

## Listening to the Inner Voice (or, How I Got the Dog I Promised I Wouldn't Get)

I didn't just bend them. I sent them flying; I heaved them from my mind, hurled them from my life. Any and all rules my husband and I had established regarding getting another dog were sent into orbit when I donned Sagittarius's bow and shot those laws right out of this galaxy.

To set the stage: last March, the second of our two senior dogs passed. After nearly fifteen years with a pair of Great Pyrenees-Lab mixes, the hole in my days without them was cavernous. Virtually every morning since they were eight weeks old, these friends and I had headed out the door in the wee hours for our daily walk, companionable in our silence, enjoying this quiet slice of the world to start each day. Now, all of a sudden, the early daybreaks were lonely, and so were those stretches from one dawn to the next.

Despite the emptiness, Scott and I promised each other that we would not get another dog for a full year, making this virtually the first time in our three decades together that we wouldn't have sizeable, four-legged pals in the house. But, of course, if we had stuck to that, I wouldn't be writing this, right? So, right off the bat, you can guess that the pact of "no dog for twelve months" was pulled from the quiver of rules and fired from the bow of noncompliance! But before I could even launch that arrow of disobedience, I had to shoot off a bunch of other household decrees!

I really didn't mean to look for a dog, honestly; it just kind of happened. My twin was exploring the Petfinder website, searching for a dog for herself. So, I confess: one day, during a quiet spell at home, I ditched the computer project I was tackling and logged onto the internet, eager to scope out the links my sister had emailed me. The dogs that caught Martha's fancy were engaging, all variations of huge, handsome mixes.

Out of curiosity and with a few more minutes to spare before responsibility (ok, more likely it was guilt) made me close down the site and resume trying to puzzle out some HTML language, I decided to browse to a couple of other pages. Zip! The first rule was flung aside: *looking at dogs!*

Thwap! Another "dog law" went sailing by: *considering*, albeit illicitly, anything other than a big dog! Don't ask me what flitted through my head—we have always been adamant that our dogs have to be large, coming up to the hips of my 5-foot, 9-inch frame and having limbs long enough to bound easily through the waist-high drifts of snow we hope for each winter—but off I went, typing "medium" into the size category box . . .

There, on the very first page of "medium male dogs," was a photo of a mutt who, for heaven-only-knows why, caught my attention and my imagination! Wait! He was small. And slender-built. Kind of funny looking, really. A coat so thin that his pink and black spotted skin showed through. And white! White!? No way! There wasn't a single thing about him that, according to my long-held preferences, should have made me look twice. So why did I bookmark the page? send the link to my husband's computer as well? keep opening it up?

That evening, I showed Scott the picture of "Dao." "Yeah, Laura, whatever. But we're *not* getting a dog right now. We agreed to that. Why are you looking?"

"Well, I wasn't *really* looking. I was helping Martha and was kinda poking around and just stumbled upon him. There's something about him, though, isn't there? He's rather cute, in an odd way, don't you think?"

"Sure," Scott muttered. "But, remember: twelve months! We promised. I don't know why you're wasting your time."

For the subsequent few days, I kept bringing the picture of Dao up on the computer, often leaving it on the screen -when I knew Scott would be the next one to sit down at it. This was my idea of subliminal messaging. Subtle, huh? The little spotted dog, though, kept creeping into my thoughts and into my dreams.

A couple of weeks later, I spent a weekend with Martha, who was still in her all-consuming dog quest, calling the foster homes of some that sparked her curiosity. When she put down the phone to retrieve a number, ZING! Before I could stop myself, I played the archer and let soar another agreement from our cache of rules: *calling* about a dog. I snatched the phone and dialed Dao's foster mother. Just what was I doing? I rationalized that this would be a cursory inquiry only, to satisfy myself that this

specific dog would absolutely, positively *not* be the dog for me. By having this confirmed, I could erase him from my "bookmarked favorites" and from my mind and could forget about dogs for the next eight months.

Donna, the foster mother, patiently answered all my questions and supplied plenty of information and opinions. Drat! The dog was smart, quiet, fun, affectionate, sweet, gentlemanly. Oh, come on! Why couldn't she say he barked at every falling leaf and from sundown to sunup, dug holes big enough to bury modest-sized tankers, used the upholstered furniture as trampolines, and despised going for walks? Try as I might, though, to trip Donna up on him, Dao's magic was infecting me through the telephone wires. Would I like to see him? When? How? He was about four hours from my home.

