

*Oyez à Beaumont*

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A STUDENT of mine called two days ago and asked, "What do the experts do when their dogs die?"

He developed a calcium deposit on his upper spine, did my good Airedale Gunner, and it would hurt him to track, so Gunner and I stopped tracking, stopped retrieving and jumping, not because he wouldn't have gone on if it were up to him, and awhile after that he was very ill with cancer, and after a time of that, too much of that, I had him killed. Gallant Gunner, brave Gunner, gay Gunner. Once, late one evening on a beach in Malibu, he took down a man who was attacking me with a knife. The vet had to patch Gunner up some, but he didn't turn tail the way my assailant did. Brave Gunner. Harken to Gunner. Twenty-four hours later, bandaged, he clowned and told jokes for the kids at Juvenile Hall, performing for the annual Orange Empire Dog Club Christmas party. Oh, rare and dauntless Gunner. Even his hip, broken when a prostate tumor grew right through the bone, did not stop the courage of his gaiety, but I did. My friend Dick Koehler said, "He is lucky to have a good friend like you," to encourage me, you see, to get on with it, kill him, and Dick was right, of course, right, because when there is nothing much left of a dog but his wounds you should bury those decently.

Until he died, he was immortal, and the death of an immortal is an event that changes the world. That is all for now about Gunner, because what it does to you when such a dog dies is not fit to print. "Der Tod ist groß," writes Rilke. "Death is huge." But various psychologists deny that it is as huge as all that when it is an animal that is mourned. I have read statistically studded reassurances that mourning for a cat lasts at most one month, for a dog three. I have read that when an animal dies there are no regrets, no rehearsal of the wail, "If only I had," and also that the splendid thing about

animals, what is said to make them so convenient to our hearts, like antidepressants, is that when we mourn them, we are only mourning a personal loss and not "the loss of life and potential," according to Professors Beck and Katcher, authorities on all of this at the University of Pennsylvania.

That is the way psychological authorities talk — "Eventually an animal *can* be replaced," they write in their books, but this is not how the experts talk. (I realize that psychologists and such like are generally understood to be experts, but I have met none who were experts in the various ways my good Gunner's work with scent developed, especially when he started scenting out the human heart.) But I am just a dog trainer. My thinking, such as it is, I learned from the animals, for whom happiness is usually a matter of getting the job done. Clear that fence, fetch in those sheep, move those calves, win that race, find that guy, retrieve that bird. The happiness of animals is also ideologically unsound, as often as not, or at least it is frequently wanting in propriety, as when your dog rolls in something awful on his afternoon walk, or your cat turns off your answering machine.

In over a quarter of a century of training I have never met an animal who turned out to be replaceable, and Dick says, "Hell, even trees are irreplaceable, but we don't know that, and *that* is our loss." The loss the dog trainer has in mind is the loss of eternity, for, as Wittgenstein put it: "Denn lebt er ewig, der in der gegenwart lebt." "So he lives forever, who lives in the present," wrote the philosopher, and this is how the animals live, in the present, which is why the expert's difficult and apparently harsh advice, advice they occasionally take themselves, is: "Another dog. Same breed, as soon as possible." Not because another dog of the same breed will be the same, but because that way you can pick up somewhere near where you left off, say that you have it in you.

In a children's book called *Algonquin: The Story of a Great Dog*, there is a quarrel between two brothers, old men they were, grandfather and great-uncle to the boy who tells the story. Grandsir is angry because Uncle Ovid is going to take on the training of the

grand young Pointer named Algonquin; he is angry because he wants no more of the "grief and the rage and the ashes." He shouts at his brother, "Do you know what it does to you? Do you know what it does every time one of them dies?" but Uncle Ovid just says, "Don't tell me. I am an old man and it would not be good for me to know," and he trains that Pointer who turns out to be something else again at the field trials. Mr. Washington says, "I think sometimes that he would pity his bracemates, were he not enough of a gentleman to know that they would rather die than be pitied," and Algonquin wins and wins and wins and then Algonquin starts to get a lung disease and can't work well, is distressed therefore, because he is losing his work, his happiness, and Uncle Ovid sends him out on his last run and shoots him while he is on point, while there is still something more to him than his wounds.

At the end of that story, when Grandsir suggests that it is time for the boy who has been witness to all of this to get another dog, he says to his grandfather, "Irish Setters don't win field trials, do they? I mean, you are not in much danger of getting a great dog?" Grandsir purses his lips and agrees, "Not much." The boy says, "Then an Irish Setter would be nice."

There exist mighty dogs, the dangerous kind who take hold of your heart and do not let go. But avoiding the great ones does not get you out of it. If, like the boy in *Algonquin*, you already know what a great dog is, then the knowledge marks you. If you do not know, then you are still in danger, for if you give her a civilized upbringing, every collie is Lassie *in propria persona*, killing that snake in your heart, driving off the cougar that lurks there, sending for help. This is not because all dogs are great dogs but rather because all dogs are both irreplaceable and immortal and as Rilke says, "Der Tod ist groß."

One day I talked about death with my friend — my teacher and friend, for these are synonyms in the trainer's world — Dick Koehler. I had told him about the results obtained at the University of Pennsylvania. "Dick! The news is out! There are no regrets when a dog dies," and Dick said, "Oh, then my several thousand students who

say to me, 'If only I had done what you said, Mr. Koehler,' or 'If only I had worked with her more,' — they're all hallucinating, right?"

