

LESSONS FROM A BLIND DOG ...[©]

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As appearing in the Loveland Reporter-Herald May 21, 2005

I find myself awake in the darkest hour of the morning. As the fog of sleeps clears from my brain, I realize something out of the ordinary has roused me. Listening closely, I hear Ali, snoring ever so softly in her crate. My boy, Frankie, rarely makes a peep other than the long, contented sigh when he first settles in for the night. There it is again, the sound that brought me from my repose ... the soft jingle of dog tags. It is my newest foster, "Magoo," as he lifts and turns, once more snuggling into his warm bedding. My eyes finally focus and I can see only blackness – it occurs to me that I have slipped into Magoo's world.

A rescue in every sense of the word, Magoo was found staggering in the middle of a country lane near Pueblo, Colorado – alone, blind and in unfamiliar surroundings – I can only imagine his terror at this point. His Good Samaritan takes him to her groomer where the severe matting is clipped off his thin body. Long neglected, his hair comes off in a solid pelt. Since his Samaritan cannot keep him (she already has 3 large dogs, all rescues), she contacts me, the state rescue coordinator for the American Lhasa Apso Club. Arrangements are made and we meet in Castle Rock for the hand off in early April, just missing the spring storm that blows through a few days later and closing roads.

Magoo is an enigma – he literally has no eyes. The vet and I cannot tell if he has been blind from birth or if his eyes have been removed. It matters not as he has more pressing needs at hand with a bladder infection, a yeast infection in both ears and, unfortunately, fully intact necessitating a neuter in his very near future. Recently, I found scarring deep in the hair that covers his face suggesting an enucleation (removal of the eye), most likely from trauma, glaucoma or some long-standing infection. At some point in his short life, he was loved and well cared for, a far cry from the circumstances that brought him to Loveland. Indeed, he is house trained, crate trained and a perfect little gentleman.

We humans are wholly dependent upon sight as our main sense and, as such, I find it hard to wrap my head around Magoo's impairment. I consult with other rescuers who have dealt with blind dogs ... they tell me it is his ability that I will notice, not his disability. Sight is the least of a dog's senses, coming in after smell and hearing, and I am advised that a blind dog will learn in two months what it takes a human two years to adapt to and learn. Generally, my fosters stay two to three months and I settle in for the long haul with Magoo as there are not many folks lined up to adopt a blind dog. Most folks don't realize what gems they really are, not bothering to delve beyond the obvious.

Lying motionless, I ponder the lessons learned from this happy, trusting little dog ...

- Even without sight, one can still "see" the world around them.
- If I close my eyes and sit quietly, I can visit his world, if but for a brief moment.
- When lost in a corner – keep moving, keep trying – eventually you'll find a way out.
- The best thing in life is not food, a treat or a toy ... it is a kind word and a gentle touch.

- Holler for help when you think you're all alone and the silence is deafening.
- A romp in the yard, a roll in the grass and the sun on one's face constitutes joy in its purest form.
- Don't take the stairs – they are **not** good for one's health!
- Greet everyone as a long-lost friend, whether you know them or not.

The day moves slightly slower with Magoo as he requires a bit more guidance and supervision than my sighted dogs. We're teaching him a vocabulary – “step,” “this way,” “bite” (of food), “kennel up,” “touch,” “outside” – and he's a fast study. To help him find his way, a variety of scents mark different areas, i.e., bitter apple to warn of the stairs, vanilla to guide him to the grass he loves so well, and lemon to note the two small steps to the patio. Amazingly, he's not a clingy dog and is content to be on his own when the need arises. The consummate couch potato, he loves nothing more than to be close to his human – a bed on the floor will do.

Someday, someone will open their home and heart to you, Magoo ... until then I shall keep you close to mine. Sleep tight little one, for you are safe even in the darkness that surrounds us both.

Update: Magoo was adopted and lives happily ever after in Loveland, Colorado.