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THE HEALING BOND: One therapist's quest for healing and the canine companion who showed him the way

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One simple phone call changed my life. "Larry, you have cancer." The words rang in my ears. I felt like I had been pushed off a cliff. I was light-headed and teary eyed. Hot and cold chills ran through my body. And my heart pounded and throat tightened.

That May afternoon my urologist told me the biopsies came back samples were negative, but the fifth was positive. "I can't believe it either. I'm sorry Larry. I'm really sorry."

I had cancer.

Immediately following the news, I found myself in a blur of activity. Like most cancer patients, I had to decide on treatment, doctor and facility. Two months later I was scheduled for prostate cancer surgery at the UCLA Medical Center.

The real work, though, followed surgery. I was in pain, weak and depressed.

All I wanted was to curl up and shut everyone out. The prospect of becoming agoraphobic and never leaving the house became more and more appealing. And I would have succeeded had I not found Max. He was a two-year-old flat-coated retriever. If it weren't for Max, I would still be in bed.

Pets have long been recognized for their healing impact. Sigmund Freud, in fact, had several chow-chows. His favorite, Jofi, stayed with him through his sessions. As Jofi walked to the door at 10 minutes to the hour on the hour, Freud knew when to end his sessions. Since Freud's time, much research has been conducted on the benefits of pet therapy.

Researchers at the University of Bergen, in Norway, have found that dogs reduce both systolic blood pressure and cholesterol in their owners. Thereby reducing the likelihood of heart attack or stroke. One study notes that pets provide their owners with health benefits such as an incentive to exercise, reduced anxiety, distraction from pain, as well as kinesthetic bonding, or the permission to touch and be touched, which decreases loneliness and depression. These benefits are especially critical for those suffering cancer.

My dog Max provided me with all these things. Through his companionship and unconditional love, he lessened my feelings of loneliness and depression. He wasn't scared of my cancer or me. My experience with Max is not unique. Many cancer patients tell me similar stories of recovery.

Take Lori Higgins. The San Juan Capistrano resident was diagnosed with stage-II breast cancer in November 2000. Her four Siamese cats pulled her out of her fatigue and post-treatment funk by taking turns sitting on her lap and purring for hours.

For those with incurable disease, pets can improve the quality of life. Gabriella Graham has a rare and incurable form of cancer. The 45-year-old patient of Salinas, California, has outlived her prognosis by four years. Graham partially credits her miraculous longevity to her pets: a rabbit, a cat and a parrot.

For me, I went into surgery a healthy 39-year-old. But I came out functionally 89, hardly able to walk, stooped over and hooked up to a urine bag and catheter. People couldn't understand why I felt more anxious and depressed after my treatment.

My tightly organized, predictable and structured routine of actively fighting my cancer was gone. I was no longer "doing," I was "being." It was a void state. While I was no longer the "old" pre-cancer Larry, I was not quite the "new" Larry either. When my treatment and hospital stay ended, my friends and family went back to their daily lives. I felt abandoned, isolated and scared. That's when I opened my home to Max.

When Max first came to live with me, I had to guard my sutures and make sure he didn't jump on me, knock me down or pull me over with the leash. I was forced to get up and get moving. Max needed to be fed, he needed to get out and walk. And he definitely needed a friend to play with, not to mention dog training. (The flat-coated retriever is like a child with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.)

During those months of recovery, Max and I became inseparable. He didn't care if I had to run to the bathroom every few minutes. He didn't mind that I was out of shape. And he wasn't scared of my cancer as some of my "friends" were. He was living in the moment. That helped me in accepting what I was going through as well. In effect, Max was helping me construct a new "narrative" of who I was, what my cancer meant to me and how I would reconstruct my life.

Max gave me a renewed sense of purpose. He was a lifeline, a rainbow bridge from me being "stage-II prostate tumor in room 918" to being Larry, although a very different Larry than before.

I realize that taking Max in when I did offered me the best medicine at the time. He provided me with the ability to rediscover the simple joys in life. Max pulled me out of the deep emotional abyss that many cancer patients fall into following treatment. He brought me back into a world filled with people, places and renewed hope. And for that gift I am eternally grateful. Thanks Maxie Boy.

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