

# And Thereby Hangs A Tale

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## AND THEREBY HANGS A TALE

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# contents

an uncommon love

9

1

so inevitably dog

13

2

presence is everything

25

3

it's almost like being in love

41

4

saint bernard

57

5

oh, how the world doth wag

75

6

if i love you, who cares what time it is?

93

7

stick your head out the window if you don't believe me

107

8

the joy of being who i am

121

9

if only i could love like that

141

10

and finally, it was my dogs who taught me to  
stop and smell, well, everything

163

epilogue

the incredible journey

179

notes

185

bibliography

189

# so inevitably dog

*Life achieves its summit when it does to the uttermost  
that which it was equipped to do.*

**JACK LONDON, *WHITE FANG***

*If a plant cannot live according to its nature,  
it dies; and so a man.*

**HENRY DAVID THOREAU  
*CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE***

**T**HERE WAS REAL MEDICINE IN THEM, and not only were they generous in the distribution of this medicine, they provided the sugar to help it go down. Love was easy. It had no conditions. It was untamed and uncivilized, as love should be. It was immediate and relevant, and it had no agenda but itself. And they never seemed to tire of it; time itself being the nonissue it was to them.

They took panic and severity from our lives and gave us back animation and color. They extended our playtime. They took the dullness out of things. They imposed their good sense of citizenship and bounce upon us, adding a buoyancy to our lives, elasticity and stretch. They taught us how to bound and bolt from our enclosures. They taught us to be curious, to be explorers, pioneers. They taught us not to care too much what others thought. Always tugging at the kid in me, they kept something young in our house.

They taught us the importance of a good nap and having a warm place in the sun. They taught us the importance of a good nose and to stretch first thing in the morning. There was no guesswork about their

devotion, and it was easy to be devoted to them in return. Something mutual grew between us—naturally, casually, and in daily installments. They suited our personalities, our temperaments, our own private need for belonging. They filled out our little circle of warmth. The dogs were an intimate part of us, and we grew together.

They taught us what little work devotion can be; that innocence lives by a faith it little thinks of and that needs little labor, if any, to sustain it. They showed us that nature in us *can* be redeemed and retrained; that unlearning, though difficult, may be necessary; that old dogs *can* be taught new tricks.

They have no plans to worry them. Everything is *now*. If you don't believe that, watch them eat. Immediacy is all.

Dogs have an indifference to wealth that is difficult to understand, as well as an indifference to trends and fashions of the hour. Celebrity means nothing to them. They are unmoved by the media.

Love was easy. It had no conditions. It was untamed and uncivilized, as love should be. It was immediate and relevant, and it had no agenda but itself.

They seem to live life authentically, in every moment, which is itself a form of worship, that is, living according to an original design and to the delight of the Creator of that design. A dog knows no other option, having no thought of or any real concept of tomorrow, taking life in with the wolfish gulp.

Outside of an occasional howl, whine, or whimper, a bark, growl, or pant, even the love croon, they had no audible language and therefore they had to *show* me their devotion outside of words, by the simple art of being themselves. They had to give devotion a shape that was louder, deeper, and truer than tongues.

Love was animated. It was conspicuous, playful, kind, without pretense. They could not hide what they felt. They saw little point in it. They were neither political nor guarded. They could not wrap themselves in protective coverings. They had not learned from us the art of disguising or suppressing what they felt. They were who they were. They accepted the mystery of me, the *other* I seemed to be to them. They didn't know how to question it, so they didn't bother.

Devotion for them was a way of life. And they made it look easy. I envied them, and yet the mirror they held up seemed to suggest possibilities—bright and hopeful possibilities that I might discover something similar about my own nature. That I too might live authentically, that I might live life as it was designed to be lived—at capacity, at full measures, and with fewer restraints. All this, and with love at the very heart of it, a love that becomes the undersong of life, as natural as breathing.

*For dogs, loyalty is the desire to be together with the loved one, to be where one belongs.*

JEFFREY MASSON  
*A DOG NEVER LIES ABOUT LOVE*

I prithee, sweet wag!

The homage we pay to the dog is nothing new. She has maintained a presence in literature consistently since man was first able to record his thoughts. I suspect that an image of the dog—or something like the dog—was painted on cave walls. It seems we can't get enough of them, these creatures that are so purely themselves and that love with such genuine effervescence.

