

Coming Home

by Ed Blechner

This past spring I let our Alaskan Husky Jeter out to pee on a rainy night sometime after midnight. He was sick and was staying inside in a crate. He never came back. We never found him. We think he went off to die. Ever since, Queens, another of our dogs, has been bringing him back home, one piece at a time. She knows where he is. We don't. But for some reason, she is bringing Jeter home.

Dogs to me are a mystery. After forty years of working with them, I still don't really know what goes on in their heads. Trying to relate every day to another species is endlessly challenging and often frustrating. In the case of Jeter coming home, though, is it coincidence or is Queens purposely bringing him back so he can be at peace here where he lived most of his twelve years? She could have led us to his remains but she didn't. She could have let us follow her, but we haven't been able to see where she goes. It is a mystery that has taken place, right under our noses, in a familiar place, a place my wife and I call home.

Snake Mountain may not be much of a mountain, but like living on all mountains everywhere, one is always going up or down. Every step must be earned. I am either going down to the mailbox or up to the clearing; down to the lower garden or up to the barn; put the dogs down in the exercise pen or bring them back up to their houses. Sometimes it is like a see-saw. Our five plus acres has a tremendous view of the Adirondacks but the land itself is not rich with beautiful woods or meadows. But it is interesting. There is no one behind us and the dogs are kenneled underneath old apple and pear trees that back up against our property line. These trees are much too tall but they produce a diverse crop of several varieties of pears and apples and, with an abundant year like last year, the dogs can get inundated with the fruit as it falls. I am constantly cleaning up fruit around the dogs. We eat what we can but much of the fruit is way too high to harvest properly. Some of the dogs love the fruit and one dog, Ace, especially will go out of his way to find that perfect pear. That is a feat in and of itself, since Ace has been blind since we got him many years ago; in fact, he has no eyes at all, as we had them removed to relieve pressure.

Just north of where the dogs are located is an open area where we built a small barn a year ago. Behind the barn, again we run into our property line, which is too bad because just a little ways north of the barn is a tiny pond and the area is home to some unique amphibians. This flat tableland in back of the barn was once pasture and is now overgrown. There are a couple of deer blinds back there. However, this is not where I think Jeter went but it is where the porcupines come from that have caused many problems with the dogs over the years. When I

first moved here, I walked out to the dog yard one morning to do chores and I noticed a bunch of quills in Tubby's mouth. That's weird, I thought. I knew that Tubby had gotten off his chain before but how did he get himself back on; in other words, if he got into a porcupine, it must have been while he was running loose, right? Then it dawned on me that the porcupine had just walked right through the yard and that is how Tubby wound up with a face full of quills. And over the years lots of others, as well, including Jeter. Maple killed one once and was so covered with quills, she looked like a 65 pound pin cushion. Porcupines make good eating, but I have yet to try them. I would prefer not to see them again anytime soon.

South of the upper garden, the woods road leads out back to the rest of Snake Mountain. There are all kinds of trails back there for snowshoeing and skiing, and I have run the dogs back there but it can be a little hairy for mushing. We don't own the land but it is great to be able to walk out the door and in sixty seconds be on a trail up the mountain. So many times I have been back there, a half an hour from home, but nobody in the whole world knows where I am. I actually love that feeling. It is the highest form of independence, a sense of total responsibility for oneself. Besides, when you are familiar with a place and its' flora, you feel like you are among old friends. The familiar makes me feel safe. I frequently used to hike with Jeter back here when he was young. If he had gone back here, we would probably never find him – the area is too vast.

I'm pretty sure he is not east of the house but west and downhill from it. Queens never goes up hill when she is loose, always down below the house, beyond the exercise pen and the mound. This is a scrub area of red cedar, juniper and poplar. Very soon you come to the top of the small quarry that is below us. Just to the south of this area, our driveway goes down to the road. It is two-tenths of a mile long. If Jeter walked down the hill toward Route 22A, he would not have been the first dog to do this. Years ago, I had a couple of 15 year-olds who were on their last legs but sometimes I would turn around and one would be gone, heading off toward 22A and perhaps their happy hunting ground. A couple of times, I found Drifter a half mile away almost at 22A. No, I don't think Jeter took the driveway.

