

Sage: Lessons Learned From a Blind Dog

“I’m afraid I have bad news for you – your dog is going blind.”

Those words from the veterinarian jolted through me like a lightning bolt. My husband Greg and I had recently adopted Sage, a 1- ½ year old Springer Spaniel, from an animal shelter, and no one said anything about blindness. The facts that we had noticed her stumbling on the porch steps and staring at the ceiling for several minutes prompted me to take her to the vet. In addition to the traditional vaccinations, Dr. Johnson gave her a checkup and discovered Progressive Retinal Atrophy (PRA), a genetic disease of the eye. Many dog breeds are prone to PRA, and those diagnosed are usually between the ages of three and five. Sage was much younger, and by age three, she was completely blind.

How does an owner cope? And how does a dog adjust to living with blindness? I was about to find out as together, Sage and I embarked upon a journey that would take us through continual loss of sight, several surgeries, new training, and discoveries about faith, love, and courage – lessons I never imagined I’d learn from a blind dog.

Sage did know the terms “timid” or “disabled”. She chased squirrels and treed them in the backyard. She could not fetch a ball, but she played tug-of-war and also swam in a nearby creek. She walked proudly and happily on a leash, through the neighborhood or on a forest path.

As her eyesight dwindled, her other senses became increasingly acute. She could smell or hear a squirrel from inside the house as it ran across a telephone wire. She “sensed” when my husband or I drove into the driveway. She cocked her head to listen to birds singing from the trees. When strolling around the neighborhood or in the woods, not one scent, whether squirrel or rabbit or person or other dog, got past that spaniel nose. And her tail always wagged. Sage accepted her disability with grace and perseverance, and I found myself in awe of her courage and faith – courage to adjust and learn new things, and faith in herself and her caretakers.

With the help of a friend who had trained dogs in the past, we taught Sage the words “stop”, “step up”, “step down”, and “enough”. Eager to please and learn, Sage quickly caught on to the terms. “Step up” and “step down” helped her navigate stairs not only in our house but also in hotels when we traveled, and those words also came in handy when traversing the neighborhood on daily walks. “Stop” also helped on those walks to wait for traffic in order to safely cross the street. “Enough” was used to keep her from pulling on the leash and to shush her when she barked too much at squirrels in the backyard.

Also as her vision decreased, her courage seemed to increase, and I often marveled at her. Sage’s bravery would be tested, and my faith assessed, not long after the second eye surgery.

Sage, my husband and I went camping one night in on mountain property Greg and I had just purchased. The morning after arriving, I unzipped the tent and let Sage out to do her business, then, unthinking, turned around and fell back to sleep. About 20 minutes later Greg woke up, left the tent briefly, then stuck his head back in and asked, “Where’s Sage?”

“Oh, I let her go out a bit ago – she’s out there.”

“No, Gayle, she’s not,” came his tense reply.

We spent the next hour, three hours, day, and two days looking for her. Friends helped us, walking, driving, posting flyers, visiting campgrounds and cabins. My throat became raw from calling Sage’s name, talking to people, and crying. Greg’s forehead furrowed like a newly planted field, worry aging his face past its 47 years. Neither of us spoke the fears concealed in

our hearts: Sage falling down a hillside, hit by a car, mauled by a bear or mountain lion. The night of the second full day a call came to the house of the friend whose phone number we had listed on the flyer – someone had seen Sage nearly two miles from our property. Our friend came to our campsite to tell us; at least we knew Sage was still alive!

About 6:30 a.m. the next morning Greg and I drove to the area where Sage had been seen the night before. We walked for nearly 30 minutes without seeing her. I stopped at a cabin where a woman was sweeping off her porch. As I talked with the lady, my back to the road, the woman asked, “Is that the dog you’re talking about?”

I turned around to see our beloved Sage running along the road. I called and called, but she did not turn; I believe her fear was too great to recognize my voice. I ran quickly to find Greg, and we briskly, yet quietly, walked the dirt road, in hopes of sneaking up on her. A light rain had fallen the night before, and we discovered her tracks, following the circular road of this forested cabin area. Twenty minutes later we found her, off the roadway, sitting in a ditch and panting heavily. Quietly, we approached, and my husband reached down and grabbed her. Her eyes reflected terror, the horror of blindly running through woods and sagebrush and the fear of uncertainty. We were thrilled to know she was back with us, but we also knew we needed to be calm, so we gently said her name over and over. A recognition soon came to her eyes, and she barked with joy! Greg and I lay our heads across her neck and cried with thanksgiving.

Sage rebounded well from her ordeal. Her continual devotion to the people who caused her such anxiety, her courage to survive alone in the forest, and her faith in living life with vigor and valor humbles me to this day. Sage is now more than nine years old and is a great ambassador for disability awareness. She and I frequently visit elementary classrooms, showcasing that disability does not mean “no ability” in either people or pets. When children meet her and hear her story, they respond with admiration. Sage enjoys the attention and leans into their small hands and bodies as they pet and hug her. Through this dog, children learn about respect for others and for themselves and about courage and facing obstacles. Sage and I share that it’s okay to be different because **everyone is** different, and that we should respect others and ourselves because everyone has value. Children understand that if Sage can be brave although she is blind, they, too, can persevere in the difficulties that come their way.

When I first wondered how I’d cope living with a blind dog, little did I know the great lessons she would teach me nor that together, we would teach others. I am grateful to travel this life journey with such an inspiring dog!