The following passage was written not about a man or a woman in love, nor was it written about the mechanism of worship in the human heart, in spite of how precise an image it makes. It was written about a dog:

[Love] manifested itself to him as a void in his being—a hungry, aching, yearning void that clamored to be filled. It was a pain and an unrest; and it received easement only by the touch of the new god's presence. At such times love was joy to him, a wild, keen-thrilling satisfaction. But when away from his god, the pain and the unrest returned; the void in

him sprang up and pressed against him with its emptiness,  
and the hunger gnawed and gnawed unceasingly.

—JACK LONDON, *WHITE FANG*

This is not just another portrait of warmth and loyalty. The devoted life will ask much more than that. The springs of life are deep, and for too many of us, untouched. Life by toleration, not by enjoyment. Unaware there is anything more, we too often limit ourselves to the shallows and deny what is so very close to us—that which is perhaps one surrender, one small death beyond our reach.

Genuine love is severe. It is costly, the way as treacherous as it is narrow and steep. But we are not left to our own devices. Not trusting us to figure love out for ourselves, Christ showed us how it is to be done. Having botched it so completely as we are given to do, he showed us what love looks like, how it behaves, the submission it demands, the surrender it cannot do without. He came that we might see the divine within each of us; that we might know what authenticity means. At the cost of his own life, he bought back heaven for us, and with it bought back our truest humanity. There is no better image of love.

Outside of that, nature has given us the dog.

In the entire animal kingdom, the dog is the only creature who has dared to cross the threshold that separates her from a being totally unlike herself, the only creature that has made successful pilgrimage from one realm to another. Desire outweighed consequence. By some irrepressible magnetism, the dog alone overcame the obstacles, crossed the divide, and made herself a home there. And she did it for one reason: to be close to man. He was god, after all. Or at least the dog was convinced he was.

Man loves the dog, but how much more ought he to love it if he considered, in the inflexible harmony of the laws of nature, the sole exception, which is that love of a being that succeeds in piercing, in order to draw closer to us, the partitions, every elsewhere impermeable, that separate the species!...Amid all the forms of life that surround us, not one, excepting the dog, has made an alliance with us.

One animal alone, among all that breathes upon the earth, has



succeeded in breaking through the prophetic circle, in escaping from itself to come bounding toward us, definitely to cross the enormous zone of darkness, ice and silence that isolates each category of existence in nature's unintelligible plan.

—MAURICE MAETERLINCK, *OUR FRIEND THE DOG*

The devoted life is a pilgrimage, an incredible journey across a divide, across an “enormous zone of darkness, ice and silence.” I struggle against the elements that I might be close to him I love, that I might inhabit his world, that I might make a home there.



*The only one who can teach me to find  
God is God, Himself, Alone.*

THOMAS MERTON  
*NEW SEEDS OF CONTEMPLATION*



## beyond human likeness

Obviously, we are working within a playful, but nonetheless powerful metaphor, and the most effective metaphor, like music or perfume, works best by suggestion, not overthrow. Maybe the best way to learn is not to know we're being taught, where there are no exams, no monitors, no grades to worry us. Lessons learned in the simple and not-so-simple habit of living, the incidental kind, learned in love, love that has the naked power to bring out the tender and the best in each of us; love that asks something authentic from us; love that is not afraid to come out and play, to rally the child again; love that could be trusted because of an ancient fidelity in their animal blood, by an intelligence that grew between us, a faithfulness set like a law within them, the first commandment fixed in them like a code of life. When I dared to think the same conditions could exist between God and me, I understood their contentment.

Each of our dogs was unique. Each had their own distinct personality, their own separate set of demands, their own peculiar strengths,

requirements, and preferences. Each had their own measure of neediness and complications, their own peculiar arrangement of spots. In those things, they were pretty much like the rest of us. They were not perfect, any more than you and I are perfect. And long after this metaphor has spun itself out, we will still be talking about dogs, dogs that, at times, do disgusting dog things. Nonetheless, each of them possessed an enviable spirit.

In the beginning we had one dog—a Dalmatian. We named her Oreo. She was a great dog, and that was the problem. After three or so years of her, we wanted more. We wanted a whole houseful of what she gave to us. Love with that much bounce is rare indeed. In time, we bred her with a distant cousin, a prizewinner named London. We kept two of the ten puppies that followed—one male and one female we named Salem and Savannah.

After all the cuteness wore off, and as they grew, we quickly learned that three is not one. Something changed. They became more recognizably animal, less like us. There were different rules—rules we all had to learn and accept, different dynamics, pack laws, tribal imperatives that were not present with just one dog.

The springs of  
life are deep, and  
for too many of  
us, untouched.

