

A Tribute to Trista

On October 14th, 2004, when she was 10 months old, we adopted Trista from a shelter in Oakland, NJ, a modest little shelter huddled in a fairly affluent part of the state. Trista, then Peppermint Patty, was scrawny and scared and hiding in the back of her kennel. Mike was the easier sell and fell for her almost immediately. I think it was her eyes that got him. But I was a hold-out... how does one know the right dog, among so many? How does one make a decision that will last a lifetime (at least hers)? Then, in the stony yard of that little shelter, she lay down on my feet and thus answered that question.



Her adoption fee was \$325, which I thought was a fairly handsome fee for a shelter dog, but we paid it, of course – price wouldn't stand in the way once a decision was made. That first weekend, she got very sick with something that had been going around the shelter, and our \$325 shelter dog became our \$1325 shelter dog. Of course, nothing grows the love of a dog mom better than a sickly, scrawny dog throwing up green puke. I was hooked, and so she was worth every penny of that. (Little did we know then of the expenses we would have later – for specialists' consultations, spleen surgery, acupuncture treatments and hydrotherapy visits, a quad cart wheelchair, the list goes on. It's a cautionary tale on the importance of pet insurance, which we had and which afforded us to give her everything she ever needed).



In those early years, we joked that Trista might have had some regrets about whose feet she picked to lie on. She could have scored an estate with rolling acres and woods, with lovely heaps of decaying animal remains to investigate. Instead, she settled for a 5th floor walk-up in Hoboken. But later on, and especially in her late years, we assured her that what we lacked in riches and luxury of a Bergen County family we more than made up for in love and devotion for our sweet, disabled dog.



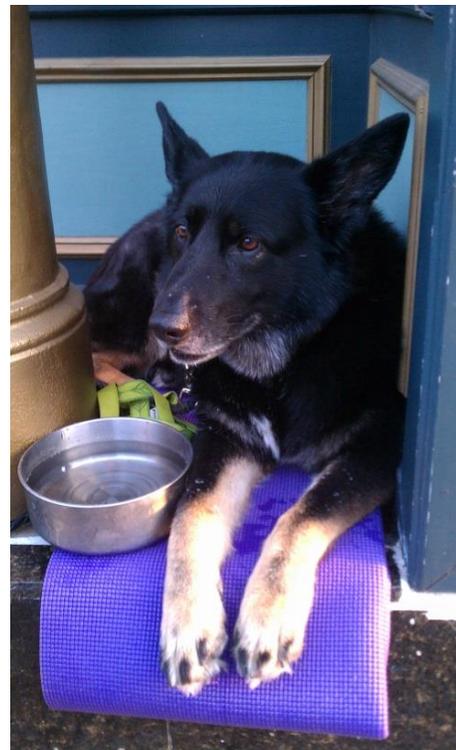
A bi-colored German Shepherd Dog, Trista had a thick lustrous black coat and tan feet. Her huge man paws had black toes that we affectionately called her Goth paws. She looked and moved a bit like a stunning black wolf and had an element of elegant bad-assery that made me feel safe on a dark street. That nothing happened to us in all our years of late night walks together may be testament to her intimidating looks, but to know her was to know that she wouldn't have known what to do in a dangerous situation beyond offering a deep bark.



As a dog trainer, I've written a lot of articles about training and its effect on relationship. In many of these articles, and in the final paragraphs of my little book *Bringing Up Puppy*, I wrote:

I share my life with a rescued German Shepherd Dog named Trista. From the very start of our life together, I trained her ... These days I take Trista everywhere, on trips across the country involving boat ferries, horse-drawn carriages, motels and shops that allow dogs and, of course, sidewalk cafés. She can go so many places with me precisely because she is a pleasure to be with and around: She lies quietly beside me, bothers no one by soliciting attention or making noise, tolerates the unexpected with grace, and seems happy just to be included. And our relationship is deepened by the mutual respect we have and because we can share so much together.