When you live on a hill, how you get up in the winter is always an issue. Having four-wheel drive may be a necessity but it is not always a panacea. Common sense usually trumps technology in extreme conditions. Our hill is quite steep in a couple of places and if it is really slick with ice or has too much snow, you may not make it even with four-wheel drive. Since I don't plow my own driveway, we have to wait until Gene gets to it and if the snow is really bad, he'll bring his big tractor up. There have been times where I've returned from a trip with the dogs to find the driveway not plowed yet. Out come the dogs and off we go up the hill. This is where a big strong team is valuable. Their pulling power is immense. Ironically, Jeter was not much of a puller in his later years as a working sled dog. Though built beautifully for running, at some point he just decided to run but not pull. This does not make for a highly efficient dog team. Getting up our hill sometimes seems like the last test in trying to make it home; like Odysseus, you've fought the war but not the last battle.

Perhaps coming home is so important to me because there have been times when I wasn't sure I was going to get home. In the massive blizzard of March, 1993, I was caught off guard by the severity of it while training dogs up in Ripton. As I tried to make my way home through

barely passable roads and extremely poor visibility in the dark, I wound up going off the road and getting stuck – on the left side of the road. That’s how bad the driving was. I was about 5-6 miles from home with six dogs that had just had a really tough two and a half hour run. There was no way I was going to get that truck unstuck, four-wheel or not. So, I took the dogs back out of their boxes, harnessed them up, and hitched them back to the sled. My plan was to follow Route 23 to Route 17 and then down to Mountain Road and back home. There was no traffic. The wind was really blowing, the temperature was below zero, and it was snowing like crazy. I just wanted to find the road. It took about 45 minutes to do so. We wound up in a field in a massive tangle that took forever to undo. Suddenly, a plow truck came by and I knew this was my best chance to find the road. Once on it, we went straight down the middle. I had on all my winter trail clothes, including my big parka and goggles. I couldn’t see a thing. The snow was blowing ferociously directly onto my face, and the light from my headlamp reflecting off the snowflakes made a glare that made vision terrible. Every thirty seconds or so, I would lift my goggles up and look down to make sure I was still on the road. The going was extremely slow and normal landmarks were wiped out. It was hard to tell where we were but eventually we made it to the bottom of my hill. We had just fought the war but still had one more battle to go. Never was I so glad to get home.

Coming home is not simply trading one location for another. The familiarity of a place gives you the ability and confidence to accomplish what you need to, even under awful conditions. Home is not just a structure that you live in. It is an environment that you are a part of, a place at which you can be yourself. But what about the dogs? Do they care? Home is where their houses are and where they get fed. It is where they get loaded into the dog truck to go train. It is where their exercise pen is. It is where our house is, where they love to come in. Does it mean one thing to a dog like Queens and another to a human like me? Are Jeter’s returning bones a tangible recognition of the importance of this place? Is his soul at peace? For that matter, is my soul at peace having Jeter home again? Once I lived alone in a tiny cabin on a lake in central Vermont. I travelled back and forth in a canoe. One very foggy night, I paddled across to my cabin, figuring I could make it okay despite not having a flashlight or headlamp with me. A five minute paddle took over an hour. I kept going in circles and coming back to where I started. I was looking for that log that stuck out from the bank below the cabin and when I finally found it, it was joyous – back on familiar ground.

If coming home means familiarity and a certain sense of joy to a human, what does it mean to a dog? I know my dogs are glad to get out of their dog boxes after a long trip and that they love going into their houses after I’ve laid down fresh straw for bedding. I have no idea if they care about the land they live on (other than their territoriality and their never ending quest to mark that territory) or if they experience that thing we call sense of place. Queens is a very smart dog, a twelve year old female who has completed the Iditarod, and seems to have had me figured out ever since I got her some years ago from a friend in Alaska. Did she know that we wanted closure about Jeter, that my wife wanted to bury him, and that he belonged up here with us, rather than hidden amongst the spreading junipers below?

At first, she brought back a rib bone. Then, another one. Then, she brought a foot. Then, the remains of his head. Yes, his head, with those soft gray ears. That is when I was absolutely sure it was Jeter that she had found. We buried those body parts in the lower flower garden.

Every time we lose a dog, we dig the grave, place the dog in, and cover the hole. I say Kaddish, the Jewish memorial prayer. It may not be appropriate to say Kaddish over a dog but it helps to ease the pain.

Queens, however, wasn't through. One day, she came back with his red nylon collar. That really threw me for a loop. The bones I could understand – that's what dogs will do. But why the collar? And even though she continued to bring back more bones over the summer, it was the collar that was definitive for me. At that point, I was willing to say okay, maybe she is really transporting him home so he could be where he was supposed to be and we could have a little closure. Maybe she understands somehow the importance of coming home. Or maybe that is what we want to believe. Or maybe, just maybe, it doesn't matter. What matters is that Jeter is home.

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