

Essential Readings for the Development of Empathy

The Story of George

Adapted from *Let's Have a Dog Party!* by Ingrid Newkirk

When Mr. Murray, a writer, lost his dog to old age, he began to think back on what joy his dog had brought into his life and what he had not noticed about his dog while George was alive ...

When the Murray family got George, they had to teach him to go up and down stairs as he'd lived his life on one floor.

Murray wrote: "I think that's the only thing we ever taught him in thirteen years, and it was mostly desperation that made me finally give up and conclude that maybe this dog didn't come to us to learn, but to teach, though it took me a while to understand the lessons." Murray says he started out trying to teach George by using a rolled-up newspaper to stop his barking and dancing through the house every time the doorbell rang or he heard a car in the driveway. "I think he was trying to make me understand," concludes Murray, "that a friend at the door, even a stranger or the mailman, can be a nice little diversion on a humdrum day, and something to celebrate with a little excitement."

Murray says George was impatient whenever his food was being fixed, "prancing around the kitchen, standing on his rear legs and then gulping down a full bowl almost before it was set in front of him on the floor." No matter what was said or done to calm him down, George never stopped this excitement, probably, as Murray decided, "to remind me of the pure joy of wanting and waiting for something, and, by always wagging his tail the entire time he was eating, demonstrating that gratefulness is a priceless part of good manners and doesn't cost a thing."

Early on, Murray had tried to get George to hurry up and finish his business in the yard and come back inside. "In time," he says, "he taught me the joy of a much longer sunrise walk to see the new day, even in winter, and another after dinner to help put the day's work and worries in perspective. I think I grew to look forward to those walks as much as George did."

There are many more lessons George taught the family over time The Murrays thought that they would make Christmastime special by putting a red bow on George's collar and giving him some extra treats but realized that on all the days that weren't Christmas, George was trying to show them that it was possible to spread that feeling of anticipation and happiness over the whole year, not just when the holly decorations and the tree were put up. In other words, George's lesson was "that the only presents that meant much of anything to him were those that were waiting for him, not just on Christmas, but every morning of the year—his family, his friends, his freedom, and not too many baths."

Am I Blue?

By Alice Walker

There were many apple trees in our yard, and one by the fence that Blue could almost reach. We were soon in the habit of feeding him apples, which he relished. ... Sometimes he would stand very still just by the apple tree, and when one of us came out he would whinny, snort loudly, or stamp the ground. This meant, of course: I want an apple ...

Blue was lonely. Blue was horribly lonely and bored. I was not shocked that this should be the case; five acres to tramp by yourself ... cannot provide many interesting events. ... No, I was shocked that I had forgotten that human animals and nonhuman animals can communicate quite well ...

But then, in our second year at the house, something happened in Blue's life. One morning, looking out the window at the fog that lay like a ribbon over the meadow, I saw another horse, a brown one, at the other end of Blue's field. Blue appeared to be afraid of it, and for several days made no attempt to go near. We went away for a week. When we returned, Blue had decided to make friends and the two horses ambled or galloped along together, and Blue did not come nearly as often to the fence underneath the apple tree ...

It did not, however, last forever. One day, after a visit to the city, I went out to give Blue some apples. He stood waiting, or so I thought, though not beneath the tree. When I shook the tree and jumped back from the shower of apples, he made no move. I carried some over to him. He managed to half-crunch one. The rest he let fall to the ground. I dreaded looking into his eyes—because I had of course noticed that Brown, his partner, had gone—but I did look. If I had been born into slavery, and my partner had been sold or killed, my eyes would have looked like that. The children next door explained that Blue's partner had been "put with him," ... so that they could mate and she conceive. Since that was accomplished, she had been taken back by her owner, who lived somewhere else.

Will she be back? I asked.

They didn't know.

Blue was like a crazed person. Blue *was*, to me, a crazed person. He galloped furiously, as if he were being ridden, around and around his five beautiful acres. He whinnied until he couldn't. He tore at the ground with his hooves. He butted himself against his single shade tree. He looked always and always toward the road down which his partner had gone. And then, occasionally, when he came up for apples, or I took apples to him, he looked at me. It was a look so piercing, so full of grief, a look *so human*, I almost laughed (I felt too sad to cry) to think there are people who do not know that animals suffer.

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