

HEAL.

A silhouette of a person crouching on a beach, petting a dog, with a sunset over the ocean in the background. The scene is captured in low light, with the sun setting behind the horizon, creating a warm, golden glow that reflects on the water and silhouettes the person and dog against the bright sky. The person is on the right, crouching and touching the dog's head. The dog is on the left, standing and looking towards the person. The ocean stretches across the middle ground, with small waves lapping at the shore. The sky is a mix of deep blues and oranges from the sunset.

He was an unknown.
I was unprepared.
He ushered me into a world that became my destiny.

“Do you want to get a divorce?” It was not a question one would think to ask after three months of marriage, yet here it was hanging in the air like a misshaped blimp with no place to land. How the hell could this be happening? After a few hours of talking, our faces twisting around irreconcilable differences, we were draped in a heavy silence. We had decided to end our relationship—not three months of marriage but four years of togetherness and two kids that were going to feel this more deeply than I could bear. I remember trying to stand. My knees slammed to the ground. The gravity of what I had done pulled me down to the floor, and I had nothing left to fight it. There was no resistance. None. I had accepted why I was here, on the floor, with no strength to stand. I was lost. No husband. No plan. No dog.

My soon-to-be ex-husband left with Thai, a stocky, female English Staffordshire/American Pitbull Terrier mix. I guess it was ok since she was actually his dog, but I loved her. Shortly after I lost Buster, she moved in—an ever-so-friendly, white ball of Samoyed perfection. Thai and I did a lot together. There were tongue baths every morning, training through her tragic history with cats, and sunbathing in the yard. Neither one of us was big on sunscreen then, which is regretful. Thai died some years later from cancer that began with melanoma.

I had almost always had a dog. From one year old until today, the longest stretch without a dog was from the age of 14 until I moved out at 19. It was a very dark time. My mother married a man that brought a lot of change for our family, and one was the “no pets unless they can live in a cage or a tank” policy. This included giving my cat away (it was a horrible thing to do to a kid, but we did find the cat a wonderful home with a family friend). Don’t get me wrong here. I have owned and loved birds and reptiles, but their cuddle factor sometimes left me wanting. Snuggling with a parakeet or my sister’s ball python did not provide the same oxytocin boost as my furry family. My sister’s Oscar was always fun to watch—in a “fish are food not friends” kind of way. As soon as I was able, I started my own pet family.

“Mom, I want to get a dog.” I was 32 years old, divorced, and yes, I called my Mom. I’m not sure where we went or how much planning we did. Captain Emotion had the wheel, and I was just along for the ride. We ended up at the local SPCA. I don’t remember much, and I’m sure this paragraph will contain monumental confabulation. I do remember standing in a long room flanked by six-foot-tall kennel doors. There was a smell bursting out from the expected mix of doggy odor and cleaning products. It was pungent. It was the overwhelming scent of desperation. The decibels were ear-splitting, but I didn’t hear barking. I heard begging and pleading for escape. I think the sensory overload had my feet stuck to the floor in front of two kennels confining the only two dogs that were not pleading with me. Their demeanor gave me relief. It would be one of the two that would share my now empty, little beach house.

I remember clearly being pushed down by the weight of the pending decision. According to a t-shirt a very good friend gave me, rescue means the act of saving from distress. But it dawned on me that not only was I selecting a dog to rescue but, conversely, I would be condemning another dog to more days of solitude, confinement, and what I would later learn to be impossible amounts of distress.

My choice was between a ten-month-old, fifty-pound, scruffy, red dog and an eight-year-old male, German Shepherd Dog. Oh, how the moments that shape our life look exactly like the ordinary ones. They happen without fanfare. There are no callouts or “Help” buttons to click on; no little pop-up boxes are exclaiming, “Hello! Our live chat feature is available. Would you like to speak to one of our representatives to ensure you don’t fuck up your life?” I stood there pondering the weight of my choice for both dogs.

