

# Both Ends of the Leash

## Home is Where the Heart Is

Patricia B. McConnell

**What brings contentment in one place and not another? A dog's happiness and sense of place (as is yours) is a complex matter.**

She came the night my husband said he was leaving me. A small, neat-footed little Border Collie, Lassie arrived late into a house gone silent. I leashed her to the bed beside me, and lay all night with my hand touching her soft back. Patrick lay in his own world, turned away from Lassie and me, across the great ocean of our king-size bed.

Lassie and I slept fitfully, reassuring one another throughout the night. In the morning I took her outside with the rest of the dogs. She stayed focused on me and my other dogs, so I let her off leash and allowed her to charge through the Wisconsin countryside after my own pack, who were delightedly dashing after some surprised small animal. I can't imagine what prompted me to try calling her name, as she tore away from me, but I did. "Lassie," I called. "Lassie, come!" It was absurd to think that a dog I'd barely met would be so responsive in that context, and I remember laughing at myself for even trying. Perhaps that's why I still have the image of her response in my mind – a freeze-frame of a small, black-and-white dog suspended in mid-air, twisting her front end back toward me, hindquarters still going away. She hit the ground running just as hard toward me as she had been running away and skidded to a stop at my feet, grinning like a cartoon dog.

I was just going to keep her for a few weeks. She was the daughter of my male dog Luke, and had been sold by the breeder to a woman who ended up single and in the city with three young kids. It was was a good place for a Border Collie to go bad. If you don't like to come home, put on jeans and go outside in your football field-size yard for several hours, don't get a Border Collie. Smart, high-energy dogs who are bored always find something to do; it's just usually not what you want. True to form, Lassie



drove her owner crazy by digging, barking and recycling the kids' toys. The owner loved her dearly, but she couldn't cope with Lassie's misbehavior, so she agreed to send her back to the breeder to give her another chance. I said I'd foster Lassie while the breeder was on her honeymoon. When she returned, she would take Lassie back, and we would both look for a good home for her. [When the breeder called the owner back to make arrangements to pick up Lassie, she found to her shock that Lassie had been taken to the local shelter. Before we could get her ourselves, she was adopted out in less than 24 hours. Lucky for me, she was returned the next morning. I called the shelter and said HOLD THAT DOG, and two days later she arrived at the house, disoriented but sweet as cream. You can read more about this part of the story in "[Pick of the Shelter](#)"]

That first morning Lassie seemed a bit restless; lying down and then getting up, never settling in one place for long. There was no question she was a bit anxious. But she was happy to play, slurped down her dinner with gusto and took to herding sheep like a professional. She slept soundly the second night, and by the third day you'd have thought she'd grown up here. I called the breeder and asked if we could skip the "finder her another home" part of our agreement. She's still here, seven years later, warming my feet as I write this.

Lassie's first owner decided not to keep her, and it was the most responsible and loving choice she could have made. Deciding to re-home a dog can be an agonizing process, and as an applied animal behaviorist and seminar speaker, I often encounter people who are suffering over what to do about a

particular dog. Perhaps it's a bitch who has declared an all-out war on the other female dog in the house. Perhaps it's a dog who is marvelous with adult humans but is terrified of young children – and the owners are pregnant. Often it's a dog like Lassie – a square peg trying to pound herself into a round hole, and driving everyone crazy in the process.

There are many things that make re-homing a dog difficult. Besides the pure, slicing grief over an upcoming loss, there's a valid concern about finding the right home. I know it well. I remember sleepless nights when I thought about re-homing a Border Collie named Scott, worrying obsessively that I'd choose the wrong place and end up sending him to some version of doggy hell. But there's another issue that comes up when good, responsible dog owners first think about re-homing a dog, and I think it's the hardest one to handle. We think of re-homing our dog as a Betrayal. I capitalized the word on purpose, because being betrayed is such a primal, pervasive fear that it can take on a life of its own.

What could be worse than selling your child? What act is more horrible than selling out a friend and then turning your back on him? Our society has strong feelings about family loyalty, and after all, if you're reading this magazine, you probably think of dogs as part of your family.

All responsible, loving dog owners are appalled by, and painfully aware of, the real betrayals that people perpetrate on dogs. Dogs are beaten, starved, abandoned and tortured, and the rescuers among us are often overwhelmed with a desire to make up for such horrors.

