

# Losing sight of What matters.

by Maryanne Pope

*It's a funny thing about life. If you refuse to settle for anything less than the best, that's what it will give you.*

—W. Somerset Maugham

**M**y dog, Sable – a long-haired German Shepherd cross – taught me many valuable life lessons over the years. Developing a strong sense of self-worth, however, was the most important one . . . because so much else hinges upon that.

Sable passed away on February 10th, 2011 at the age of thirteen. She was deaf and blind by that point but up until her final hours, still smiling and chock full of life, despite significant health issues over the past three years. Her passing was graceful and beautiful, just like her, and although my heart ached when the time came to say good-bye, I knew our journey together had come to an end. Understanding all that I had learned from her, however, was just beginning.

Sable first came into my life as a seven week old puppy – a belated wedding gift to us from a friend to my husband, John. When John, a police officer, passed away in the line of duty three years later, Sable became my companion through grief. Six months later, Soda, a matching Shepherd cross, joined us. Slowly but surely my heart began to heal as I learned to live in a world without John.

Eight years later, however, I began to veer off track and got another nasty wake-up call. "Let's see . . ." said the Universe hypothetically. "What shall we do this time around to get Maryanne's attention? Ah yes, let's threaten to take away — again — that which she loves the most."

So there I lay, a week before my fortieth birthday, on the floor of the ICU visiting room at the emergency vet hospital, holding Sable's paw as she slowly bled to death from internal haemorrhaging that had started after minor surgery and was continuing for unknown reasons. She was ten.

Then, just like that — there on the floor of the animal hospital — my mind took me back eight years to the ICU at the human hospital, holding John's hand as he passed away. As I recalled this horrific memory, it occurred to me that, metaphysically-speaking, I had been 'here' before . . . as in, I'd done the ICU-moment, shed the tears, got the t-shirt, lost half a decade to grief, had gone through a couple hundred grand, and learned the lessons.

Or had I? For if I'd learned all there was to learn about losing a loved one (before the natural end of his or her life) then I probably wouldn't be back here for a re-test.

"Fine," I said out loud to the Universe (via the walls of the vet hospital). "I'll

make you a deal: if you let Sable live, things will change. I'll change."

Otherwise known as bargaining in psychological circles, I prayed for a miracle in exchange for some behaviour modification.

Sable's miracle came in the form of the antibiotic Doxycycline — which would make sense if it was an infection that was causing Sable to bleed in the first place. But despite extensive testing, there was no evidence of either. Still, it seemed Doxycycline saved the day and my damn-near-death dog bounced back for another three years of life.

But the countdown on the cosmic clock to February 10, 2011 had begun.

In exchange for more time with Sable, I promised whoever was listening I would slow down enough to learn a thing or two from her mysterious haemorrhaging. And I did. I learned the very difficult lesson that self-loathing is what results from grief that has been allowed to fester — and, just like Sable's internal bleeding and external bruising, by the time we actually notice the damaging effects of the resultant low self-worth on the surface of our lives, a massive amount of internal damage has already occurred.

Yet once I'd "learned" this lesson — as in becoming aware of the underlying causes leading to behaviour that wasn't conducive to an authentic life, but not necessarily changing said behaviour in any significant way — I sped up again. For, as is often the way, once our immediate crisis passes, we more or less return to normal.

Normal?

My casual use of that word should have been the first clue that the Universe might feel the need to step up the learning curve a bit — for my "normal" was, in fact, insanity. An insane work schedule. An insane social



*Bonnnngggg! went the cosmic clock again*

schedule. Insane writing deadlines. Insane workload. Insane amounts of demands on my time. Insanely low standards of how I allowed men to treat me (so much for learning the self worth lesson). Insane amounts of debt. Insanely big home to care for. Insane amounts of people in my life.

I was so busy trying to keep up to the demands of a life that had evolved out of good intentions, obligation, and guilt, that I'd completely lost sight of the life I wanted to live.

Bonnnngggg! went the cosmic clock when it struck again one year later. In the winter of 2009, Sable went blind in her left eye due to glaucoma; high blood pressure in the eye.