One dog alone is fairly civilized, tranquil. Three is a sitcom. Oreo, who had shown profound devotion and attachment, what might easily be called *worship* when she was the only dog, was now competing for place. Her psychology seemed to change. We could sense her frustration in the shuffle. It was easy to feel we had lost something of her in the addition of the other two, but these were only appearances. Truth is, she had love enough to meet the needs of her new role as pack matriarch and that of loving devotee.

Even so, my wife, Benita, and I could tell Oreo grieved the slight distance between us that motherhood seemed to impose on her. But with nature duly aroused, she was a good mom: an attentive, patient mom who lived according to script, especially in the early weeks of motherhood when she was host to a sort of king-of-the-mountain, eight-is-not-enough kind of puppy brawl. Still, her eyes gave her away.

*"I want to be with you," they said, "but at the moment I'm providing dinner for ten."*

Does that rob us of our metaphor? Not in the least. Something was enhanced by the change. Community was engaged.

Though their first devotion was to us, the dogs were devoted to each other as well. They almost seemed to mimic us. Of course, I never scrapped with my sons or my wife over a bowl of food or a place to sleep, and we only occasionally hoarded our toys. But beyond that, the dogs got their cues from us. All three of them were warm, protective, and generous in their love. They were trusting, gentle, and uncommonly devoted—things that could be said of any one of us in our household. Although I didn't think about it at the time, they demonstrated another powerful element of the devoted life: *identification with the master*. We mimic what we love.

With all the changes, with all the upheaval and revolution in our little country of seven, devotion remained the first order among all of us. Oreo seemed to favor our son Shad. He was four. Maybe it was her awakened maternity that made her protective over the smallest of us. Maybe it was his height, so much closer to her own. Salem had this crush on Benita that was obvious. To Savannah, I was god.

Adam, our oldest son, who was 11 at the time, was a source of fascination to them. His youth, his own alpha standing with his brother, his assertiveness, his own bounce, even his aloofness; these things endeared him to all three of the dogs. It was a real treat for Adam to give them attention.

Their devotion was truly beyond human likeness, and their method of teaching me was so subtle that in the mutual adoration that grew and prospered among us I was not aware that *I* had become the student in this school of love.

• • • • •  
*Dogs register no need to theorize about love (or about anything else for that matter), they just show it.*

JEFFREY MASSON  
*DOGS NEVER LIE ABOUT LOVE*

• • • • •

## our little plot of eden

As sweet and as memorable as those times were, they couldn't last. The canine life span is regrettably brief. Time and inevitability eventually caught up with our little plot of Eden. Life sped by us, as it does, and in its wake left only one dog: Savannah. After 12 years with the three of them, it came down to her.

It was a crisp December afternoon. There were no clouds in the sky, and other than a slight chill, sorrow seemed to have no place in such a day. They went together. Oreo and Salem had developed an observable attachment to each other over the years, so this was the only justice we could find in the whole messy thing.

Christmas was one week away. My father had died less than a year before. The wound was still raw and unsettled, and whatever grief I had suppressed, evaded, denied, buried, or sublimated for my dad got flushed to the surface again, and in full measure. It came back to me clearly, uninvited and undiminished, the ghost of Christmas past, as if it wasn't finished with me. It was relentless. I was a child again. I was blind with grief. The pain was like nothing I had felt before.

These dogs lived and moved in our intimate circle. They were a part of us. Oreo had been the pioneer who brought us to the new world. They had summoned the boy in me and allowed me to know him again, to retrace my steps. They taught my boys how to care, how to lead, how to accept love, and how to exchange it without conditions and without reserve. They taught us all lessons of belongingness.

Love is the highest  
praise we may  
offer to God.

I felt guilty for having to make the awful decision concerning two sick dogs. I felt guilty as well for putting that decision off again and again, making the two of them suffer one more day, hoping Oreo might go quietly in her sleep or that Salem's arthritis might respond to my prayers, that we might not hear him cry in the night. I had not realized until those approaching moments just how attached I was to them, just how deep the investments were among all of us.

Recovery took days, but when I surfaced at last, Savannah was my one solace. She was now alone and had free rein in our world.

But it wasn't the adjustment you might think. Even when the three of them were together, she was separate somehow, excluded in a dog sort of way.

Savannah had one attachment. It was animal clear, and she made it obvious to all of us, including the other two dogs. She had one love, one true master, one deity of sorts, and it happened to be me. Understanding nothing of English outside of a few commands, which she hardly obeyed anyway, she nonetheless provided the metaphor that drives this little book. Though Oreo and Salem will make appearances again and again, the remainder of this tale is all hers.

