

White Cane to Guide Dog

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By Guiding Eyes

February 20, 2014

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I traded a white cane for a guide dog. The world became a bigger place. Perceptions changed from pity to admiration. The contrast between partnering with my dog and poking at the world with a stick was a personal paradigm shift.

I tried to adjust to different circumstances by choosing the right length from among my arsenal of canes. Attending a cocktail party or other crowded stationary setting, I'd reach for the shortest stick. The 40", held close to my body, helped me avoid the ubiquitous waist-high trays of dirty glasses. This length intruded the least as people milled about with their focus more on being seen than on seeing what might be in their way.

Airport? The 57" swept a wide arch to keep people from crossing in front of me as I tapped toward what I hoped to be the gate's direction.

At work, the medium cane was fine, as I knew the location of corners and stairs and crosswalks. Long enough to warn me what was to come, but short enough that my sensory arc was relatively unobtrusive. The sound of cane on sidewalk kept me on my path and warned others out of the way.

Now, I work a dog whose one size fits all situations. I gently grasp a horizontal harness handle instead of jabbing with a stick. I walk calmly with the cheerful jingling of tags at my side. **I walk straight and tall, balanced and confident with my place in the flow of human motion.**

Rather than murmurs of pity, I hear wonder and public adoration. "What a good dog." "You are so beautiful." "Aren't they amazing?" I even appreciate the young squeal, "Mommy. Look at the dog!" particularly when the mommy responds, "Don't touch her, she's a working dog."



With my guide a bit forward at my side, we stroll through crowded streets and whip around slower folks as we hurry to make connections in airports. We wait with confidence at street crossings, both knowing our part of the job in gauging when to proceed and which way to move to reach our destination.

I am bigger now, and gauge my space as my height plus one-dog-length long. But my awareness of the environment around me has multiplied far beyond that size. My sensory arc has gone from the length of a cane to as far as a dog can see and smell and hear. My dog is my radar. She responds to stimuli before it begins to register for me. She steers me around problems of which I remain unaware. She leads me calmly out of the way when I am startled by sudden movement in my path.

She wags her way into her harness when it is time to work just as happily as she wags her way out of harness when it is time to play. Her life is full of praise and treats. But, she works for the pure joy of being the dog that she was bred and raised and trained to be. She works because we were well matched for pace and personality. **She works because together we are so much more than we would be without the other.**