

Another of those "got me to thinking" events. This is only peripherally a dog situation, since the person involved happened to be dogsitting when it happened. It involved a woman who had been severely beaten by her boyfriend and ended up in the hospital with serious injuries. Before I could stop, I heard myself ask, "How can someone let herself get into that situation?" I immediately realized what a dumb question it was. I've certainly gotten myself into some situations that would elicit the same question from other people. I've never been beaten up, but I've sure done and put up with things that caused me to later look back and say, "What was I thinking??"

There have been forks in the road that, had I taken the other one, I might well have ended up in that woman's place. She wasn't stupid to have gotten beaten up. She was unlucky and possibly made some bad choices. I don't know -- had she just met this guy? Stayed with him ten years? Tried to leave? Who knows how much was bad fortune and how much bad decision making? These incidents left me wondering, "What makes me think I couldn't have been that person? What makes me think I'm better or smarter instead of just luckier?"

How often do I start a sentence with "I would never..." (or could never or have never or will never) or "How could he/she...." ? The hardest life lesson for me has been to try to see through someone else's eyes, to walk in her shoes.

It's not hard for me to empathize with animals. When I see a dog in pain or fear, I just ache inside for him. So why is it so hard for me to believe that most people are doing the best they can with what they have to work with? We throw around the word "irresponsible" so freely, when what we really mean is "not like me."

My dogs are up to date on their vaccinations and any illnesses are promptly treated. Is that because I'm "responsible"? Maybe. It's also because:

- 1) We have enough money to take them to the vet for shots and when they're sick
- 2) We have a car that will transport us and them to the vet
- 3) Our dogs are of a size and we are healthy enough that we can handle them well enough to get them in the car and to the vet
- 4) We know enough about dogs to know when they need shots and to recognize signs of illness
- 5) We are able to spend enough time at home to take note of signs of illness (i.e., we don't work two jobs each and drop in at the house just to sleep)
- 6) We're not so distracted by a sick parent or child, a lawsuit, marital problems, mental illness, social issues, or other of life's non-dog challenges that we fail to notice the dog is sick
- 7) Neither of us has cultural, social, or religious beliefs that prevent us from spending money on a dog/veterinarian.

A hang-up in any one of those areas and we'd drop from responsible owners to people who "just let the dog die because they were too irresponsible to get it to the vet." And no, my dogs don't get hit by cars or end up in the pound. I have a good fence, our neighbors don't come through the yard, our electric meter is not in the yard, and our dogs don't dig, jump, or climb. I have a good fence because when he bought the house, Walt had enough money and dog-knowledge to have a fence built that is reliable, dog- and weather-proof, and relatively permanent.

But just as important, I don't have an alcoholic or drug-addicted husband who lets the dogs out from carelessness or spite or a teenager who has been told a million times to close the gate

and doesn't. We don't have eight-year-old neighbor kids who go in the yard to play with the dogs and leave the gate open. I'm home during the day and if a tree fell on the fence, I'd know it and get the dogs in. I have a husband who would help me fill in holes or mend a broken place in the fence or would pay to have it done.

Maybe my dogs don't get out because I'm a "responsible owner," but I think it's more because my life allows me to take care of the dogs the way I want to.

Okay, within reason. Walt did say no to the \$250 orthopedic cherrywood Captain's Beds I wanted for Judy and Babs, the old girls.

The major failing of the animal rights philosophy is that there is no compassion for people. And compassion is also the lesson that's hardest for me and for most dog lovers I know. How often does irresponsible owner translate to "has a drunk husband" or "can't afford it" or "is seriously depressed" or "wasn't raised that way" or "just lost her job."

Sure, there are people who just plain don't give a rip, but I don't think there are nearly as many of them as we might think. There's more to a life than pet care, and sometimes pets (as well as children and spouses) take a backseat to problems that loom up and cast a shadow over weeks and even years. What we think of as "responsible" may simply be a life free -- at least for the time -- of bankruptcy, divorce, alcoholism, senility, mental and physical illness, poverty, or the dozen other real-life boogey-bears that wait around every corner for every one of us.

It never hurts to stop and think, "There but for the grace of God go I."

And now I just have to figure out whether I'm feeling self-righteous about not being self-righteous....

Sharyn Hutchens, November 20, 2004



Timbreblue Shows Her Panties and Timbreblue Plays the Joker Annie and Diamond, not much appreciating that good fence