But re-homing a dog whose needs you can't provide for isn't abusive, it's generous and kind. One of my clients rescued a herding dog from a shelter where she worked, but in just a few weeks he developed a severe aggression problem. After working with both of them for several sessions, it was clear to me that the dog could never adapt to life in a tiny city apartment. He was so tense in such close quarters that he could barely breathe. Even though his owner loved him deeply and was committed to solving his problems, her love, time and money couldn't make up for his soulful need for open spaces. He's doing beautifully now, out of the city, loose as a goose in a big pack of slap-happy dogs, because his owner bravely accepted that her responsibility wasn't to hold

on to him forever, but to figure out what he needed and find it for him.

All dogs need shelter and care and kindness, but beyond that, every dog is different. You might think that 13 acres in the country, a flock of sheep and an owner who's a kindly professional dog trainer would be the perfect home for any Border Collie, but it's not. My Border Collie Scott desperately needed to herd sheep for a living, not as a hobby, and he hated all the changes and excitement that occur on my farm. Scott moved to an isolated farm with hundreds of sheep who needed a serious, dedicated dog to work long hours every day. I cried so hard when I drove away from his new home that I had to pull off the highway. But Scott adapted quickly to the life he'd always wanted, and within days both he and I were thrilled with his new home. Another of my dogs, Kit, herded sheep as if she were starting a pool game – running straight at the flock until the sheep scattered, and then standing stock-still in the center, nonplussed about what to do next. Kit may have some of the best herding-dog genes in the country, but she had no more natural ability to herd sheep than a Bichon Frise. At the time, I desperately needed a herding dog, and it would have been unfair to put so much pressure onto a dog who showed no interest or natural ability in working sheep. Kit became the beloved house dog and agility star of a dear friend of mine, and lived a life far better than she would have here.

In some cases, no amount of training, conditioning and skill can make up for an outside environment that clashes with the inside of a dog. That's why finding the right home for a dog who you love doesn't have to be betrayal, and neither is it necessarily a failure. I lived in 12 places in eight years in my twenties, and I learned a lot from so much moving around. One of the things I learned was that it's a lot easier to be happy in some places than it is in others. I'm settled now, on my small farm in the hills of southern Wisconsin, and even after the most luscious of vacations, my heart swells when I come home to the rolling hills and feathery woods of my little valley. I love visiting the vitality of busy cities, but I could never thrive in one for long. The mind boggles at the behavioral problems I'd develop if I were forced to live away from my beloved countryside. Lassie's behavioral problems shed off like a winter coat in spring after just a few weeks at the farm. I didn't

have to re-train her or develop an elaborate treatment plan. Lassie's heart expanded into the open pastures around her, and within days she was as settled and calm as if she'd been here all her life. Home is indeed "where the heart is," but that doesn't mean that you can toss your heart anywhere and be happy no matter where it lands. All of us, dogs and people both, need a place that allows us to be who we truly are, not who someone else wants us to be.

Of course, passing a dog around like a fruitcake can cause terrible harm. Most dogs will suffer if their homes shift underneath them like sand in the wind. It's important to know what your dog needs, and if it's clear that you can't provide it, then it's important to have the courage and the faith to find it for him. What each dog needs is different, and individual requirements must be carefully considered. There are many dogs, for example, who get worse – not better – in that fantasy "good home in the country."

It's an act of love, this scary project of finding fertile ground for your dog's soul. That's where your knowledge and skill are critical, just as when you carefully consider where to send your son or daughter off to college. It's a big responsibility to shoulder, it's true. But if it were truly necessary, you would no more be betraying your dog than you would your child when you celebrate at her wedding. After all, we humans move from one family to another, eventually leaving our first home to fit into another one as we mature into adults.

Patrick left for good a few days after Lassie came, and for a time I thought my heart would break. But the bleakest of winters still lead to spring, and that sad season feels long ago and far away. Patrick and I are good friends now, and we are both happier than we've ever been. He built a house just down the road. Tomorrow we will take the Border Collies on a walk – me with my dogs, and he with his dog, Tess, the daughter of Lassie, who needed the love of her first owner to be able to finally come home.

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