PART 2:

When I was a child, I lived in a small town. Mom, Dad, my sister, and I occupied a small apartment in a two-family ranch. My grandparents lived in the other half of the house, and they were always there to help. My childhood dog was a female, purebred champion Siberian Husky that my father purchased with the intent to breed. Nikki had two sizable litters of pups. I was so young that it is difficult to remember the details. I want to say that my little two-year-old self relished my time with them, laughing and smiling through the scratching and nipping, refusing to leave their area while everyone gushed over my magical rapport with the dogs. The truth is, I probably cried a lot and requested that we stop making any more toothy little demon spawns. Not sure. The one memory I do have is snuggling on the couch with one of the neonates, and when it peed on the couch, I told my mother it was me. I did not want the puppy to get in trouble for not using the potty.

My mother became a single parent in 1975. It turned out that not only did Dad not know how to raise puppies, he actually did not have much skill around the whole husband/father thing either (that is most definitely another story). Luckily, we had a nice village of family who were kind enough to support my family. If my mother was going to be late, my grandmother would prepare dinner for us before she left for her second-shift job at the local textile mill. My grandfather would get everything she cooked on the table when he got home from a full day of welding submarines. He also took on the role of our dog’s primary caregiver after my parents divorced.

One afternoon, my grandmother was preparing an evening meal. It was a classic. Overcooked steak, something green and mushy that looked like it may have had the lead role in Swamp Thing, boiled potatoes, and a loaf of Italian bread. My Nanny gave Nikki the bone from the steak, and she retreated to her “den” half under the kitchen table. As any good six-year-old who loved her dog would, I crawled right under there with her, and, yes, she growled at me. I don’t think Nikki made a federal case out of not wanting me to disturb her, and neither did my grandmother. “Get away from the dog while she is eating.” I was expected to—not asked to—respect my dog. My dog was given something that she valued, allowed to maintain possession of it, and gave a very primal warning, “Get away from me, kid. This is mine!”

We didn’t know anything about canine behavior. Seriously, not one thing. I had never owned a dog with “behavior issues.” Looking back, it’s not like they didn’t have them. Nikki was a great family dog, but she did have some “light” resource guarding and some dog aggression. There were fights with blood, a few punctures, and they often occurred in the middle of the street, right in front of everyone. All the adults seemed to understand that Nikki hated the dog opposite us. The target of her wrath happened to be one of her female pups from an “unauthorized” litter. That didn’t stop my grandfather from setting her

free every evening after work to gallop through the neighborhood, and no one complained. After all, it was the 70's and dogs were still allowed to be just that—DOGS.

As I stood in front of the kennels, I felt my feet move. The barking had quieted some, and I began to read the eight and a half by eleven sheet that attempted to summarize this dog's existence to date. This was less of a challenge for the scruffy red dog being all of ten months old. "Owned dog for eight months. Worked 14 hours a day. Can't care for the dog." "Where was the dog kept when no one is home?" Answer, "Bathroom." I slid to my right, where the shepherd lied pressed into the corner of his kennel. "Reason for relinquishment: Owner passed away." Dear God.

After what felt like waiting in line at the DMV but was actually only a few minutes, I handed a woman a one-page application summing up my existence to date. I paid the adoption fee, and out I walked with one scruffy, red dog who went from quiet and calm to a whirling dervish darting through the parking lot, dragging me behind him like a tail on a kite. But this was ok, right? They wouldn't have given me this dog if it wasn't going to be ok.

Right?

The ride home was rough. He panted and thrashed, shoving his head out the window and pulling it back in just as fast. We made it home, and I just walked him. And walked him and walked him. This was my first shelter dog. I had read some articles that advocated for not using this label. After all, first and foremost, they are dogs. But shelter dogs go through an experience that some other dogs do not. I believe now that it writes on who they are. For some, this is just a small piece of their sum total. For others, the change is profound.

PART 3:

I am going to ask a favor, a kindness from you as a reader. If you can remember, as you take in this next part, I was an average person who had never rescued a dog, never read a training book, and had no professional resources.