Six months later, in November 2009, I waved the white flag of surrender on my chaotic life in Calgary and made the decision to sell my home and move to BC. I suspect the Universe wasn't going to take any chances of me slipping back into my old ways and simply replicating my unsustainable Calgary life in BC — for Bonnnngggg! went the cosmic clock again and, one year after Sable lost vision in her first eye, she lost the sight in her second eye . . . one week before the movers arrived to pick up my belongings.

The high blood pressure culprit that led to Sable's blindness now threatened to send my stress level through the roof. How was I possibly going to look after a blind dog and still ensure all twelve thousand pounds of stuff was packed up and ready to go?

I did three things. First, I hauled out the old metal fold-up gate that John and I used to put up around the Christmas tree when Sable was a pup and used it as a barrier in the kitchen to keep Sable away from the stairs. Second, I asked for help and got it: without my brothers, I wouldn't have met the deadline. Third, I focused on my priorities: keeping Sable safe and getting the house packed up. Everything else fell to

the wayside.

In retrospect, it's odd that I wasn't willing or able to implement these key strategies into my daily life — putting barriers/boundaries in place, asking for help, and focusing on priorities — for more than a decade and yet, when I was forced to learn these practical lessons within a ten-day period, both for Sable and my future, I did so.

Once I'd settled into my new digs in BC and began to master the art of caring for an elderly blind dog, the inevitable slower pace brought with it the opportunity to reflect back on my Calgary life in the decade since John's death. There, I worked — in one form or another — all the time.

Plus, I'd lived in fear of the phone ringing, dreading the next demand placed on my time. What now would be asked of me that would take me away, yet again, from what I really wanted to be doing: writing and spending time with Sable and Soda? Maybe the more important question to have asked myself would have been: why couldn't I say no?

Well, I'm asking it now — for that's an entire decade I'll never get back.



At first, I blamed the people in my life. Clearly, they did not value my time or the work I was trying to accomplish. Upon closer inspection, however, I began to suspect that if that was the case, then that was probably because I didn't value these things.

Ouch.

Because John died on the job, I receive his paycheque, and then pension, for the rest of my life. John's death gave me the financial freedom to pursue my writing dream. But, paradoxically, because I didn't "have" to work, I ended up working ridiculously long hours and often refused to take payment for my efforts. Which begs the question: what had I been trying to prove?

My self-worth.

With this revelation, it occurred to me my time might be better spent developing a sense of self-worth again – outside of work – rather than trying to prove its existence to everyone else. Sure enough, slowing down with Sable helped me find my way back to my old self and all the enjoyable activities I used to love to do – hiking, gardening, swimming, walking on the beach, eating, camping, road trips, reading in the hammock or on the couch – before I turned into a task-obsessed, joyless workaholic.

I began to have fun again. What a concept! Sable, Soda and I explored our new neighbourhood and the nearby beaches, lakes and forests. We went wilderness camping, where I awoke to see Sable lying on her back, wedged between the side of the tent and the edge of the air mattress with all four legs sticking up in the air!

Then, in December 2010, two months before Sable passed away, the cosmic clock struck again when she started bleeding from her nose – and scarcely stopped for three weeks. That is a lot of blood to contend with . . . and since the BC vets were just as mystified by Sable's external bleed as the Calgary vets had been by her internal one, I figured there might be a spiritual lesson to be learned by yours truly. Interestingly, that lesson turned out to be to stop giving my money away!

For while I was traipsing about BC, I was also still paying people to, unsuccessfully, market my writing. Intellectually, I may have grasped the self-worth lesson but financially, I was being . . . bled dry.

Why? Because, deep down, I believed the income I receive from John's death was blood money and therefore, whether it was in the currency of time or cash, I'd been subconsciously determined to give it away.

Sable, on the other hand, knew how to receive. She knew her worth. Sable knew the level of love and attention she deserved and she got it from me – every single day of her life.

I miss my furry, four-footed demanding diva with the beautiful smile and oh-so-discerning palette. But as Soda and I learn to live without her, I know the best part of Sable – and John – didn't die and never will. That's the beauty of love. **ca**

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