

Everyone Speaks Dog

By Laurel E. Hunt

When I adopted Baker, a Welsh springer spaniel, I hoped he had the temperament to become a therapy dog. With the help of a good trainer, we worked hard on obedience and passed the Pet Partners certification test.

Making our first hospital visit as a therapy dog team was a special moment for me. The journey had begun years earlier when a dear friend was hospitalized with terminal cancer. Therapy dog visits were the highlight of her last days and led to fond reminiscing about dogs she had loved. I realized the power of a wagging tail in a hospital, a healing dimension that no high-tech treatment, or the most caring human, can provide. To honor my friend's memory, I had vowed that someday I would do this work.

The first time we walked through the hospital doors, I knew Baker was up to the task, but was I? I'm introverted, and not comfortable making small talk with strangers. But it's not about me making conversation, it's about Baker making a connection and for a few moments, helping patients and family forget why they are there.

We entered the Cancer Center's main lobby, walked past the boutique with its array of colorful hats and scarves, and signed in at the reception desk. Then we took the elevator down to the Radiation Therapy Department, where specially shielded rooms housed the radiation equipment underground.

"Would you like a dog visit?" I asked a couple sitting together in a small waiting area near the elevator. The woman looked up from her magazine and smiled. She stretched out her hand to Baker. While she stroked his head, Baker sniffed her shoes.

"He smells my dog!" she laughed.

We made our way around the circle of people seated in the waiting room, spending a few minutes with each person, chatting about their pets. Baker decoded the smells by sniffing their shoes: this one is a dog person; that one is a cat person. There were probably a few interesting farm animal smells on some boots, as well. No one spoke about what had brought them there, but I knew: they were a family member, a neighbor, or perhaps a church member, providing transportation and support to someone undergoing cancer treatment. What surprised me was how eager they were to talk about their dogs, and how the whole room had lit up with smiles when Baker walked in. They rubbed Baker's silky ears while I listened to funny stories of pet mischief and sad stories of dogs much missed. For a few moments, they forgot why they were there. They smiled and laughed and hugged Baker. His tail never stopped wagging.

The receptionist buzzed open the locked door into the treatment area, a U-shaped corridor with treatment rooms on the perimeter. Down the hall, a small waiting room where patients changed clothes in curtained cubicles was empty. Before I could intervene, Baker stuck his head into a trashcan and nabbed a McDonald's bag containing a half-eaten burger and fries.

“Leave it! No!” I grabbed the bag, put it back in the trash, and squirted sanitizer on my hands. No harm done, but Baker now knew that trashcans had rewards. I was glad no one had seen us.

We continued our circuit of the hallway and came to the nurses’ station, opposite a small bay where hospitalized patients wait on a gurney for transport back to their room, after their treatment. A nearly bald, debilitated-looking woman lay motionless on the gurney, staring at the ceiling. I couldn’t let her touch Baker without the doctor or nurse’s permission, but his presence and wagging tail provided a moment of respite. She turned her head to look down at Baker, her face softening in a weak smile.

“Pray for me, honey,” she said.

“I will.” That was the first of many moments in the Cancer Center, where I would see the intersection of grace, hope, and courage in the face of death.

One afternoon, our pet therapy shift coincided with that of the hospital’s music therapist. Baker and I had completed the circuit of waiting rooms in Radiation Therapy and headed for the elevator to go up to the Infusion area. The music therapist had unpacked her instruments and was starting to strum her harp in the lobby next to the waiting room. I led Baker over to an empty chair and took a seat, glad for a few moments to rest before completing our rounds. Baker laid down, but instead of flopping on his side for a nap, he remained alert, ears pricked as if listening to the soothing music. A quiet calm enveloped the waiting area, the visitors transfixed by this impromptu concert.

“Can you play *Amazing Grace*?” a visitor asked. The music therapist nodded and pulled the score from her tote bag. I rested my hand on Baker’s back, feeling the comforting warmth of his fur.

A therapy dog and a music therapist providing solace in the Cancer Center. Amazing grace, indeed.

Occasionally, Baker and I visited the hospital’s Neuro-trauma ICU waiting room, where families pass the hours between a few moments at bedside. Most of them sit quietly, gazing at the TV or reading magazines, alone with their thoughts.

People are often surprised to see a dog in the waiting room, so I begin by explaining that Baker is a therapy dog who is there to visit with them if they would like. The first family that we encountered shared that their father was dying, but “It was all in the good Lord’s hands.” I assured them that their father was getting the best of care. As they told me about their dogs, they smiled as Baker tried to head for the nearby trash can, which by late afternoon overflowed with fast food wrappers.

We moved on to other families. Some were talking quietly on cell phones, or dismissed Baker with an absent-minded pat. Their sadness was like a bubble around them.

As we worked our way to the back of the room, I noticed an Asian man sitting by himself, his face contorted with worry. He looked up and seemed startled by Baker, but his expression softened as Baker made eye contact and tentatively wagged his tail. The man got up and came over to Baker, and in halting English asked if it was okay to touch him. I smiled and nodded. The man knelt and hugged Baker for a few moments. He whispered, “Thank you” and made a slight bow to me as he returned to his seat. Baker laid his head on my lap and looked up, as if to say, “We should go now.”

Leaving the hospital, Baker received more hugs from staff. I was exhausted and exhilarated at the same time, knowing we had made a difference. We walked out of there humbled by the faces of courage we’d encountered.

I'll never know what brought these people to the ICU waiting room on that afternoon. I only know that for a few moments, Baker helped them to transcend their sadness and feel comforted. I needn't have worried about what to say. I've learned that no matter what language you speak, everyone speaks dog.

Laurel E. Hunt writes about pet therapy, pet loss and the human-animal bond. As a Pet Partner she completed pet therapy visits with hundreds of patients with her Springer spaniel, Baker.

© 2022 *Intima: A Journal of Narrative Medicine*