

A TALE OF THREE DOGS

Two or three times a day Jon goes for a long walk through his neighbourhood or the nearby riverside parkland, with his dogs Amy and Zachary (Zach for short). Amy and Zach are both golden retrievers--a breed that is considered friendly and good for families. Zach is now 11 and has been Jon's companion dog for 9 years. Amy is just two years old and has been trained as a service dog. Jon is comfortable with both Amy and Zach. He is the only person who feeds them, and the only person who walks Amy.

It was not always so, that Jon could even tolerate a dog! In fact, since the age of three he was terrified of all dogs and would flee like the wind if he saw one or even thought a canine was in his vicinity. No one knows what happened to cause this terror of dogs. There is a photograph of Jon petting a black dog when he was two. Perhaps he was badly frightened by meeting a strange dog on one of his many sorties from home to explore his neighbourhood.

Whatever took place to cause this fear was unfortunate. For many years, Jon became very cautious about venturing out into the community. He might get into the car to drive to the store or shopping mall, but if he sensed a dog nearby, even when others could not, it was useless to try to get him to leave the safety of the car. Shopping or the errand would have to be postponed.

A particularly dramatic encounter with a black dog occurred when Jon was 16. It was March Break, and he had gone with his father and twin sister for a walk in a nearby conservation area. It was a challenge to get Jon to go at all, and then to get out of the car, but they had succeeded. They began their walk when suddenly a wild-looking black dog came up to them and started to bark. Jon's normal response to such a calamity was to run back to the car, but this time he ran out on the lake. It was only semi-frozen; in March it was starting to melt. He ran so fast that he quickly crossed the lake, and then vanished from sight. He could not be found. The police were called. Neighbours joined in the search.

The searchers saw many treacherous patches of water. It was too frightening to consider what could have happened. Then suddenly Jon's sister saw him. On the ice! He was stomping his feet on the frail support. The police were alerted and Jon was eventually rescued.

In July of that year Jon's sister was a bit bored. Summer holidays stretched before her, with nothing special to do. She had the idea of getting to know one of their neighbours who had helped search for Jon back in March, and who had a golden retriever who had to be walked twice a day. Angus was rather slow and very keen on scents, but he was also very

lovable. Friendship grew for the neighbour was companionable and had a good sense of humour. She learned to understand more about living with autism.

The following March Jon's sister was getting ready to go for a walk with her neighbour friend and Angus. Jon was riding his bike, when the neighbour called to him, "How about coming with us for a walk?"

Jon hesitated. There was Angus. He did not like dogs. . . Finally he got into the car - WITH the dog in it, and they drove to nearby fields. Jon actually enjoyed walking the dog, and from that time he often went walking with Angus two or three times a day when he was at home. Angus no longer frightened him, but if Jon suddenly met any other dog in the community he would run. He would refuse to get out of the car if he sensed a dog anywhere near.

Another year passed. The neighbour returned from a trip to Australia and New Zealand, but with a strange ailment. It was learned that she had terminal cancer, a shock to her family and friends. Immediately they all rallied to help her. Angus remained at her side almost all the time, but Jon and his sister helped by taking the dog for his walks.

After their good neighbour died in mid-April, her son asked Jon's family to care for Angus while he went away to Vancouver for a time. On his return he offered Angus to Jon's family and the dog formally became a member of the household. Jon adjusted well to the dog living in his home and soon co-operated in feeding and bathing him at weekends.

Jon regained some of the confidence in moving around his neighbourhood that he had shown as a young toddler. At times when he felt hyperactive, Jon could run fast and far. Or he would let off steam by cycling very vigorously around the crescent in front of his family home.

In March 1989, he was home from his residential school for the March Break--always a difficult time. On a Saturday afternoon, he had returned from a long walk with Angus and his sister when he slipped away again, and had left his home street for a few minutes before his absence was noticed. As his mood had been a bit volatile, the rest of the family quickly swung into action to find him. Their search was concentrated first on the fringes of the nearby conservation area where he had just walked with Angus. They remembered the terrible adventure there four years earlier. They scoured that area, somewhat impeded by rotting ice and snowbanks, but found no traces. After 90 minutes or so, they called in the police who combed the same area. Jon's parents took separate cars to cruise streets in the larger neighbourhood, while his sister stood guard at the home phone.

Jon's mother tried to think herself inside Jon's mind, to imagine where he might be bound, or what route he might take. Apart from the regular walks with Angus in the conservation area, Jon's weekend almost always included a visit to the University with his father and sister to do some photocopying and collating. Jon's mother thought she would search in that direction. Finding no sign along the direct route for about 4 kilometres, she returned home to check that Jon was still missing. Finally, at nearly 7 pm, she drove all the 8 kilometres to the University using the customary route, and parked where the family would usually park on Saturday evenings. There, standing in the twilight outside the usual entrance to the building, was a forlorn figure. Jon must have walked the whole distance along an arterial road, crossing at least five major intersections, and with no sidewalk for about 2.5 kilometres. All these thoughts were in his mother's mind. But, having learned that calm reassurance works best, she did not berate Jon for the anxiety he had caused. She approached him gently and praised him calmly for having chosen such a sensible place to wait to be found! Jon's family has still not worked out all the meanings of this adventure!