"Must be," I reply, "for it says here that dogs are replaceable, and grief for them lasts no more than three months," and right before my eyes Dick Koehler starts looking a little funny; he startles me. He is thinking of Duke, dead several decades now. Hallucinating that Duke had been irreplaceable. Duke was a Great Dane, one of your great dogs, too. Duke was a movie dog; some of you may remember him from *The Swiss Family Robinson*.

"What was so irreplaceable about Duke?" I asked.

"Well, it's not every day you find a Great Dane who thinks a 255-pound tiger is a kitty cat. Not every day you find a Great Dane who will hit a sleeve and go through a second-story window, not just once, not just twice, but seven times and it was as good the last time as the first time."

Soon after Duke died, there was Topper, of *The Ugly Dachshund*, various TV series. "Topper paid the rent for about three years there," said Dick. "I mean, he did all the work on that series." Topper died like this: the great dog and his son were playing, horsing around after a day's work, and his son slammed into him and ruptured his spleen and Dick realized it too late for the vet to fix things up, and so had him put down. That was over two decades ago, Dick's most recent Great Dane.

Dick talks about Duke and Topper and the thing starts to happen to me again, the merging of all of the elegies, all of the great dogs. "There is nothing left but his name . . . but there never was a dog like Algonquin," or, "It's all regrets," or, "After he got in his car and drove away I dug a grave and lined it with the bright fallen leaves and there I buried all that could die of my good Fox," or "He was allus kind to the younguns and he kilt a rattlesnake onct," or one of my favorites, the passage in T. H. White's *The Sword in the Stone*. The great hound named Beaumont is on the ground, his back broken by the boar, and the expert, the Master of Hounds, William Twyti, has been hurt also. Twyti limps over to Beaumont and utters the eternal litany, "Hark to Beaumont. Softly, Beaumont, mon amy.

Oyez à Beaumont the valiant. Swef, le douce Beaumont, swef, swef." Then he nods to Robin Wood, and holds the hound's eyes with his own, saying "Good dog, Beaumont the valiant; sleep now, old friend Beaumont, good old dog," while the huntsman kills the dog for him: "Then Robin's falchion let Beaumont out of this world, to run free with Orion and to roll among the stars."

What next, though? The narrator of *Algonquin* decides to go for an Irish Setter. But that is not what the experts say to do. They say, "Another dog, same breed, right away." It takes courage, courage that Master Twyti seems to have had, for he rose from beside Beaumont's wounds and "whipped the hounds off the corpse of the boar as he was accustomed to do. He put his horn to his lips and blew the four long notes of the Mort without a quaver." He called the other hounds to him.

Another dog, same breed, right away. Or a pack of them, and not because there were any replacements for Beaumont in that pack. The other hounds were all right, but there were no Beaumonts among them, and there is no point in saying otherwise. I don't mean by that that there are not plenty of great dogs around. "There are a lot of them," says Dick. Yeah. They're a dime a dozen. So are great human hearts; that's not the point. We are by way of being connoisseurs of dogs, some of us, but one falls into that, and a dog is not a collector's item, not for Dick Koehler, anyhow, whom I have seen risk himself in more ways than one, over and over, day in and day out, ever since I met him when I was nineteen and he straightened out Stevie, a German Shepherd cross I had then, who was charging children but was a nice dog after we took care of that, who lived for twelve years after Dick showed me how to train him, who shook the ground just as hard as Beaumont did when he died. My teacher and friend Dick Koehler is a maniac for training dogs instead of killing them. Deaf dogs, three-legged dogs, dogs with chartreuse spots on their heads. He hasn't gotten around to getting another Dane, though there have been other dogs, of course. Of course.

But "Master William Twyti startled The Wart, for he seemed to be crying," and this book, *The Sword in the Stone*, is about the

education of great hounds and of a great king, King Arthur in fact. Immortal Beaumont, douce, swef, swef. And immortal Arthur—douce, douce, harken to Arthur, they would say in time about: *Regis quondam regisque futuri*. The once and future king. Which is to say, this is all of it about the education of any hound and any boy.

“But won’t it hurt?” my student asked me recently when I gave that advice: *another dog, same breed, as soon as possible*. “Won’t it hurt my daughter again?” Oh, it hurts, especially when, as is so often the case, you have a part in the dog’s death. Perhaps because you were careless and he got run over, or because, like Master Twyti, you gave the nod to the vet or to the huntsman with his falchion.

There is the falchion, and then sometimes you must speak abruptly into the face of grief, for grief gives bad advice. Grief will tell you to throw your heart into the grave with the dog’s corpse, and this is ecologically unsound. The ants will take care of the corpse in a few weeks, but a discarded heart stinks for quite some time. Two days ago that student of mine called, a woman in her late thirties. She had gotten a new pup for her eight-year-old daughter, and at a few months of age the pup had died because left in her crate with her collar on, and the collar got caught on the handle of the crate. “My daughter is so upset, my husband says it would be too bad to get another dog and have something else happen. What do the experts do?”

I said in tones of vibrant command, “Another dog, same breed, right away.” Nothing else, for wordiness is not in order when you are discussing, as we so often are, the education of a queen.

A decade went by between the death of Gunner and the purchase of the new Airedale pup. That was as soon as I could get to it, what with one thing and another.