Of course, in the later years, when she was wheel-chair bound, training was irrelevant. I wrote about it as if it were still true, but she really just lay at my feet because she had no other choice. But before the disease took hold, all of that *was* true. She was my constant companion. We were inseparable. She went on every trip with us – to Mackinac Island and its horse-drawn carriages, to Chicago (which is not as dog-friendly a downtown as one might hope), to Indiana for a seminar I took at Wolf Park, on many trips we took to our summer cottage in Michigan, and everywhere in between. Going to New Hope, PA for a day trip will forever be steeped in the memories of our many trips there with Trista, eating on the bleachers of the restaurant Havana and in the garden of Wildflowers Café (which is regrettably no longer there). And it was all possible because of her training and aptitude; that was no exaggeration.



She was my exercise buddy, too. For several years, I was self-employed as a private dog trainer and set my own schedule, so Trista and I had plenty of opportunity to walk and hike and investigate new places. Mike was with us for much of it, too, making excursions to Harriman State Park and on hiking trails up and down the Hudson River, from a bird estuary in Bayonne to a fishing pier in Piermont and a park in Nayak. Her very presence gave me a perspective on the natural world around us that was more wild and immediate than my usually analytical mind would gravitate to on its own.



In her youth, Trista was the consummate herding dog, and it was a constant struggle for us to find activities and exercise that would satisfy her natural instincts while allowing the cats to live unmolested by her vigor. We experimented with her herding sheep, and her instincts and breeding became immediately apparent as soon as she was in their company, but it was a sport that proved too costly and required too much travel. And then we discovered the perfect solution, or rather she did... nothing made Trista happier than herding the waves along the shoreline, snapping at them and getting whole mouthfuls of water as she chased them into shore.



Despite her efforts to herd the cats, Trista was always very gentle with them. Chatzi in particular took a liking to her and, though Trista had no real interest in a relationship with any of them, she tolerated whatever came her way, from Chatzi's efforts for closeness to Jazzie's constant soft-pawed swats. She was never one to use her size to her advantage – Jazzie would often steal her bed and Trista, though whining and aggrieved, would relent, finding another resting spot.



She was the darling of just about every person she met. She mingled with bikers and Renaissance Faire revelers. She did tricks for children, jumping over their outstretched legs for a sliver of a treat. She had an instant connection to my elderly mother that would last Trista's lifetime, and she loved visiting her "grandma" and hearing her voice. She tolerated the

shenanigans of drunk people and homeless guys who would thrust themselves into her face with a suddenness that startled her. She was the patient tutor to my sister-in-law who was deathly afraid of dogs until Trista played dead at her feet and didn't move a muscle except to snuffle her hand with her inquiring wet nose.

In her last year, Trista was an inspiration to the legions of people who saw her as she ambled along in her cart. It was rare for us to walk the streets of Collingswood and Haddonfield and every other little hamlet of southern Jersey without having someone approach to touch her, to pet her, to ask about her. She had a standing account at the corner store, funded by one admirer who supplied her with pink wafer cookies whenever required. When it came to people, Trista was just about flawless. (In truth, she had an annoying inconsistency of trying to herd only certain people when they were in our home, and I never knew who it would be, but for this I can only blame her breeding and my inconsistency.)



As with any relationship, though, it was not perfect. I don't want you to think that it was. She made compromises and so did I. I had wanted a dog who was a brilliant negotiator with other dogs, who could speak to scared, lonely souls and help me to. Trista was anything but that; instead she was pushy, obnoxious, insecure and reactive, and so this was my accommodation to her. Trista, in turn, wanted to bark at said other dogs (or she thought she did anyway), but this I could not have as a dog trainer, and so this was her accommodation to me, though in truth she had little choice in the matter. Thus began a lifelong journey to shape her into a polite canine citizen. It was not easy and it certainly was not fast, but it was successful and it made me the trainer that I am today. She became somewhat of a calling card for me, as she looked good on a leash and was well-trained. (I am the first to admit that she came out of the womb with smarts and a compliant soul that made her too easy to train.)



