


Lifelong learning – and a little magic

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By Guiding Eyes

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by Guiding Eyes graduate Deni Elliott

In our first full calendar year together, Guiding Eyes Alberta and I have flown more than 100,000 air miles. We've walked well over 1,000 miles in harness. We exchange so many subliminal cues that we move as one unit. I think we look like a horse and rider in perfect dressage. "I'll take Den-Berta home," a friend announces as our group leaves a restaurant.

Yet, Alberta astounds me on a regular basis, as she demonstrates appropriate, even ingenious, behaviors that she figures out all on her own.

There was the day that the sky opened as we walked from a downtown errand back to my office. It was true tropical afternoon shower that wouldn't last long. But, the storm was instantaneous and intense. It would have been easier to measure the water coming down in buckets, rather than in inches. Alberta stopped at the corner across the street from my office, turning this way and that, but not moving forward. I could hear the water rushing wide, deep, and fast on both streets. Alberta knew there was no safe place for us to cross.

As I pondered what to do next, Alberta turned us around and purposefully led me back the way that we came. Mid-block she veered suddenly to the left, guiding us under the covered canopy of a parking garage. One more pivot in place and Alberta flopped into a soggy down and sighed. It was clear that she decided that we would wait out the storm right here. Five minutes later, the sun came out, steam rose from the wet pavement and the storm gutters drained to an easy-to-step-over trickle. "How did you know how to handle that?" I asked her as we walked on.

There was the day, walking home from school, when Alberta stopped mid-stride. I could find no over-hanging limb or other obstruction. But, Alberta was not willing to cross the grass to walk in the street either. No amount of urging persuaded her to cross the twigs that I could make out not far from our feet. Alberta danced in place, huffing and puffing, until the largest twig showed itself to be a long black snake stretched across the sidewalk and into the lawn strip that separated sidewalk and street. We waited a respectful distance for the snake to



slither her way far beyond our path. “Where did you learn not to step over snakes?” I asked, knowing that she was not troubled by the little lizards that run across the sidewalk as we work our way home.

And, there is the often-told family story of how Alberta gets my mother’s cat to ask for food. When Alberta and I visit, the cat’s kibble stays above the level that a Labrador can easily reach, until the cat demands to be fed. When the food is set down, Alberta watches from a respectful distance as the cat eats and then walks away. Once the food bowl is put back on the counter, no human objects to Alberta cleaning up dropped pieces of kibble.



Alberta never begs for cat food, but she does pressure the cat to do so. Here’s the routine: Alberta nudges the cat and then stares up at the cat’s food bowl, obviously expecting the cat to look where she is indicating. Alberta nudges the cat again. Stares up at the food. Nudges again. When the cat finally meows, either in hunger or annoyance at the Labrador shoving him around, someone puts the cat’s food dish back on the floor. The cat walks over to eat a few bites. Soon there are another half dozen tiny kibble bits for Alberta to clean up. I have no doubt that this indirect method of getting a food reward was not something learned at the puppy raiser’s or at the Guiding Eyes kennel.

What Alberta did learn at her puppy raiser’s home and in advanced training back at Guiding Eyes was far more important. Alberta learned how to think, critically and creatively. She was bred and born and trained to be a life-long learner. The commands that Alberta and I used at guide dog school were merely the foundation upon which she continues to learn – to the benefit of both of us.