

THERAPY DOG TEAM

Q&A with Sue Halpern, author of *A Dog Walks into a Nursing Home*

By Annik La Farge

IN 2009, HER DAUGHTER AWAY AT SCHOOL AND HUSBAND traveling the world for work, Sue Halpern found herself in a quiet home, and restless. Pransky, her seven-year-old dog, was bored. Both were ready for a new engagement. Halpern wondered: could Pransky call on her Labrador and Poodle roots and become a service dog? Could they work together to bring joy to some new corner of their world?

Author of five books and dozens of articles for leading publications, Halpern turned to an expansive library, delving into everything from Aristotle to Temple Grandin. After a rigorous—and occasionally hilarious—training regimen, the two became a certified therapy team and soon were making weekly rounds at a local nursing home. Halpern recounts the story in her new book, *A Dog Walks into a Nursing Home: Lessons in the Good Life from an Unlikely Teacher*. She spoke to Annik La Farge about their adventure.



La Farge: At the heart of this book is the idea that dogs love—and even need—to work, just as humans do. Pransky was a bit bored before she found her calling as a therapy dog; how did working change things for her, and what turned out to be her special gift?

Halpern: Pransky is a social animal, like most dogs. She loves to be around people and she loves to be around dogs, but most of the time, she just gets to be around me, which is not so interesting. When I say, “Today is a work day!” or “Do you want to get dressed for work?” she perks up and gets quite excited. Tuesday, the day we go to the nursing home, orients her week. I don’t know if it would be too anthropomorphic to say that she looks forward to it, but it sure seems so. Her

special gift—and I’d argue that this is not really special to her, but to all therapy dogs, which doesn’t make it any less special—is the joy she brings with her and spreads around. Pransky is an enthusiast. She’s always happy to see you. Her (self-controlled) exuberance is infectious.

La Farge: Death is a constant presence in a nursing home, and you write about it with real poignancy. How does it affect Pransky?

Halpern: On a day-to-day basis, I don’t think it does affect her. But when someone is actively dying—a situation we’ve only encountered three times in four years—her compassion is visible. It’s something I write about in the book, and something I’ve found quite moving. Most of the time, though, she’s unconcerned by people’s infirmities, which is a gift. She lets people be their essential selves, which has nothing to do with being sick or being old. When they’re with her, they can forget that they had a stroke or have diabetes or a heart condition.

Annik La Farge: Your book left me interested in putting my own dog to work as a therapy dog. What advice would you give us? How does a person know if she and her dog will make a good team?

Sue Halpern: For years, I thought Pransky would make an excellent therapy dog because she was smart, attentive, open and loving, which are necessary attributes, but I also knew that she was a bit too playful. I had to wait until I knew I could absolutely count on her to do the right thing—to not go frolicking down the hall if I accidentally

dropped her leash, for instance. She always had the right temperament, she just had to grow into it completely, which seemed to happen when she was around five. I think you’ll know, instinctively, if your dog will do well in a therapeutic setting because you’ve watched him or her interact with people of all ages, sizes and conditions. Pransky has always been one of those dogs who sits patiently while small children pull her tail. And she never jumps up on people. Jumping is a therapy-dog sin.

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La Farge: I loaned your book to a friend who works with dogs for a living. Interestingly, what most captivated her was your description of life in a nursing home; she was relieved to see this institution, which fills most of us with dread, humanized—and by a dog, no less. What’s the takeaway here for institutions, and for professionals who care for the sick and aging?

Halpern: I entered the nursing home with a certain amount of trepidation and was shocked to find out how much fun it was to be there with my dog. By the end of our first day, most of my preconceptions were blown to bits, which was a very good thing, since most of my preconceptions were not only wrong, they were grim. The literature on the positive effects that dogs (and other animals) have in hospitals and nursing homes is getting more robust every year. Dogs lighten the mood for everyone, staff included. Pransky dispenses the best medicine there is, indiscriminately and without a co-pay.

La Farge: The first part of the book is about what you teach Pransky—the complex matrix of training and behaviors required for a professional therapy dog. What did she end up teaching you?

Halpern: My dog has taught me that with her by my side, I can do things that my normally reticent self would

I don’t know if dogs, because they live with people, not only take on the appearance of their owners but acquire human attributes as well, and I don’t know if the moral calculus of animals operates within the same parameters as ours. I do know that some dogs, like some people, when called upon, exhibit great courage, and that courage always has been counted, by philosophers and theologians, among the virtues. I would like to believe that my dog would be quick to run into a burning building to rescue a stranded child, just like I’d like to believe that I would, too, but how could we know until the building was on fire? That is the mystery of courage: it lies dormant until a situation calls upon it. Fortitude is something else altogether. To me it suggested endurance, though it is possible that in finding examples of fortitude in the ways that County residents held on and carried on against the odds—in Dottie’s calm acceptance of her deafness and isolation, in Clyde’s flirtations and in Fran’s current events club of one, to name just a few—I was simply putting a gloss on frailty and loss. Maybe spending time at County with Pranny was making me a glass-half or even -three-quarters-full kind of person. Maybe I was becoming more like my dog.

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never be able to do, like spend time with infirm strangers. But more importantly, and somewhat paradoxically, she’s taught me that by following her lead and being more like her—which is to say, not seeing people as a collection of disabilities, but simply as potential friends—I become a better human. ☺



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