

LOVE IS BLIND

For those of you who share, or have shared heart and soul with a dog, you will no doubt agree that they inspire, delight, humble, teach and touch the human spirit like no other being can. Courage, devotion and the ability to adapt are qualities that immediately come to mind when we think 'dog'. I've been privileged and blessed to have met many, many dogs along my life's path and each one has possessed these traits. That said, there are times when a particular dog comes along who, like a thunderbolt, reminds us just how remarkable dogs really are.



This is the story of a dog, named Atomic, who came into the world about 7 years ago. When Anne Marie Lorusso went to see the litter of tiny Italian Greyhound puppies, she was immediately drawn to the friendly male who enjoyed being handled and cuddled. "He really chose me. He kept climbing out of the pen to be with me and when I held him he would smother me with kisses. It was clear that he was a real character," recalls Anne Marie. When he was brought home, the wee mite almost fit in the palm of her hand; weighing just a couple of pounds and only a few inches tall. As he jumped and bounded around Anne Marie's apartment like a whirling dervish, a friend said "this guy is full of atomic energy" and the apt name "Atomic" stuck.

When he was just 10 weeks old, Atomic was already receiving individual puppy sessions from a local trainer. Anne Marie wanted to ensure he grew up to be well socialized and mannerly, and she had read that early training was a good idea. At 12 weeks, he started puppy classes where he enjoyed playing with other pups and learning more new things. By 2 years of age, Atomic had a wide repertoire of behaviours. Aside from the traditional obedience - heel, sit, down and stay, he had mastered signature moves like waving hello and good-bye (with both paws), dance, spin (both ways), crawl, speak, quiet, 'have a stretch' and 'take a bow.' After completing several levels of obedience and trick classes, he dabbled his paws in agility and freestyle activities and, further still, became a Therapeutic Paws of Canada (TPOC) certified therapy dog.

"I had seen stories about therapy dogs on TV and thought it would be a lovely way to volunteer our time. He had always been a friendly dog and loved to be the centre of attention with people, especially children". Atomic delighted in showing his routine of tricks to anyone who would watch and clap for him. Nothing seemed to really scare or bother him, and he was happy to meet anyone in any circumstance – a superb quality for a good therapy dog.

“He’s like a sponge and just loves learning and interacting with people. He’s great with other dogs and thoroughly enjoys the social aspect of any and all activities. Contrary to popular belief, he’s not as delicate or breakable as he looks, he’s a hardy, well built little man” said Anne Marie.

Tragedy struck when Atomic was about 3 years old. “Vision problems”, recalls Anne Marie. “I wasn’t sure what exactly was going on, but I knew he was having trouble seeing. My veterinarian referred me to an ophthalmologist for dogs and we had tests done to determine the cause. I was devastated when I was told Atomic had sudden onset of Glaucoma and Vitreous Degeneration”.

Over the next 3 years, Anne Marie did everything humanly possible to battle his diseases but, despite surgeries, expensive treatments and prescriptions, nothing they did could prevent him from slowly going blind. Last Christmas the medications seemed to completely stop working and Atomic started to incur pain from the increased pressure behind his eyes. His eye specialist said there wasn’t much more that could be done for Atomic because he was already on the maximum dosage of medication for his small size. Anne Marie was faced with two choices; have him euthanized or remove both his eyes.

“Other than his eyes, I knew that there really wasn’t anything else wrong with him and he had so much life left in him. How could I possibly consider euthanizing my best friend - my sweet boy who loved everybody and everything that life had to offer? I opted to have his eyes removed, signed the consent form and prayed that he would adapt to life without sight”.

Now that he was going to be completely blind, there were many unanswered questions. Would he have to totally re-learn the life he once lived? Would he have to be restricted in his social activities? Would he remain a social butterfly or would he now be frightened and confused, living in a world of darkness? As Anne Marie pondered Atomic’s future, a realization dawned. Atomic had already begun the adaptation to blindness process. “For the last 3 years, he had very limited vision and seemed to use his other senses anyway. I took him to work at my office every day throughout the 3-year decline of his vision and he would walk up the stairs, through the office, around my desk and into his crate without missing a beat. He would only bump into things like chairs or obstacles if they were out of their usual place. Other than that, co-workers and clients would ask me if I was *sure* he was really going blind?

Miraculously, once Atomic recovered from the physical aspects of the surgery, he was back to his spunky, social self and seemed to be even happier than he was before. An additional advantage of the surgery was that there would be no more pills, drops or doctors visits with medical instruments poking about his eyes. Anne Marie confesses that the deterioration of his vision and subsequent removal of his eyes was harder on her than him.

Anne Marie reflects, “It’s been about a year now since the surgery and Atomic continues to flourish. Not a day goes by without someone asking ‘Is your dog blind?’ We also get a lot of stares now wherever we go. Atomic still walks well at heel and is happy to march along without a fear. He marks all his usual spots and walks up to greet as many people, especially children, as possible - whether he knows them or not. Whenever I take him on street walks or to visit stores, people are shocked at how confident he is, even when he’s in a new environment. If he bumps into something, he just backs up

and picks a new route. He knows the words *careful* which means slow down, *wait* means to stop and *step* means there's a step up or down ahead. He's not anxious or fearful at all and starts wagging his tail as soon as he hears people around him, especially if they say 'awww'".

Atomic was retested as a therapy dog and passed each component of the evaluation without any trouble whatsoever. When he went back to his visiting facility the staff and patients were elated to see him again. "I can see the faces of the patients and family members light up when Atomic enters the facility. We often have people waiting for us in the lobby. Despite his complete loss of sight, Atomic knows where the people are and senses which ones need his therapeutic touch. I have no idea how he does it – it's a gift he has" said Anne Marie.

Last summer Anne Marie decided to have Atomic evaluated as a TPOC Child Certified Therapy Dog. His love for children had been clear and constant since he was a puppy and she thought it would be an idea to share her 'Atomic Star' with the children at the Hospital for Sick Children.

(Note from author) I had the pleasure of experiencing Atomic firsthand that day as his evaluator and was simply awestruck by his exceptional abilities and character. He undoubtedly knew where everyone was situated and after navigating his way through the circle of children flawlessly, he sat quietly and politely while a child read to him and was gentle, engaging and charming throughout the entire evaluation.

What I found most interesting was that he continually gravitated and seemed to want to spend additional time with one of the young girls who had volunteered to be part of the evaluation test group that day. There seemed to be an uncanny, unspoken connection between the two. After the test, the girl's mother approached and I commented that Atomic was clearly very fond of her daughter. She too had noticed and said it would mean a great deal to her daughter and, despite her autism, she had been very aware of Atomic's special attentiveness to her.

There is no question that dogs have capabilities and senses beyond our comprehension. What they are or how they work is not for us to know, just to appreciate and embrace.

Author: Lorraine Houston