I was about to step foot inside a disorienting maze of emotion and disinformation.

The first week with Kolby was uneventful. He pretty much hung out, kept his cool. He was a bit of a puller but nothing compared to the Staffy I lived with. He jumped up some, on me and my family when they were visiting. I couldn't say if it was friendly or not. At that time, I assumed it was. One night, I was getting ready for bed. We had our walks and our dinner and TV time. I heard what I could only estimate to be a herd of large animals running up and down the stairs. Kolby was in full gallop, all 50 pounds of him, running, bouncing off things, and snapping on his way by me. On one pass, he flung himself into a loveseat, pushed it about six feet into a glass door. I grabbed him by the collar, and he bit my hand.

Frozen.

Shocked.

Snapping into reality, I realized that I was living alone with a dog I didn't know. Kolby didn't physically damage me, but I heard a pop. It was my heart. After all, "I saved you, spent a week's pay on beds, toys, collars, bones. I am giving you a home, good food, and all my time, and THIS is what you are going to do?" This scenario replayed itself sporadically over the next couple of weeks, but I

couldn't see the pattern. It was unclear as to why we had blissful days and evenings of calm and other nights could only be described as watching a red tornado with flashes of white deconstruct my house. On one occasion, I decided to climb up on my bed and literally hide. Well, he took a detour from the regular loop, jumped on the bed, bit my foot, and took off.

Scared.

Confused.

Desperate, I decided he was going to sleep in the kitchen. He had other ideas. As I was about to find out, he had many other ideas. I had a gate, but my kitchen had a large opening, so I had to McGyver a barrier. I put his bed, water, toys in there with him and said, "You're gonna have to help me out a little. If I had any idea of what you might need, I would give it to you." I felt like I needed to follow that with an Amen and a quick sign of the cross even though I wasn't religious. I left him panting, lips wide, eyes the size of saucers, and that giant tongue extended to the size of a large serving spoon. And then I had a thought. Should I bring him back? There. To the shelter?

I heard that popping sound again.

That night Kolby and I were up until the wee hours pissing each other off. He would break out of his enclosure, and I would add another piece of furniture to the barricade. It had become a battle of wills. By 3:00 a.m., every movable furnishing on the first floor of my home was stacked floor to ceiling in front of the kitchen. At 3:05, Kolby was on the wrong side of it, staring at me. I am really not sure who was more stressed out. I lowered myself to the floor and sobbed. He, of course, went to sleep. "You won, buddy."

PART 4:

After a pretty long week, I decided to spend time with some friends. Not sure about Kolby's reaction with new people now, my trust was waning; I had offered to meet everyone out at a local bar. I gave Kolby fresh water, the first floor, a rawhide (so 15 years ago), and left for a few hours. I had one light on, but it was too faint to cover the entire living room. I walked into the house and heard a noise. Puzzled, I flipped the switch, and there I saw, bathed in a warm incandescent glow, my dog atop a pile of cushions, chest over his rawhide, front paws spread, staring and growling. At me.

Kolby made my heart pop more times than I can count over the next year or so. Things unfolded quickly, and I fell in lockstep with most of the owners I help now. I was sure there would be some kind of change. I was sure that this aggression would resolve just by exposing him to the world and literally saying, "See, buddy? You're ok. Everything is ok." But things just continued from confusing to frustrating, scary to dangerous.

I made a lot of mistakes with Kolby during the first three months. From my current vantage point, they were egregious. It was 15 plus years ago, and I am still trying to forgive myself for threatening him, restraining him, and following horrible advice that took me down a road of punishment, deep regret, and emotional damage for both of us. There were so many moments I wish I could snatch back. So many moments that still, as I type, leave me in tears. My most monumental misstep was the board-and-train I trusted him with while I went on vacation. They placed a choke collar around his neck, they complained

about what I know now was extreme anxiety in his kennel, they kneed him in the chest for jumping and instructed me to do the same when I picked him up. He came home with stress-induced colitis and now growling at strangers. His growling escalated to bite attempts. There were several, quick and nasty, lunges with snarls and air snaps. There were moments of pure luck with him simply running out of leash as he went from standing still to exposed canines, snarls, catapulting himself toward whoever I was talking to. This happened on leash, in the car, in my home, with family and friends.

