

Precious Pets, Precious GEMS

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We use GEMS states to describe the levels of cognitive ability partly because gems are precious and unique. Those of us who are pet-lovers also feel that our family pets are special and have unique personalities. I have seen firsthand the value of pet interactions with those we care for, both in the home and in a facility setting. Toby, my golden retriever has been a “facility dog” since he was a little puppy! The residents of the facility have seen him grow from a fuzzy four-legged fluff ball, to a 75-pound pal! As he emerged from puppyhood to a young adult dog, it became apparent that he had significant arthritis in several major joints – hips, shoulders, and elbows. The vet gave Toby a very poor prognosis and gave us an expensive prescription for medications that would ease his discomfort. Toby continued to visit the skilled nursing facility daily, although he insisted on laying down more than he would walk about or stand for long periods of time. Watching the interactions of the residents with him became rewarding and fun, although my name was quickly converted to “Toby’s mom!”

When we reflect on what makes pets connect so readily with people, the emotional experience and memories triggered by pets evoke a response beyond language. For dog and cat lovers alike, our emotional memories are powerful—bringing us back to happy childhood days of romping around the yard, sharing teenage secrets with a faithful friend, and saying those tearful goodbyes as we step out into the big world. The decision to get a pet often precedes the decision to start a family, and the excitement is accompanied by the reality of new responsibilities. As the family expands with new members of the two-legged variety, we quickly help our pets to see that we still love them, but they move from the center of our attention to the sidelines, sometimes gracefully, sometimes not! As our toddlers develop, we see the patience and understanding of our pet as fistfuls of fur are grabbed and tails tugged on, then later as they endure being dressed up in ballerina tutus, soccer uniforms, or decorated with face paint! How pleasurable it is to see the bond grow and the protection and loyalty of our pets to our children! How easy it is to look back and reflect on the times our pets did something atrocious, but as furious as we were initially, it is now a story that makes us laugh!



My personal favorites: Solo ate the popcorn off the Christmas tree, then got tangled in the popcorn string and pulled the tree over, ornaments strewn everywhere! I came home from work to find my perfectly decorated tree in shambles! Then there was the time Lucie raided my daughter’s plastic pumpkin bucket of Halloween candy and devoured it, foil wrappers and all! (With golden retrievers, the stories are usually connected with food)! All

this to say that throughout all the stages of life, our pets provide us with unconditional love and loyalty and a connection that transcends words! When words fail, those memories remain and bring us back to happy times with our faithful friends. When our amygdala is more prominent in governing our responses, we gravitate to what we like, or



what we have positive connections to. The emotional memories of pets are powerful, and as we interact, my “Toby” can become someone else’s “Sophie” of long ago – it doesn’t matter! Here is Toby’s take on his role as a facility dog through his “GEMS colored glasses:”

Sapphire: People are calling out, “Good morning, Toby!” as I come into the building. They know my name, and hold the door open for me to go into the therapy gym.

Diamond: Every time I sneak into the deli to vacuum the crumbs off the floor, she grabs me by my are NOT allowed in here, Toby!” but I like her! Sometimes she asks and tells me that her arthritis is

Emerald: When he pats me, he girl, Jennie.” I’m clearly not a girl, Jennie, but I know what he means, belly. He knows I like that!

Amber: Sometimes she walks see me laying right by the door. she sees me walking down the hall



collar and says, “You She’s a little bossy, me how I am doing bad today, too.

says, “You’re a good and my name isn’t and he still rubs my

right by and doesn’t But then sometimes



towards her and she will stop and just pat my back. She doesn’t say much, just a quiet, low sound, but I hold still until she walks away. I think she likes it better when I am fluffy and soft from a bath!

Ruby: So, I was resting in my favorite spot on the cool vinyl floor, and he was coming toward me with his walker and one of those therapists holding on to him. She pointed to me and I picked up my head, but I didn’t get up. It’s hard, you know, when your joints hurt. When he got right up close, he turned away from the walker and stooped down to pat me. I held really still because I didn’t want him to fall, but there he was, barely able to walk with the walker, and he’s reaching over to pat me!

Pearl: I know how to sit quietly next to someone. That’s what I do when I visit one of my friends who sleeps a lot. Most of the time he doesn’t know I’m there, but sometimes he opens his eyes and mom helps him put his hand on me where he can touch my back or my head. He smiles sometimes and I know that he’s happy I’m there.

View Debi’s bio [here](#).