... BUT!! Wait! As things would have it, Scott and I had to be in Massachusetts the next week. Even better, Scott would be tied up on that Thursday, but I had no obligations and was, therefore, free. Hmmm. Donna lived on the north side of Boston, about 45 minutes away from where we'd be. Would it be possible? Could I work this out? Would it be convenient for Donna? Yes, yes, and yes. Despite that inner voice shouting, "No! No! No!," my lips formed around the words, "Great! When?" as I fetched pen and paper to jot directions.

Ooops: another of the arrows in our shrinking arsenal of rules was jettisoned as I set the time and date to see Dao: *looking* at a dog. It would be pretty tough to pawn this one off as "incidental." But the reason I broke this dictum was because, of course, I wouldn't like or adopt the dog, no way, so it wouldn't matter. Visiting with him would be the final affirmation that not only did I not want another dog right now, but also that I didn't want Dao. Phew! This exercise in futility was going to be well worth the effort.

After depositing Scott for his duties, I braved the city traffic and web of highways, white-knuckles gripping my steering wheel, while trying to reconcile my MapQuest directions with the expressway signs. Four wrong turns and a couple of inquiries later, I was on the correct street, pulling my car up to the curb in front of Donna's home. I sat there for several moments studying the house, as though I could divine something about the mystery that sat on the other side of the front door. With more than a little trepidation to escort my pounding heart,

I rang the bell. Was one of the yips issued in response Dao's?

Donna's open, pleasant face greeted me, as did two twisting, wiggling, wagging, obviously happy dogs squirming at my feet, their excitement barely contained by their bodies. Enthusiastic little jumps escaped from both of them, and they bounced and pranced around the foyer, playing with each other and encouraging Donna and me to join in their merriment. Neither was introduced as Dao. Where was he?

Then, seemingly out of thin air, a little white dog was quietly taking the last couple of treads of the staircase into the entryway where we stood. He had slipped down the stairs 30 silently, like mist rolling off a lake, that neither of us heard him coming. Then he sat down. Right in front of me. No fuss, no commotion. Just the largest, deepest eyes I had ever seen, and he looked at me with a stillness that pulled me in and held me there. Whatever splinter of logic that was nesting in my brain slipped its guard and let heart and instinct pull a coup in that split of a second; I plunged headfirst and was totally submerged in those bottomless, liquid bittersweet chocolate eyes. In that very twinkling of a moment, I knew; I just knew.

When we took the dogs for a walk at a nearby park, they ran and played while I kept trying to figure this lil guy out he was totally unfamiliar, making it hard to "place him" or put him into any familiar context. Dao, you see, was rescued from the streets of Bangkok. Stray dogs in Thailand are so rampant and long-established that they have, in essence, developed into their own "breed." He didn't look like any dog I'd ever seen. It wasn't as though I could watch him and say, ahhhh, there's the Shepherd in him, and, yeah, I see a bit of Bas-sett and a pinch of Poodle. No, not at all. My mind was running toward hieroglyphics on cave walls; Anubis (the ancient Egyptian god associated with dogs); wild dogs from National Geographic; cartoon characters, even. Just what was he?!

I tried very hard to *not* like Dao, but things weren't going how they were supposed to: he was supposed to be annoying, a tyrant, as loud as a rooster and as charming as a pig after a three-day rain. I was supposed to be looking for a graceful exit, a way to get out of town (literally and figuratively) in a hurry. I was supposed to dismiss this dog like last week's trash and be done with him.

My internal alarm system kept trying to stave off the breaking of the next rule: *falling* for a dog! Uh-oh. Focus, Laura, look for all the things you don't like about him, try to find his faults; be picky—really, really picky. There must be something. Yeah, remember, he drooled copiously in the car; now there's a darn good reason to reject him, isn't it? He's not big. And he's fine-boned. Stop wasting Donna's time. Simply tell her N-O. Turn around and go home!

But for all his strangeness, there was a something about Dao: an elegance, an athleticism to his lean frame, a quiet dignity in his presence and a depth I couldn't fathom. And there were those adorable little ears that flopped when he trotted; the tail that curved over his back, in a full circle, so that it seemed to tickle him; those three, perfectly round brown spots on his hind end, as if a trio of small pancakes had fallen on him and stuck; and that face—that handsome, handsome face that held the of a soul that touched mine. Oh no! Another of our rules went whizzing past me at breakneck speed: *getting hooked* definitely wasn't in our verbal contract.