Angus lived with Jon's family for three years. His back legs became increasingly weaker. Soon he could no longer walk without pain. His appetite decreased; he could not enjoy his food. He was found to have cancer. The heartbreaking decision came in April 1990--Angus must leave them. The house felt very empty. Jon's sister cried for a week, while Jon was obviously sad and missing his dog. Yet even without his friend, Jon continued his regular walks whenever he was at home.

Another year passed. Jon's sister continued to miss her furry friend and insisted that life was incomplete without a family dog. Jon had just returned home in distress from the failures of a group home placement and experiments with anti-depressant medication. His sister urged that he could benefit from the discipline and joys of caring again for a pet. Jon's parents agreed and advertised in *The Globe and Mail* personals for a gentle, trained two-year-old golden retriever.

The eagerly awaited phone call came on the Victoria Day weekend. A two-year-old Golden Retriever, "an obedience school drop-out" named Zachary, needed a new home. Several days later Zachary and his owner came to visit. Zach was hyperactive, a bit overweight and very energetic. His owner was very sad that she could no longer keep him, as she lived in a high-rise apartment and worked long shifts at a hospital. She liked the idea that her dog would provide pet therapy for Jon. She was impressed by Jon's sister's photo album of Angus, with pictures of him sleeping on her bed. She decided then and there to give Zach to the family to be Jon's dog.

And so a gorgeous and loyal dog joined the household, to be much loved by all. He had only his collar and leash, so Jon's mother dashed out for supplies. That evening, she and Jon led Zach for his first long walk in the University Arboretum. For the next 24 hours, Zach was excited and probably rather anxious about the big change in his life. He hardly slept as he explored the house. Jon's family anxiously wondered whether they could manage this super-energetic dog as well as hyperactive Jon!

A few days went by and Zach did settle in, quite happily. Over the next few years Jon learned to lead the dog by himself. Zach behaved better with Jon than with other family members. He was sensitive to Jon's moods. Jon's sister took him and Zach on some wonderful trips around southern Ontario. Having Zach with him helped Jon to cope with new and strange places, and to prepare himself for meeting other dogs in the community.

Zach was also a loyal comfort to the family after Jon's twin sister was killed in a winter car accident. He was a vital element in Jon's individualized plan to live in his own home from mid-1997, supported by family and friends.

Jon's home is very close to a riverside park, which is ideal for walks and for meeting many other dogs and their owners. Jon could lead Zach calmly and responsibly, even when some of the dogs they met might be off their leashes and rather exuberant. Their regular walks in their new neighbourhood were observed. Jon was asked to be block captain for the Neighbourhood Watch, his duties including keeping an eye on more than 70 houses within a half-kilometre radius. Jon's fear of dogs no longer limited his activities. Zach was the stimulus that got him going each day. Together they could relax and listen to classical music. It helped Jon for Zach to go along on outings and trips, to support him on walks through strange parks and neighbourhoods.

In early 1997, when Zach was nearly 8 years old, Jon had applied for a service dog to continue Zach's companionship and also in the hope that a properly trained dog could help him towards more independence. Several of Jon's friends wrote enthusiastic letters of support, and he was approved.

In November 1999, Amy joined Jon's household—the third golden retriever in his life. Bright, beautiful and loyal, she is now very much at home. The bonds with Jon are being strengthened all the time. From the beginning, Jon has been the only person who feeds or walks with her.

Amy is being trained to serve Jon even more. They will be able to walk quite independently around the neighbourhood and even ride the public transit buses by themselves. Amy already accompanies Jon to public libraries; they will be able to go anywhere together. At home, she will be his

companion at all times, supporting him so reliably that he can cope for short periods without humans. If Jon is in distress for any reason, Amy will alert Jon's housemates or other caregivers.

Amy is now learning to help Jon to cope with the distinctive movement and sensory differences of his autism. As he does not speak, she is learning to read his signs and hand signals, and to know all parts of his daily routine. When he gets stuck or frozen in carrying through a movement or course of action, she will nudge him to get him going again. When he cannot help being on the move or hyperactive, she will stay with him, to help him gain control again.

Amy is a working service dog. But it is important that she also has some time to be a regular dog too. Zach's continuing presence in Jon's house is good for Amy, as she can relax and play with him as light relief from her important duties. And the advent of Amy has helped to rejuvenate Zach.

Jon's sister's work in pet therapy, which gave her so much joy, lives on in the freedom Jon now feels in moving about his neighbourhood and community and in the quality of life in his home with Amy and Zach.