

You Get What You Need

I have become the proud owner of a rescued dog named Zukini. Zuke for short, with the added nickname of “little brown dog”. Although, he isn’t quite so little. He is 70 lbs of concentrated muscle, a very strong dog.

Zuke is teaching me many important life lessons. Some of them are deeper understandings of concepts I’ve already been introduced to, and some of them are opening up new learning and ideas. One of the things I am fortunate enough to do is help people direct their lives with my Equine Assisted Counseling practice. I have been introduced and accustomed to the ideas of training, retraining and healing, and Zuke has helped me experience these at a wonderfully deeper level.

I fell in love with Zuke from his online pictures from a rescue site. There wasn’t really a good reason for this, as he really just looks like a little brown dog. On top of his unremarkable appearance, he also had been discharged from the animal emergency room just before the pictures were taken, and there wasn’t much sparkle in his eye, either. Like The Rolling Stone’s song states, “...you can’t always get what you want....but if you try sometimes, well, you just might find you get what you need”. Little did I recognize at the time just how much Zukini and I needed each other.

The reason that I was so diligently searching for our family’s next dog was to help me navigate through the grief I was facing after losing another dog that was a huge part of my life. It was very difficult for him not to be a huge part of anything, as he was an English Mastiff who at one time tipped the scales close to 200 lbs. His last 5 months he had basically been in hospice, and I was his main caregiver. From running a pet loss support group for 5 years and witnessing lots of grief processes, I knew that all the energy I had put into caring for my gentle giant had to be channeled somewhere, or it could go into guilt, depression, or some other dark place that would complicate my grief journey.

This is when I discovered Zuke, and my heart and intuition told me that this was my dog. There wasn’t much information listed about him, and talking to the rescue workers didn’t give much more. He had been very sick, close to death, which is why the rescue that I got him from took him from a shelter. Over time, I found out he was brought in as a stray,

and has been in at least 3 different rescues or shelters. For a dog not even two years old, Zuke had been through a whole lot.

Because of our 8 year old daughter, and 14 year old dog at home, I needed to be cautious. I wanted to meet Zuke off site before I brought him home to see if I thought he could get along with everyone in our house. However, during the ride to our meet up site, he chewed through the leash the rescue worker had him tied with in the back seat. So, because I was unwilling to reschedule our meeting, Zuke came home.

Before I continue with our initial meeting, I have to express my appreciation and gratitude to my husband for supporting me on this crazy journey. I know that my grieving process was such that a dog was necessary, and he wasn't quite ready for another dog yet. Despite this, he has tolerated and helped and I couldn't have learned all that I have without his support.

We put Joy, our older dog, in the house, and brought Zuke into the back yard. I got a leash, and we put it on him. His leash manners were almost non-existent. He didn't actually walk on the leash, it was more an exercise in dragging the human. He also considered it to be a fabulous tug toy, and his discrimination between human hands and toys needed work, too.

Over the next few days, I watched him like a hawk, and started to get to know Zuke. He was not quite as good with other dogs and kids as I had thought my next dog would be. He also was pretty reactive to being touched around his midsection and hind end. If you picked your arm up fast, I noticed that he would flinch or cower, which caused me to think that he might have been hit or somehow mistreated.

Even if I could get more answers about his past, I'm not sure that I would want to know what all it entailed. I tend to be very sensitive and empathic, and very reactive with my emotions. I chose to focus on where I wanted us to be and went in search of ways to get there.

I devoured books and bought videos, searching for ways to help Zuke with what I really felt was high anxiety. Our walks could turn treacherous, as he would start by jumping at the leash, and then jump at my clothes. I was convinced that as a tiny puppy, someone helped reinforce that this was a fun game. It can be very cute when an 8 week old puppy grabs onto your clothes and plays tug. An adult, 70 pound anxious dog is a completely

different story. I had the scrapes and bruises to prove it. I could not figure out what would set him off into what I was labeling “anxious outbursts” rather than “aggressive actions”.

I am not a dog trainer by profession. I knew what my intuition was telling me about Zuke, and it was time to get professional validation of what I was sensing. I did not want to contemplate them telling me that I was wrong, but others' safety was depending on my getting the right answers quickly. It was time to search for in person help.

We attended workshops and classes from two good trainers. I learned some things, and enjoyed our experiences, yet there was still something more and missing that we needed. I was encouraged because both of these trainers believed as I did, that Zuke was not acting out of aggression, but out of anxiousness. It helped to know that, but I still needed the right tools and/or approach to be able help Zuke with his anxiousness. Obviously, people had given up on Zuke before. I was not willing to join that club.

This past Christmas Eve, during our family dinner, I talked to my sister extensively about my little brown dog. The day before Zukini had a pretty intense outburst on our walk. Now was the time for the next intervention on our journey. She suggested I reach out to her agility instructor. My sister said that she had mentioned us to her teacher, and she had thought that she could really help us. I called this instructor the day after Christmas, and in retrospect, could consider that conversation a late Christmas present.

One thing that the new agility trainer said to me on that phone call validated much for me. This wise instructor pointed out to me that if he weren't so very strong, the antics of jumping up and grabbing at the leash and clothes wouldn't have the same impact. She explained impulse control, and her manner of teaching dogs and humans. Everything that she said made sense, and I knew that this trainer, Laura, was going to be involved significantly in the next leg of our journey.

Laura also surprised me by encouraging me to sign up for a class rather than individual lessons. Her words had made so much sense to me, and encouraged me enough that I decided to give it a try. A bonus was that we got weekly videos to watch at home and practice. My learning addiction loved this idea!

I am happy to report these classes have given me even more hope than I imagined. Zuke is making some small, yet significant changes in his choices and behaviors. I really feel that his anxiety is decreasing, which is such a huge relief. Not only does it allow for

better behaviors on his part, but I don't want him to have to suffer from being worried, apprehensive or fearful. I can't take away what was in his past. I can influence what happens in his future. He has, without a doubt, found his forever home. He has taught me a deeper understanding of belief in myself and him, and following that inner voice, or intuition, that we all have. He has taught me that patience and persistence pay off. He is still teaching me about trust, communication and bonding. He is teaching me about life. I am so fortunate that instead of getting what I thought I wanted, I got what I truly needed in Zuke.