There were other compromises. I wanted a dog who loved to hug and cuddle. But Trista, alas, was not that dog. So here, too, we compromised – she would tolerate the hugs as long as they were short enough, then shake off afterwards, and she would join me for a quick cuddle on the couch, and then in short order withdraw to her own bed to cool off and stretch out.



And so for over 11 years, Trista, Mike and I lived as a family, longer than most other relationships we'd had besides our own families and each other. And like all long relationships, as the years pass, the sharp edges wore away and became smooth, and this smoothness lost its separateness and we became entwined, ever entwined.

Trista died of Degenerative Myelopathy, also known as DM or Doggie ALS. There is nothing funny or gentle about DM. It is cruel and crushing and a slow, grueling descent until the end. It affects the nerves of the hind legs first, starting with a change in gait and paws knuckling over until they become completely useless. It gradually moves forward, affecting breathing and the front legs. It is a series of progressions, then plateaus. And there is no way to know how long a plateau will last or how far a progression will drop you. It is a death sentence without a timetable. We felt and feel so lucky, especially over that last year, that Trista remained at a plateau – alert, happy, full of fight, interested in walks and outings, going to sidewalk cafes, being with people.



She couldn't walk without the use of her cart and we needed to lift her into it, as she could not stand on her own, but that cart made it all possible and she was game and tenacious.

Mind you, it wasn't an easy year, and it took its toll on all of us. Because she couldn't do stairs and we couldn't fathom letting her sleep alone, one of us slept on the couch every night. At least once during the night, we needed to help her change position, so neither of us ever had a good night's sleep.



We battled all of the things that result from being bed-ridden – bed sores, lung infections, urinary tract infections, skin afflictions, potty accidents. We had some fairly significant battles to fight in the great war, but she was patient and accepting and we were devoted and steadfast – as long as she was in, we were in. And this would have lasted forever if we'd had our way. We would have taken her for wheelchair excursions, put salves on her skin, changed her bed pad, held her food bowl as she ate, and expressed her bladder for her *forever* if given the choice. But that choice was taken from us on New Year's Eve, when she lost her ability to stay balanced upright, when she became very uncomfortable, when she started to whine and we were unable to soothe her. She had stepped off her last plateau for the final descent.

We said goodbye to Trista on Saturday, January 9, 2016 at 12:20pm, with the help of a gentle vet who came to our home.

And our lives will never be the same.



A PostScript:

A big part of Trista's life was her friendship with a certain dog named Max, a yellow lab shepherd mix. The two were about the same age, had come from shelters at about the same time, and had about the same personality with other dogs – pushy, obnoxious and inappropriate. Somehow, though, they fit each other perfectly. They were an old married couple, barking and kibitzing, from their very first day. During our years living in Hoboken, Trista and Max and Connie (Max's mom) and I spent almost every morning together, over coffee and dog walks, so that the two could have their time together.



And strangely, eerily really, Trista and Max lived rather parallel lives. When Trista began to exhibit some of the symptoms of DM, Max would soon follow. By then we had moved away

and so Connie and I could only commiserate by phone about the progression of the disease in each dog. While DM manifested differently in them and at different rates, they both soon required quad wheelchairs, making us quite a sight when we visited and went for walks together – a legion of wheelie dogs with their humans-in-attendance.

These two souls, furry star-crossed lovers, joined on the rainbow bridge, for Max said his goodbye to Connie on January 14th, only 5 days after our girl. Trista had called him to her.

A Post PostScript:

Far sooner than we ever thought possible, Mike and I met and adopted a new baby shelter dog, a little German Shepherd puppy who we named Chantilly. As if as juxtaposed to our Trista as she could be, Tilly made her entrance in our lives, white and young and endlessly energetic. Amid the hand-me-downs of collars, leashes, beds and toys from a sister she'll never know, this little vixen helps heal our hearts from our pain and keeps us too busy to stay too long in our thoughts. It is as if Trista herself has sent us this sweet little whirling dervish for us to tend and care for, and in turn who will usher us from the darkness of lost love and back into the light of dog love.

