

Snoring

By John Blackwell, Ph.D.

We were in bed. It was 2 a.m. She had snuggled up to me during the night. Her nose was in my ear. She began to snore—rather loudly, I might add. We get thunderstorms here in Kansas. The snoring was at least as loud. It reverberated throughout my entire body. Needless to say, it was difficult to sleep.

She is our new dog. Her name is Madeline. Our daughter Jaime wanted me to name her after Madeline Albright, the first female Secretary of State. I was okay with that idea. My hope had been to get an English Bulldog. We were going to wait until Daisy, Jaime's dog, had died and gone to dog heaven. Our friend Amy works in a veterinarian office. She telephoned on a Sunday afternoon. Their office had a French Bulldog that needed placement. She was a purebred. If we would give her a nice home, she was free.

Jaime was there when Amy called me. She thought it an idea worth pursuing. I didn't think this something I could do without Nancy's and Jaime's consent, so I asked Amy if we could come and see the dog. She said that we could meet her at the veterinarian office in ten minutes. Jaime and I immediately told Nancy, and we were off.

I really did want Nancy's consent. Honest! And I didn't harbor a lot of doubt about Nancy's giving it. This is not to say that Nancy's a particularly spontaneous person. Quite to the contrary, God short-changed Nancy when it came to distributing the spontaneity gene. For better, for worse, God balanced us by placing us together. For years, I have been working on keeping my spontaneity gene under house arrest. I am pleased to say that I have enjoyed some success. I am less than pleased to say that it hasn't been easy, but God didn't promise that growth would always be easy. The long and the short of it is that I work on thinking things through—a lot more than I used to!

The reason that I really thought that Nancy would give her consent to adopting this dog was that she would fall in love with it. This actually happened before I ever set eyes on Madeline. Nancy, Jaime, and I walked into the vet's office in that order. Nancy was in the lead. I couldn't see past

Nancy and Jaime, but I did hear Nancy exclaim, “Oh, look! Oh, isn’t she sweet!” I knew that we were taking this puppy home.

Actually, she isn’t a puppy. She’s a year old—which, among other things, means housebroken! When we adopted Daisy, she was housebroken. Our first two dogs were puppies, so we came to the prayerful conclusion that if we had to skip the housebreaking phase, we could force ourselves not to feel cheated or deprived.

So we took Madeline home. I drove. Jaime and Daisy sat in the back seat. Madeline sat on Nancy’s lap, both of them feeling not a little overwhelmed. For the rest of that Sunday, we all focused on our new dog, doing our best to help her feel at home. I love to spend Sunday afternoons taking a nap, reading, or playing the piano. On this particular afternoon, none of these was in order. Madeline was front and center. She was our guest. She was the show. The Secretary of State commanded the best of our canine diplomacy.

Both Nancy and Jaime are good sports, especially when it comes to dogs. They are also loving, skilled, and tender. (Our son Dave is, too, but he lives in Phoenix.) So when it was time for bed, even though Madeline is my dog, Jaime said, “She can sleep with Daisy and me on this first night.”

As my students would say, “I’m cool with that.” Jaime took the pups to bed. After all, she didn’t have to teach in the morning, like I did. She only had to prosecute people accused of crimes. So Jaime cuddled with the pups, and I got to cuddle with Nancy—until 2 a.m. It was then that I heard Jaime’s voice. I opened my eyes. She was holding Madeline. “Would you take her? I haven’t gotten a wink of sleep.” I didn’t need to say yes, for Jaime simply laid Madeline between Nancy and me.

Madeline snuggled in and tried to find a comfortable position. If this position didn’t suit her, she tried that. After about thirty minutes of moving around, she finally fell asleep. She had found a position that worked—for her. She had crawled up near my head and placed hers on my shoulder. For reasons that I will never know, she pushed her nose into my ear. To understand what this is like, please remember that Madeline’s nose is completely flat. She’s cute, to be sure. In fact, she is (and I promise that this is absolutely true) the cutest dog in the history of canines. But because she’s a bulldog, her nose is as unlike a greyhound’s as is possible. A

greyhound would be able to put its nose in someone's ear, and only the nose would be there. When a bulldog puts its nose in someone's ear, its whole face is in there as well. And that's because its whole face is closer to its nose than with other dogs.

Thankfully, she was sound asleep. The problem was that there was now no way for me to do likewise: Madeline snores. I'm not saying that she sucks bricks out of the wall, but she does not snore in Braille. And if her nose is in your ear and she's snoring up a storm, it isn't something that you can just put out of your mind—especially on the first night.

Now what?

This became a time for reflection. What else could I do? Yes, I could have moved her. I could have risked waking her up. But the truth is that she had had it rough the last couple of days. For reasons that the Blackwells will never know, she had changed homes a couple of times and had spent the night before in the vet's kennel. This was one stressed puppy, and I felt for her. (I also felt for Nancy and Jaime, who were putting in some serious time so that I could have my bulldog!).

What came to me amidst the snoozing, snoring, and soundness of her sleeping was that love takes time. We're in it for the long haul. Love can be tiring. Sometimes it involves sacrifice. If this is true for a dog, how true is it for a child? It not only takes time—it takes lots of it.

There's more: love isn't for control freaks. I'm not suggesting that we don't try to nudge, influence, or even move things towards a significant result. But I am suggesting that when it comes to love, not everything is under our control. Moreover, not everything will unfold the way we want it to. Some things may even go badly—from time to time. When it comes to loving, none of us are professionals. We are all amateurs. We may or may not have scripts, but even if we do, love involves a fair amount of improvisation. Love is more like jazz than a sonata or a symphony.

The good news is that when we are committed to loving, we will enjoy surprises. The source of the surprises are a mystery, and that is because a commitment to loving—for the right reasons, which is always for the benefit of others—opens up channels of grace. And if we are vigilant, if we are paying attention, grace will open before our eyes.

Nancy and Jaime were the ones who opened my eyes. Madeline had been abused by a previous owner. Nancy and Jaime were attuned to this in part because this had been the case for Daisy, our 14-year-old dog as well. Simply put, Madeline needed a home, and it is our calling and privilege to give her one. Could the timing have been better? I don't think so. Although Daisy doesn't necessarily like other dogs on her turf, she is starting to fall in love with Madeline.