Columns
Spirituality



Oreo Cookie Monster as a puppy (Jane Marie Bradish)



by Jane Marie Bradish

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We came home to a surprise. The house that various sisters had rented for more than 30 years was going to be sold. It happened much faster than anyone, including our landlord, thought it would. When it became clear the new owners had different plans for the space, the scramble was on to clean out, pack up and find somewhere to go.

In those 30 years of sisters, everyone had left things behind. We made contacts with local non-profits to come and get all the "left behind" stuff. Stuff we didn't even know we had and therefore knew we weren't going to need. They brought their truck and a crew, so we didn't have to "do anything." We got lucky finding a new place, too. We had heard about a small house a couple of miles away that was being cleaned out. Stopping by, we found out the owners were trying to figure out what to do with the place because the previous tenant had died suddenly and left behind Heidi.



A framed photo of Heidi (Phyllis Vater)

Heidi was a dog. She was 75 pounds big and 12 years old and loved by everyone on the small cul-de-sac. She had her own dog house on the back porch, complete with its own porch enclosed in clear heavy plastic sheeting so she could watch the comings and goings of the neighborhood and not be exposed to the elements. Everyone knew Heidi, and she knew them. Neighbors would stop at the gate to talk with her, give her a quick pat and sometimes a treat; if there was a stranger on the

block, she let everyone know with a sharp bark. She was clearly the neighborhood watchdog.

Unbeknownst to each other, the wheels started turning in each of our heads. What if we agreed to care for the dog, could we rent the home? I grew up with animals: dogs, cats, turtles, a bunny and even a bird. The other sisters hadn't. We weren't sure Heidi would warm up to us or that the homeowners would be open to the idea of renting, as they seemed ready to stop being landlords and sell if it wasn't for the dog. We left our contact information with them, not really expecting to hear back.

Within days, we heard from the owners of the little house on the cul-de-sac. They would assume all financial responsibility for Heidi if we would look after her day to day. It turns out that was going to be super easy.

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Heidi was basically an outdoor dog, staying in the yard or her dog house from the time we got up in the morning until we coaxed her in at night. Even in extreme weather, we had to bribe her to come inside for her own wellbeing. She spent nights in the hallway between bedrooms, keeping watch over each of us. On a rare occasion, she would wake us with her snoring or the low groans she made when stretching.

Heidi let us share her home for two and a half years. One day the landlord couldn't get her to go for her daily walk, and we all knew something was wrong. It was a large cancerous tumor in her abdomen. She crossed the Rainbow Bridge a few days later, when we had to have Heidi euthanized. It was awful for the landlords, it was awful for the neighbors she had guarded for so long, and it was awful for us as her new family — we had fallen head over heels in love with the dog who let us share her home.

Waking up in the morning and not having Heidi run to the back door to go into her yard was a constant reminder that she wasn't there. Before we went to bed, we would still open the door and call for her to come in, sometimes with a treat in hand. The landlord even showed up a couple times to take her for her walk, it was such a part of his routine. Tears, from everyone, were frequent.

We lasted about four months; we so missed having a furry friend that we started to talk about looking for another dog that needed a home. The landlords were thrilled, giving us both permission and encouragement; they missed Heidi, too. We welcomed Oreo Cookie Monster in the spring. She was everything a puppy is: fast, sneaky, underfoot (I tripped over her, fell and broke my wrist), chewing on everything and everyone, even sassy with the occasional temper tantrum. She brought new life and energy into the house — big time. All of us had to learn that Oreo led the way. The joke was, and still is, she's smarter than all of us.

Local community life has changed for varied reasons, and more and more of us live singly, but Oreo keeps me accountable and balanced. She needs me for food and water and exercise and wellness, so I can't get too caught up in "me." As I watch her muzzle gray and see how stiff she is in the sometimes unforgiving weather, I know our time together is limited.



Oreo these days, with her winter fleece blanket (Jane Marie Bradish)

I reflect on all she taught me: to be adventurous and carefree (the yard holds all kinds of things to sniff and roll in and explore); the importance of a good snuggle (she drags her fleece over to share); how to play (she has toys she will bring to me when I've been ignoring her and working too long, and she's still able to play some catch in the yard and walk around the cul-de-sac); and how to care for myself — she stretches out to relax and lets me know in no uncertain terms when it's bedtime; and the list could go on.

Her most important lesson: unconditional love. No matter how long I'm gone, she's excited to see me return; she comes running to the door when she hears it open with her tail wagging wildly and a paw or kiss offered. Cooking and mealtime finds her right there just in case a morsel gets dropped. Homework or TV time finds her sitting on her chair, one eye on me and the other on the neighborhood. She likes to be close, "helping" me put laundry away or sort the mail or scrub the bathtub. Bedtime is a rush to see who can get there first, even though she now needs "doggy steps" to get into "my" bed. She will whine and paw until she gets what she needs — she knows how to take care of herself and constantly reminds me to do the same.

Not everyone can have a furry companion, but their lessons are freely given, and I hope everyone can learn from them. Heidi, and now Oreo, have been among my best teachers.

[Jane Marie Bradish is a member of the School Sisters of St. Francis based in Milwaukee. Her ministry has been in secondary education; currently, she teaches theology and is the academic programmer for a large, urban, multicultural high school.]