

# Connection and Separation

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By Guiding Eyes

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A year after graduating with Guiding Eyes Alberta, I recognize the connection in our guide relationship, but also notice the moments of separation needed for our partnership.

The move from unfamiliarity to habit happened gradually. Days became weeks and then months of routine that wove us together: Park, feed, groom, exercise. Park, work, play. Park, feed, cuddle. Park, cuddle, sleep. Repeat.

That overwhelming blur of fur and licks and wags that filled my arms and my heart on Dog Day my fingers could now etch in the air. I know Alberta's compact cream-colored body with her desires and dislikes and work ethic as well as I know my own self.



Connections are many and complex. "She doesn't take her eyes off of you," says one observer. "Doesn't even turn her head to acknowledge other people or dogs," says another.

I feel Alberta's vigilance when she is in harness. She plots and picks our way through whatever might come next. When we stop, her presence is no more than a whisker away.

She listens. Alberta has learned the names of our usual destinations. "Dean's office, please." "Take me to the library." "Let's go home!" As comfortable with our routes as a longtime cab driver, Alberta guides me to the right place at a fast pace. She knows my habits and my hurry.

I've learned to read her too. Once settled in at a meeting, Alberta steps on my foot or noses my leg to remind me that she gets a cookie for her hard work in getting us here. I grumble about her treating me as a Pez dispenser, but reach in my pocket for the Charlee Bears that provide such payment.

When Alberta puts a paw on my knee and squeezes just so, I know that she is telling me that she needs to park NOW. I excuse myself from whatever else might be taking my attention and quickly attend to her needs.

At home, when she races to me, noses me and races off again, she's saying, "Come quick! There is someone at the door." The unusual, startlingly-deep "woof" signifies something odd that she more slowly leads me to check out: A door left open; a cat in the yard; a delivered package sitting on the porch.



However 'bonding' is defined, it is clear that we've achieved that.

But bonding is not just about being together. It also includes trust in being apart. At home, she prefers to doze on one of the dog beds scattered around the house than lay at my feet.

When a dog friend comes for a play date, Alberta would rather play chase, keep-away and tug in the yard while the humans talk inside. When we walk the beach, Alberta would rather swim in the bay than stroll at the surf's edge with me. As long as she thinks that I am safe in a human's care, she feels free to enjoy herself.

I've also learned that, like many young girls, Alberta loves slumber parties. Overnight visitors provide a change in routine. She likes extended time with another human or two, or with a human and visiting dog. If the guests are friendly with Alberta, or if they have visited before, I know that Alberta will ask if she can spend the night with them.

Her request is clear. As I close up the house for the night, Alberta is in a hurry for me to brush her teeth. She runs for her last chance to 'get busy.' Then, rather than padding into my bedroom to curl up on her bed next to mine, Alberta pauses in the hall. She nudges me and waits. Sometimes she dances in place as I say goodnight to my guests. Alberta listens for words that she understands.

"Okay, Alberta, you can go the guest room," elicits a quick lick before she races off to the novelty of a night with others. She hopes for a night on the people bed. As I settle in, I notice but don't mind her absence. I know that the next morning, Alberta will be eager to walk into her harness and out the door with me.

We are bonded more than we were a year ago. We are bonded less than we will be a year from now. We celebrate our first anniversary as partners.