The scariest moment was when I was on a secluded beach with Kolby on a 50' lead. The one thing this animal loved more than anything was swimming underwater. It really was the coolest thing to watch. I timed him once. Ten Mississippis was his personal best. A girl of about 10 had walked up behind us and picked up a stick. I turned to see her and heard Kolby bounding out of the water, and I reeled in his leash hand over hand as fast as I could. He had about six feet of leash, and the girl had about eight feet of beach.

Nauseous.

Devastated.

I needed to find some help and tried to navigate the training and behavior world. There seemed to be more people out there like the board-and-train folks, willing to hurt him, and I couldn't. The punishment—forced downs, knee to the chest, hanging. I had no actual knowledge that this was not an appropriate training technique, but it just felt so WRONG. He was acting aggressively; there was no doubt. But this was hurting him and hurting me. And this was not what sharing your life with a dog was supposed to be. It was supposed to be snuggles and play and walks. Sure, training. But this?

I was able to jump off that horrifying wagon and find some people who helped chaperone both of us into the world of behavior modification. But was I too late?

PART 5:

The second trainer helped me more. We gave Kolby routines, management, and strategies to keep everyone safe. I was diligent, minded all of his rituals, and put safety precautions in place. We tried some over-the-counter calming supplements. A muzzle was used, but I was not taught how to make him comfortable before using it. The muzzle was pretty aversive to him, and there was an observable difference in his demeanor after 10 minutes of wearing and then removing it. We also discussed a second dog, one that was happy, social, and outgoing. Oh, I did it, and the dogs were very good together but the second dog, a fearful puppy mill dog (I told you, I had no clue), definitely got a big dose of second-hand fucked. (She is actually the next chapter.)

I was also referred to my first Veterinary Behaviorist. In 2002, there were only approximately two dozen of these board-certified unicorns in the country, but there was one 30 minutes from home. It was like opening that Wonka Bar with the Golden Ticket. After a 12-page profile that I filled out so meticulously that the document I sent back was double, I had my appointment for his assessment and accompanying behavior plan. Charlie was in the chocolate factory and about to see the inner workings of—the dog.

We discussed socialization, history, behavior, pharmacology, emotion, fear, reactivity, stress, anxiety. Aggression. I was absolutely overcome with awe and amazement of it all. I used every nanosecond of my two hours. I followed the doctor's recommendations to the letter. We tried three or four different drugs with myriad failure. They all had side effects for Kolby—uncontrolled urination with increased volume (yup, I tracked that), increased anxiety, licking granulomas, loss of appetite, agitation. I had cordoned off my home for any visitors outside of training. I attached a boat anchor to the wall to tether him and train with both hands. I had asked friends to help by being my friendly visitors, and they were visibly frightened by Kolby's responses. The isolation, the fear, the loneliness, the stress all began to weigh heavily on our lives. Depression was beginning to press down on me. Not because of how I was living but more from the loss of hope. But I was committed to taking this as far as I could. I was not a quitter. I was not going to give up on him. Taking him back was not an option. I committed to this animal, and I was going to save him. (And just typing that has left me sobbing.)

One summer morning, we had come home from our walk. It was warm and humid, and the grass was covered in a dewy, web-like fog. Kolby's soft, half-naked belly was wet from prancing through the high grass. He had come in, lapped up some water soaking his red beard, and then rested. Lying on his side, tongue bouncing on the floor as he panted, I sat down next to him. Anytime he was able to relax filled my soul. I placed my hand on his rising chest and looked. I was about to say something when I saw it. Actually, I am unsure whether I saw it first or felt it first. His muscles tensed and twitched, his eyes became round like copper pennies on pink-tinted paper. Finally, I heard it. It was a growl. There was no mistake. The growl was for me.

