

# Sweet Old Thing

By Paul Voakes

Young couples sometimes joke that their adoption of a puppy is an audition for parenthood.

My wife, Barbara, and I find ourselves undergoing a similar audition, but we hardly qualify as a young couple. And it's hardly a puppy we're dealing with. Lucy, our 15-year-old deaf, arthritic puggle, has been diagnosed with canine dementia. We're getting our first taste of what it's like to care for an elderly, beloved, and extremely dependent dependent.

Over our 23 years with one or more young sons in the house, we saw them gradually, almost imperceptibly, become independent. At the other end of a life, Lucy's transition to deep dependence has been likewise gradual. I can't even remember when we started mixing into her breakfast a little tablet for pain, or when I started scooping her up to snuggle into Barbara's legs on the bed at day's end. Regardless of the pace of change, our relationship has undeniably changed, from mostly companionship to mostly caregiving.

This sweet old thing barks at the back door to be let out, and then barks in the back yard at nothing in particular. We usher her back inside, and 60 seconds later she's barking at the door again. This can continue for an hour at a time. At other times, she barks at nothing in particular in the middle of the living room -- or paces, panting. The kennel where Lucy has stayed since puppyhood has told me, ever so politely, that now her frequent, irrational barking does not sit well with the staff or the other dogs.

Because she can't hear us entering the house, she's no longer the happy greeter. In fact, she sleeps through most of our comings and goings. When I bend down to give her an "I'm home!" pet, she startles -- and seems to need a moment to recall who I am -- and then gives me a wag. She's started daily meds for dementia, but so far with no effect.



Otherwise, she's healthy. Her internal feeding clock hasn't lost a beat, and neighbors still delight in her "jaunty" gait when we meet during a walk.

So we adapt. Our travel is greatly curtailed, and we're getting used to never getting comfy in a chair for too long. We're learning to rouse ourselves from sleep to tend to her needs. We adhere to three, instead of our two, medication schedules. Above all, we're learning a new level of patience, patience, patience. Scolding her, as tempting as that can be, serves no purpose.

Is any of this very far removed from our own future, as a couple? Thanks be to God, these two 70-somethings have thus far retained their faculties, mental and physical, more or less. But we've seen many friends and family members our age experience disabilities of all sorts. I'm fairly confident that Lucy, while she's still with us, is training us in a skill set that will become more and more important as we grow less capable. For us, it won't be as simple as responding to random barks by saying, "It's your turn to let her out."

More likely, we'll just be relying on our patience, patience, patience.

***(Dedicated with love to Lucy, who died March 6, 2025.)***