

# **A Good Dog's Good Death**

## **Thinking Dog Blog**

Guest Blog by Deni Elliott

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It seemed to happen overnight. One September day, 12-and-a-half-year-old retired guide dog Oriel was romping and eating and playing with toys at our mountain home in Montana. The next day, the Golden Retriever's skin seemed to hang loose, her muscle all but gone. She trotted rather than pranced to fetch a ball.

The mass in her chest on the X-ray was clear to even a non-veterinarian's eyes, as was the prognosis. Oriel was dying. Our job was to keep her happy and to know when she needed pain relief.

September gave way to October and October to November. It was time to rethink our plans. Pam and I were on our way to Berkeley at the start of January for my four-month sabbatical. The apartment wasn't large enough to swing a cat, much less an extra golden retriever, but, if our 83-year-old landlady was willing, it was about to become home to five of us: Two humans, my current guide dog, German Shepherd Wylie, Pam's Golden Retriever, Jana, and now Oriel too. The landlady was willing and celebrated Oriel's stamina.

It seemed to happen overnight. One January day, Oriel ate her meals, took a walk, and played ball in the park. The next day, she was suddenly ravenous, even by Golden Retriever standards. She was unwilling to go for walks or play, planting all four feet in clear protest. She wanted only to **eat**. Unless Oriel asked to go outside to pee or poop, she spent every minute between meals flat on the kitchen floor, anticipating her next food.

A visit to a local veterinarian friend brought the expected bad news. "She's not a happy camper," Dr. Anne said, stroking the dog's ears. Ory stood on the exam, smiling at the attention but panting, panting, panting.

“The panting is the only way that this dog will tell you she’s uncomfortable,” Anne said. She drew blood and urine to look for something that we might address. She offered no hope.

A call to Dr. Joe, Oriel’s Montana vet, a discussion of blood panel comparisons, considering whether to repeat chest X-rays — finally he cut to the quick. “How sick do you want her to get before you let her go?” he asked.

“No sicker,” we decided. Oriel would only get worse. The list of how “getting worse” might be for Oriel was enough for us to decide that it was better that she drift off to sleep, to death with human intervention rather than suffer sudden bleeds, seizures, or intense pain. Treatment would not enhance her life. We made an appointment for Dr. Anne to put her to sleep.

“Isn’t this playing god?” Pam asked. Yes, but play god is what humans do from the moment we bring puppies into the world and into our homes. Making the heart-wrenching choice to plan their deaths is no exception.

“One last day at the beach,” Pam said. Days before Oriel was scheduled to be euthanized, we loaded three dogs into the car and drove to our favorite San Francisco Bay dog beach. We wanted to give Oriel a last chance to stand in the sand and smell the salt water. We were a block from the beach when Oriel sat up and sniffed. She wagged her tail. Once on the beach, Ory found her second, third, and fourth wind. She ran on the beach, swam in the surf, and chased the dog who had stolen her stick. She rolled on her back and wriggled, sand on her nose, tail wagging. She smiled. We canceled her euthanasia. This dog was not ready to die.

“Maybe we can help her nutritionally,” Pam said. We consulted with Heidi, owner of *Holistic Hounds*, conveniently located a block from our apartment (this **is** Berkeley). We carried bags of food and supplements home. Oriel’s new diet (of course, Wylie and Jana enjoyed most of these treats as well — how can you indulge one and deprive the other two?) included:

Breakfast: Natural Balance kibble, Grandma Lucy’s chicken formula, Glucosamine, fish oil, Pepcid, a handful of frozen green beans;

Midday snack: cottage cheese or scrambled egg;

Dinner: Natural Balance, Grandma Lucy's, 4Life Transfer Factor, Pepcid, a few more beans

Evening snack: cottage cheese

The added protein helped Ory feel less hungry. She got plenty of freeze-dried liver treats and occasional treats of Saul's Deli chopped liver for her anemia. We compensated for her digestive enzyme imbalance with canned green tripe. Beach therapy once each week. Oriel didn't need to die to think she had gone to heaven.

Days flowed into weeks and weeks into a month. We forgot she was dying. Tuesday, February 21, Oriel had a typical day. She ate well, peed and pooped without problems, had the energy to go for a walk. She retrieved her tennis ball a few times. She joined Pam and me on the couch for an evening cuddle. We rubbed her ears and stroked her back; she responded by petting each of us in return — the only dog in my experience to use her paws to pet her people.

It happened overnight. We began our usual morning routine. I took each dog out in turn. This morning, it was Wylie at the door saying, "Me first." Then Jana. Oriel did not join the queue. I walked back to the bedroom to find Oriel still lying in her bed. At my call, "Ory, Ory," she lifted her head, turned it to me and then dropped it back on the floor. "Oh, honey," I said, collapsing next to her, "What's going on?" She put her head on my leg. She made no attempt to stand. I grabbed some liver treats and tried again. She sniffed and reached for the treats but made no effort to rise. I shuddered for us both and held her while I waited for Pam to finish her shower.

I left Pam and Ory together, hoping something would change by the time I took my shower. the two of them together. Pam had magic with dogs that I had seen before. When I returned to the bedroom, Pam was on the phone with the emergency vet.

The other dogs sniffed Oriel nose to toes as we wrapped the dog in a blanket and carried to the car. We had seen only that Oriel could not stand or support her head for long. The vet noticed that her belly was filled with fluid and that her gums were paper white. Ory was bleeding internally. Her struggle was over. She

was not in pain, not distressed, just very, very tired. Ory's blood pressure was so low that the techs could not get an IV catheter into her back leg.

Pam and I sat on the floor and held Oriel close as we said good-bye. I said thank you for the years that she had served as my first guide dog. We told her to go play with Mav, Ideal, Hams, and Spirit — other good dogs we knew who had recently died. The vet administered the drugs. Oriel peacefully slipped away.

Pam and I returned home, shocked to realize that less than two hours had passed since we'd recognized that Oriel couldn't stand. Jana and Wylie sniffed us thoroughly. They knew Oriel was dead.

It was hours before I could begin to feel grateful rather than stunned. I was grateful to Oriel for choosing this week, rather than next when I would be out of town. I was grateful that Oriel didn't suffer a slow painful decline. I was also grateful that Oriel didn't die in her sleep. I needed to say good-bye and thank you.

Oriel moved through the world with calm, cheerful anticipation of what might await her. She died as she lived. Her presence was profound; her absence is huge. But her message survives: Whatever the world brings, greet it with joy.