The change was abrupt, the void conspicuous. Savannah grieved in her own private dog way. We knew that. But whatever heaviness, whatever her state of mind, it didn't take much time at all after that bitter December for Savannah to adjust to her new status as family dog. There was suddenly no competition for food, water, toys, attention, or anything else. She liked the new arrangement. And she had me all to herself. We detected a kind of bewilderment at first, a slip of suspicion as mild as it was fleeting, a good head-tilting, ear-raising, *this-is-too-good-to-be-true* kind of misgiving. As if the other two had died, and she went to heaven.

Their sermons were not loud, but they were effective. In time we heard every one of them. It is my hope that you will too, that they might encourage the lover in each of us, the lover that is synonymous with the name "Christian"; that you and I might live according to our original blueprint; that we might love without condition or impediment, for *love is the highest praise we may offer unto God*, love that mirrors him who is love.<sup>1</sup> That we might know the hunger that searches for him at daybreak, that determines the course of all our waking hours, right down to the God-winning moments, until we make our little circles, flop down to bed, and draw the last long sigh of night.

### a work of rediscovery

The great suggestion here is that the devoted life is not only possible, but that it may be more natural to us than we first suspected. Christianity is about so many things. Maybe too many things. We make faith too much work, more than it has to be. We have given it too

many names and raised too many arguments. We have lost that sense of desperation that gave Christianity a beginning. Our dependence has lost the immediacy and the depth it once had. We have exchanged human warmth and connectivity for religion, reducing much of it to the maintenance of an argument or an agenda. The devoted life can give us redemption from these things.

Dogs may typically outlove us; they may be more conspicuous and more liberal in their demonstration of that love; their company might even be preferred over yours or mine at times, but there is at least one thing that can never be said of them. You and I are endowed with something far beyond them, something that separates us from all creation. *You and I are made in the image of God.* We reflect him. We mirror him like no other creature. And God is love. Therefore, *not* to love, *not* to live the devoted life, the surrendered life, is *not* to reflect that image, is *not* to be like him, is *not* to live according to our deeper nature, is *not* to be our true selves at all.



*To say that I am made in the image of God is to say that love is the reason for my existence, for God is love. Love is my true identity. Selflessness is my true self. Love is my true character.*

THOMAS MERTON  
NEW SEEDS OF CONTEMPLATION



There is a work of rediscovery before us. It will involve learning and unlearning, doing and undoing. It will mean unraveling the tight weave of habit and all binding threads, all the fictions of our lives, the many household myths that war against the heart and distance us from our God. This is as true for our private household as it is for the household of faith.

It will mean asking reason to step down from its high place. It will mean responding to love's least request of us, perhaps another death inward, another selfless act, small or large, hidden or public. It will mean we become yielding, pliant, that we become lower maintenance, that we might find new measures of trust and surrender within, things understood only in love. That we might find honor in

tenderness again, in meekness, in selflessness so contrary to the age and to the high church of man. That we might rediscover the authority in gentleness again, the sovereignty in a single act of kindness. That we might sit at the master's feet for hours, asking nothing, making no prayer but life itself.

Finally, in spite of the fun I'm having with this and the fun I hope you will have in the coming pages, I know dogs well enough not to speak too anthropomorphically of them, to make them look and act too much like you and me, to append too much of our own shapes and characteristics to them. The metaphor will stretch only as much as it needs to. And besides, to make them appear too human, well, that would be unfair to the dogs.

● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● as we embark ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●

I want to live the devoted life, to live life according to your original design, Lord. I am a world whose true discovery is yet to be. Call forth what is authentic in me, what may have been lost in my distractions, set aside, or forgotten. Set worship adrift in me. Awaken my heart, the Eden sleeping in me. I submit to all my teachers, to those you have set before, around, and above me, seen and unseen, including those I may have ignored or overlooked. I submit to the wonders of creation—to the earth and skies, to the rush and shuffle of day, and to the dark catechesis of night. Let none be silent on my behalf. I will listen for instruction. I will suffer their gentle rebuke that I may find the rule of life, that I may discover my authentic self and possess the very knowledge I sought for so long in my misbelief. Let worship flourish; let it prosper in me. Let it filter into the very lengths and limits of me, into the full sum of who I am. I will soften under your teaching.

In Christ, all that love has to say to me. Amen.



*May love give you access to the higher instincts within you,  
those we share with divinity,  
that we may have lost in our distractions  
or in our attempts to explain.*