As things turned out, we decided to not adopt Dao. Surprised? I was crushed. In fairness to my husband, though, I was trying to honor, albeit grumpily, that promise we had made. To take the dog home at this juncture would have violated that, and out of fairness to the dog (more than anything else), only the two of us returned to New York. (To exonerate Scott, the timing and the events of the weekend in Boston were totally prejudicial to realistically having a dog tossed into our lives.)

Once we were home, I was quite glum about not having adopted the dog. Glum is probably a generous term; more likely petulant, pouty, and poisonous are better descriptors; you could verify that with Scott. Hints as discreet as elephants parading through our living room were dropped constantly; comparisons between Dao and the mutt Martha ended up adopting were continually trotted out (guess who always measured up more favorably?); deep sighs of longing like the hissing of our radiators were issued from my bosom. "Really, Scott, we let a remarkable dog slip through our fingers." "He was exactly what I was looking for." "What are the odds of ever finding another like him?" Another protracted, woeful sigh; a defeated drop of the chin.

The cards I played were unfair, to be sure, but

that was secondary to my longing for Dao who, by this time, loomed so large in my mind that I could see nothing else. In exasperation, frustration, annoyance, who knows what, my husband finally turned to me one Sunday morning and said, "Okay, phone Donna and tell her we want the darn dog." Ha! I called his bluff! No sooner had he headed to the basement to his workshop than I was dialing the 508 area code! Didn't think I'd do it, huh? "Please, oh please," I silently implored, "let Dao still be available."

The good news: in another of those "coincidences" ("God's way of remaining anonymous," a friend once told me), Dao was in Western Massachusetts, within an hour's drive. The bad news: he was there because another couple was extremely interested in him. Understandably skeptical, Donna asked if I was sure—really, *really* sure—about this. After all, we had, ostensibly, rejected him once. I reassured her that I was totally committed and that the dog would be wholeheartedly welcomed into our lives. In her integrity, and perhaps in an act of faith, Donna honored our first-rights status.

Yikes! If you don't think I didn't have a huge pit in my stomach driving to Greenfield. What if I were wrong? What if this ended up to be a case of "the sweater I didn't buy"? A brief explanation of this expression: One day long ago, Mart saw a sweater in a store that she just *had* to have, but, for one reason or another, didn't get. The entire drive home from the shop, she waxed longingly about how it would match all her skirts and pants, what a fabulous color it was, how great it looked on her, and why-oh-why hadn't she gotten it! With each passing mile, each minute, the sweater became more beautiful, more perfect. The self-recriminations for not getting it were mushrooming like algae in a shallow pond in August. (Are you seeing the parallel?) Finally, nuisance-factor aside, we went back for it—only to discover that it was a bilious shade of green that would match nothing save for something equally bilious, it bagged in some places and sagged in others, it couldn't flatter a sack of potatoes, and the synthetic fabric would probably give her hives. Got it? See where my thoughts were? Oh my gosh, what if my cashmere canine ended up being a polyester pup? Gulp!

Was my instinct wrong? Had I placed too much emphasis on that flicker of intuition the moment I saw him? I'm known for debating and

deliberating, vacillating and equivocating, and, as my Grandmother would say, I analyze things seven ways to Sunday. Yet here I was, driving up the interstate to collect a dog I couldn't explain to even myself. And the burden of responsibility for this being a "success"—for the dog's well-being and, heck, for the stability of our marriage!!—rested solely and heavily on my shoulders.

Fast forward to any time from the moment I collected Dao and brought him home to this very second: Dao, whose name means "star" in Thai, has been a joy, a gift, a blessing. We now call him Chok Dee Dao, "lucky star," because we thank our lucky stars for him. There hasn't been a single instant that either Scott or I have been anything other than delighted that we brought him into our home. Okay, maybe that's a stretch, because for the first 24 hours, Scott reserved judgment (out of principle, if nothing else), but was open-minded. Now who do you think gets the first hug when Scott comes home from work?

My canine companion turned out to be neither polyester nor cashmere. I think he was woven from the light of the stars, the rays of the sun, the glow of the moon.

Maybe next time Scott and I set down some rules, I'll abide by them. But this time? I couldn't be happier that I emptied the quiver, discarded logic, and heard the little voice inside.

We invite you to cultivate an ear for your inner voice too. *Sic itur ad astral\**

\*Translation: *Else you shall go to the stars.*