, or injured deer or stray dogs.

"Rog," he said one day, "take a look at this. But brace yourself."

We walked behind the desk at the pound, down a long, shiny hallway. It was scented with a combination of eau de nursing home and fragrance of skunked dog. We came to an unmarked door.

It could have been any plain door leading to any plain room, but mortality is sometimes like that.

He opened it and stepped back. I looked in. The room was about 12 feet square, and the floor was covered with bodies: big, little, black, brown, red, white, blond, spotted, mottled, long-haired, short-haired, curly-haired, small-eared, big-eared, black-nosed, pink-nosed. The week's unwanted.

"Yeah, I see," I said. We closed the door and walked out, climbing into his van. He had tears in his eyes.

Fifteen years later, so did D.P., who added promises to go with the saltwater. We came home with both dogs.

So then we had four, a carnival of tail-wagging, mud-spotted, tongue-hanging, tick-ridden, flea-bitten fun.

Time passed and D.P. turned 13. He grew wiser in the ways of the world. He began to wear black from his neck to his toes. When I say toes, I mean it. Like a dog, he always hated to wear shoes. And he won't, not unless we vio-

late the currently accepted standards of child rearing and rope him like a calf, then tie him to a fencepost and forcibly attach store-bought footwear to his appendages.

He began to cultivate his signature look: a roof-thick thatch of blond hair settled over his head, ears, neck and eyes. A charcoal T-shirt and coal-black jeans clinging to his lean body. Big bare callused feet protruding like Neolithic launch pads from the bottom of the whole ensemble.

D.P.'s thumbs frequently twitch now, and usually they twitch over the number pad of his cell phone, while he texts his various admirers, male and female.

In this lifestyle, he'd become comfortable with our four dogs and with his promised duties: feeding them each morning at first light, along with our geese, our ducks, our many chickens, our rabbit, our four cats and, on the rare occasions we ask, our horse and donkey. Twenty-five minutes in and out. Easy chores.

Then just before Thanksgiving two things happened, both of them dogs.

First, some people down the road up and left one night, abandoning a shaggy white beast and a little black one. The white dog was tied to a tree — they left it there on a chain. Not surprisingly, it was mean.

The black one just sat on their porch, like an old blues man. We started feeding them both, and whenever the little black one ran out to meet us, I had to turn aside and spell man — that's M-A-N.

Finally, I suggested we just take the damn thing home and keep it, before the pound collected it.

My wife took one look at me and broke into laughter. D.P. frowned. And my littlest boy, Nash, who would save everything, insisted the dog would be ours forevermore, starting that moment.

So it came to pass. Not a week later another little creature, tan and white with brown eyes as big as a cow's and plenty of smarts, came up the driveway ignoring our barking, blustering pack. A sweeter little SOB you never saw.

And you can guess what happened. Or maybe you can't.

At supper that night, D.P. insisted we shouldn't have so many dogs.

Suddenly, my teenager suggested moderation. He said we couldn't afford it. "We can't save everything," he added abruptly, eyeing his little brother.

What if, we countered, they were humans? And if we didn't take them in, what if they'd get the needle — or the gas chamber or the firing squad or whatever other sentence they might receive?

Unfairly, we threw in a short quick history of Jews and Nazis, still eminently serviceable as a moral lesson for whippersnappers.

What if we were those French or Dutch farmers, and when a Jewish family crept up our lane hoping for a bit of food and kindness, and some refuge, we had to decide: do we put ourselves out and help them, or do we say, Sorry. And good luck. But go away.

They're dogs, said my teenager. Not people.

Good point. And guess what? I don't care. We have a six-pack now. It brings tears to my eyes. ■

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