Hopeless.

Destroyed.

PART 6:

The next few days were even more painful than the event itself. Endless phone calls absolutely pulled back the curtain of reality for dogs like Kolby. No one wanted him. No one could help him. His fate rested in my hands for a second time. I spent hours on the phone. The voices changed but the words were all the same. "We can't take him." "We have dogs waiting for homes with no issues." "We don't have the resources." "We can't adopt him out." The phone calls changed from the perfect strangers I was trying to rally to his team. I called the original shelter, his trainer, his vet, and the veterinary behaviorist. This was when I learned about quality of life. We went through the funnel. It was ok that he wasn't good with strangers. Lots of dogs aren't good with kids, and I didn't have any of those. And here was the last fated statement: "As long as he is good with the other dog and me, I can manage it."

Personal safety notwithstanding, there was nothing left to do. We all decided that the right thing to do was to let him go peacefully with his family around him and a horse-sized dose of valium on board. I made the appointment—twice. My mom was not ready. She needed more time, and she needed to feel like we exhausted every humane option. You see, my Husky died in her sleep. I had euthanized one dog for cancer, and my mother had never done it. And this? Well, this was for behavior (the vet had mentioned a very rare syndrome called rage disorder, but it was not officially diagnosed), and this was a young dog. Kolby was two months shy of his second birthday. This was unthinkable.

We made a few stops, and I can't say how many cheeseburgers he consumed, but even on 100 milligrams of valium, he could eat. He could also be pet which made us unravel emotionally. No one wanted this. We took pictures that I thought would help but made me feel awful—like I was trying to act normal in the face of this gut-wrenching event, like I was trying to trick him. I was getting ready to kill my dog. Kill. My. Dog. The words bounced around my head like they are right now. They hurt. They were sharp and cutting, stabbing, and indefensible.

I remember us all. We were lying on the cold linoleum floor stroking, massaging, and encouraging Kolby just to breathe and rest. They gave him a sedative in a very short time after we arrived, and a little bit after that, he drifted off. Then we plunged the fluid into his vein and waited. This moment was pregnant with suffering, guilt, regret, compassion, forgiveness, confusion, anger, what-ifs, could-haves, blame, doubt, and relief. I will be completely honest. I felt relief, and I hated myself for it.

It's 2022, more than 18 years since that day, and I can still feel the pain of it. But there is something else here. My life with Kolby was so intense that it sent me running full speed in a direction that I don't think I would have gone on my own. Our time together broke my heart, but I now know how it feels to share the world with an animal that can't cope and is spinning wildly out of control despite all attempts to help. Because of this, I am a better consultant with a deeper understanding and a lot more compassion than if I had never walked that road with him. I thank him for it every day. The truth is our time has not faded much. I call on him often. His name is a mantra for empathy, and it holds me when I need to share with the people who have invited me into their lives at a very vulnerable and confusing moment. He changed the very core of me.

If I had known then what I know now:

Socialization

We hear the word, we talk about its importance, and yet the adoption of this practice en masse remains thin. When I think about the small, critical window that we have to accomplish the task, I go into overdrive. Not a panic so much as a tactical force of nature. My goal is to impart importance and inspire action. With most things dog, I see people do the best with the knowledge they have—NO ONE is out to intentionally harm their dogs. Unfortunately, there is a lot of harmful information floating around. By the time I reach families, they have an average of about four weeks to socialize their new, small (or maybe not so small) friends.

What happens to your puppy between the ages of not-yet-born to 16 weeks old will be written on the pages of who they are as adults. The irony is that puppies have one mission—gather information and survive to adulthood. As a result, their reactions to stimulation that cause fear, stress, and anxiety are a bit more subtle than the adult dog. Puppies that are behaving typically will approach new things, collect information, and engage socially with little fear. Because they are experientially a clean slate, a typically developing dog explores and learns what is safe and dangerous. It's our job as advocates to ensure almost absolutely that every new stimulus the puppy encounters in that 16-week window is weighted heavily on the positive side. Pairing these engagements with primary reinforcement, like food and play, can help the puppy build positive associations, and they will carry these impressions along with them as they develop.

