

Families That Thrive  
Pups at Play  
By John Blackwell, Ph.D.

We call him Gus. His full name is Augustus Caesar. Gus is the latest addition to the Blackwell household. Gus is a French Bulldog. He joins Madeleine Albright (our older Frenchie, whom we call Maddie) and Lady Astor (Lady is our one and only English Bulldog).

As with any group of canines, Maddie, the oldest (she's almost two) has established a pecking order. Maddie is number one. Lady is number two (she doesn't mind this; she's no longer at the bottom). Gus, the youngest, is number three.

For the first couple of days, life among the three was anything but peaceful. Madeleine Albright not only wanted Augustus Caesar to remain on the other side of the Rubicon (that's the river that Caesar crossed after famously saying, "The die must be cast"). Maddie conveyed to all her unambiguous desire that Gus take his die and go back to where he came from (Cuba—the city in Kansas). She didn't mind an occasional visit, but she didn't want Gus to presume membership in the family.

Still, the Blackwells harbored hope. After all, what is life without hope? Not surprisingly, hope did not disappoint. Before long, puppies were playing. The three can be rough—especially when each tries to wrestle a toy from the other two. They love to be in the back yard where they find sticks under the trees. The result is always a tug of war. I don't know which is funnier—watching the pups try to wrest the stick from the other two or watching Gus try to bring in a stick through the doggie door. He will pick up a stick in the middle. But if it is longer than the doggie door is wide, Gus can't seem to cross the threshold (learning can involve as much error as trial!).

When it comes to wrestling, Lady is number one in the strength department, but she's also the sweetest dog in the evolution of the canine species. When Lady runs, she resembles a walrus in motion. I thought about naming her Galapagos because she seems mysteriously to embody just about every living thing on that island. No one who has met Lady has failed to embrace everything about her. She excels in the doggie-ness department.

Much as I enjoy pups at play, the best is when they're ready for rest. Maddie, Lady, and Gus will curl up on the couch and take a saw to oak trees. Three Bulldogs snoring in trio evokes memories of the California earthquakes with which I grew up.

I especially enjoy the pups at rest when they sleep in a dog-pile. There are two reasons that this gives me pleasure. The first is that Nancy, my wife, best likes the pups in tranquility. Their calm restores her soul, and her soul is my joy. The second is that Maddie, Lady, and Gus at rest remind me of a passage from Isaiah: "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf, the lion, and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them." This is Isaiah's picture of peace—the fruit of hope nourished by love.

To put it another way, pups developing new relationships, pups learning to play together, and pups at rest embody the mystery of the presence of God. Our privilege is to learn to recognize that presence. Pups at rest are signs of peace and good will—the kind that dwells in our homes, the kind that our world so desperately needs.

Our homes embody the peace of the Christ child in those moments of wonder when we are at rest as well. Whether for a moment or a month, the peace of God is there for us to see, to wonder over, and to live.

This is the treasure of the Christ child. He gives us the eyes to see the presence of peace—right where we are.

That is my Christmas prayer for you—that you may recognize the presence of the peace of God. Together, may we act on that peace.