Neutral experiences are not enough. Neutrality in a puppy can indicate fear which is marked observable by any avoidance or behaviors that look like the puppy is trying to escape. Unfortunately, our human brains want to convince the puppy that “it’s all good,” and we force them to get closer, coerce them into making contact, and basically hand them a reason to be afraid the next time they encounter a similar set of circumstances.

As I mentioned, Kolby had been kept in a room while the owners worked 12 to 14 hours per day. I am guessing that he was not walked much, did not have the opportunity to socialize or explore. I had no idea about any of this when I took him. I had no idea that this kind of socialization gap could cause insurmountable issues. But were they?

Aversive Training Methods

I am currently 13 years from the moment I received my first training certification. I floated a bit, playing the hokey pokey with dog training. Early in my training life, I was single, caring for four high-energy hunting dogs, and had a mortgage. My career as a graphic designer and photographer paid the bills. I worked with dogs and advanced my education sporadically. I eventually reached the point where I could move into behavior work full time. The important part is that I am fully immersed in the culture of behavior and have made some ridiculous connections with some very talented friends. I am also now regretfully aware that things could have been different.

Aversive stimulation is any stimulation that the dog will expend energy to avoid or escape. Punishment is any stimulation presented immediately after a behavior that reduces that behavior’s rate or relative frequency. Boiling that down, it must be something the dog finds unpleasant. The result of using aversives is not the elimination of a behavior but instead an almost magic suppression of that behavior. So, what is the problem? First, aversives suppress the observable behavior of the dog but do not protect the animal’s emotional state. Actually, that part will likely get worse. Remember the part about spending energy to avoid or escape? The dog will continue to intensify their behavior until the desired result is achieved. That is typically relief. Relief is reinforcing, and dogs will work hard to experience it. It can also change other reactions in seemingly unrelated situations like increasing anxiety. Aggressive displays are designed to communicate. The dog is clearly telling the world they are feeling threatened. That is not grounds for punishment.

Several studies have been done that look at the immediate and longer-term effects of using aversive and confrontational training methods. You can read a synopsis in my blog, [Aversive and Confrontational Training Methods](#).

We cannot assume we know what is or isn’t threatening. That is solely in the purview of the dog. For example, let’s take good ‘ole Uncle Roger, who is 6’4” and tends to palm a dog’s head like Shaq palms a basketball. He is convinced that all dogs love him. We all have an Uncle Roger, and we all, at one point or another, tried to verbally and spatially convince our dog that Uncle Roger is safe, all while the dog is trying to politely back out of the interaction. Why isn’t that good enough? What is in our DNA that pushes us forward, using a form of communication that dogs are not proficient in, to coerce and convince that dog that he or she is safe? Why is the mandate that we place on dogs to go forth and be “friendly” so high?

PART 7: EPILOGUE

I have sat for years and wrestled with this question: What if I had adopted Kolby now? After 13 years of experience with behavior, after so much learning and practice, my big, bold, beautiful question is:

If I adopted Kolby today, would I be able to help him live a quality life?

I think the answer will be disappointing. Simply, I don't know. The odds would likely be better as I am sure I would have so much more to offer him. That said, Kolby had some significant deficits to overcome. What I missed in his history, or didn't fully comprehend, was that Kolby was not socialized. He spent 10-12 hours a day in a bathroom for almost six months. Given his temperament, he missed out on something that could have made the most significant difference in his behavior. I do know that if I had adopted him today, he would not have suffered any aversive training practices. Could that have made the difference? Possibly. These methods are damaging and dangerous. I believe it broke an already socially-compromised dog.

Kolby was hard to love, but I did. He was hard to live with, but I did that too. He was even harder to let go, but keeping him alive would have been to save me from the pain. I did learn how to protect him and when it became clear that he was unable to navigate most of life, the best thing I could do for him was to embrace the suffering so he wouldn't have to.