

NARRATIVES BY MAX AND FRED

These two pieces were "written" by Fred and Max with help from their human typists, Lauren Singer and Mardy Sitzer, respectively. Fred wrote his narrative as a way of helping Lauren deal with the death of her father, Dr. Bernie Singer. Max wrote his narrative to describe how he helped Mardy recover from a home invasion.

Lauren's Introduction: I have multiple sclerosis and am unable to walk now. I have come back to live at home. My father was my security and steadied me when I wobbled. My mother was totally bereft and I knew that I had to separate my grieving from hers. I had to find my space to grieve. I have a wonderful service dog. His name is Fred and I have used him as a device when writing. I have written a book through Fred's eyes, looking at my life with multiple sclerosis. I wanted to introduce disability to children in the least threatening way. Fred is a lovable dog and he "writes" with humor and lightness. He has written a



Fred. Photograph by Lauren Singer.

book which has been published and has sold very well. He is in the middle of writing his second book. I find writing tremendously healing. I can, sort of, move out of myself. Whatever I write is real and true. The manner in which my father passed away was remarkable. In his death lay healing and love, but it needed to be acknowledged. There was no fear, there was no anger. Fred has been my device before. He is love without trappings. What you will read is true. I observed Fred and tried to understand what I saw. In the end, what I wrote was how I felt too. But Fred can express it better than I.

Fred's Story

It is with a heavy heart that I come to tell you the saddest of my stories. Life at home has changed and Lauren has changed and my work has had to change. Change. I can eat my Hills food twice a day and I don't get bored. My heart still thrills when I hear the clink of the chain on my lead. I love the regularity of my life but something has happened to shake the very foundation of the home I live in.

It all started very slowly. I remember sitting next to Lauren in the lounge as she spoke to Dad. They were both very serious. "I love you, Dad," she said in a very sad voice and Dad stood up and gave her a kiss on her head. I could sense their sorrow and I moved closer to Lauren. I could feel the change, the slight shimmer of fear and uncertainty. But before I go on, let me tell you more about Dad.

When I came to live with the Singers, I quickly came to know Lauren and Ma. But

Dad was inscrutable. Beyond manipulation. "Good boy," he would say as he patted me on my head or my chest. If I barked too long or too loud, Dad would shout, "What does he want? Lauren, control him."

Control me? Good heavens. Surely he had noticed the wonderful game Lauren and I play.

He did recognize the fundamental role I played in Lauren's life. "You can't believe the change in Lauren since she got Fred," he was fond of telling people. His voice would change when he said that. He had a strong voice. He would brook no insolence and would waste no words. I am fond of barking and have acute hearing. If anyone walks down the road or if a dog barks a block away, I will hear and will want to go outside to find out more. I cannot unlock the door, let alone open the door. So it is obvious that I rely on the people in the house I live in to let me in and out at my command and whim.

Dad would shout with a voice like thunder, "I'll let him out, but I'm not letting him in."

"Whenever he's out, he wants in, and whenever he's in, he wants out," Ma would nod sagely, agreeing.

I never let that upset me. I never stayed out in the rain. And anyway, Lauren, "The Fusspot," always saw to it that my wants were catered to.

But Dad could be fun too. I love hearing Lauren laugh and she and Dad often sat together and giggled. Wonderful. And I would join in. "Quiet!" would come the order. What? I just wanted to be part of the group.

Dad could be my co-conspirator as well. My love of serviettes and tissues has become legendary. He knew that I craved them and just sometimes his hand would drop by his side and he would urgently whisper, "Fred, Fred, come here." And I would run to his side and grab the proffered serviette. I would grab it quickly, hearing Lauren's admonishment float uselessly over my head.

Dad was strong. Once he saved me from two angry Rottweilers when I was barely out of puppyhood. They attacked me in our garden but Dad yelled at them and they ran away. He would come in after a day at work full of energy.

"Hello," he would call when he opened the front door and then said, "Hello, Fred," and gave me a pat when I bounded up to greet him. He would come home after climbing the mountain on a Saturday afternoon, smelling of fynbos and soil and sweat. Often, his legs were scratched and bloody because he was a keen climber and would scramble over rocks and through any bush that got in his way. I tried to lick him clean but he always pushed me away. Then, slowly things began to change.

He didn't climb the mountain anymore. He and Ma would go for a walk together, arm in arm. He became thinner and his legs weren't so powerful anymore. He needed a stick to walk with. Then, one day he walked in from outside and I heard Lauren cry, "Daddy, Daddy, are you alright?" Dad had fallen and needed to be helped into Lauren's wheelchair.

This was strange. Dad's voice no longer boomed. I was very used to Dad's smell, but there was something new. It was a smell I had never encountered before. I know that Lauren is not well, but I know what multiple sclerosis smells like.

This was different.

I must help him, I thought. Something is happening. Dad needs my help, but what can I do? Perhaps if I loved him even more, perhaps if I focused my love on him, he would get better. That's what I will do. So when he sat in the dining room or in the TV room, I would sit close by and stare at him. I looked at him and tried and tried to send him my love, which surely would heal him.

"Stop looking at me," Dad would say. He knew. Deep inside he knew why I needed to look at him and what I was smelling and feeling. He was not well, but with every fiber of his being he was fighting the bravest fight. He could save me from the angry Rottweilers with his booming voice but that was nothing compared to the fight he was waging.

Then, one Friday he said the afternoon and evening prayers and then the Kiddush (blessing) over the wine. He called Lauren over to give her the traditional blessing a father gives to his child. He kissed her on her head and then he and Lauren spoke together. No one paid me any attention. And I didn't push

for attention. This was a precious time not meant for me.

Then, Sunday morning came. Dad was lying in his bed. Ma was in the room and so was Lauren. We're here, Daddy," Lauren said, stroking Dad gently. The doctor came in with a Siddur (prayer book) and began reading a prayer. Ma sat by Dad's side and held his hand and kissed him.

"Say the Shema," Gary the doctor said and Lauren quietly whispered the prayer and a psalm and then the doctor said that Dad had gone. Ma still held onto him. She and Lauren cried and I stood silently by Lauren's side. I sniffed and my nose twitched. This was different. I walked to where Ma was sitting by Dad and I sniffed again. I stood for a moment and saw a tissue that had fallen on the floor.

"Thanks, Dad." I picked up the tissue and quickly ran out of the room.

Yes, things are forever changed.

Lauren Singer's service dog, Fred, was trained by the South African Guide Dogs Association. He has written a book that is a best seller in South African terms, titled *Fred at Your Service, Ma'am: Reminiscences of a Service Dog*. Lauren, Fred, and her new dog Pepper have numerous speaking engagements to teach preprimary through high school students about living with chronic illness. All comments regarding this article can be sent to: renski@iafrica.com

Mardy's Introduction: I was brutally attacked in a home invasion, leaving me mentally devastated, with my life in shambles, and scars that ran deeper than any flesh wound. The overwhelming emotions led me to acquire a large dog in hopes that he would keep me safe. Little did I know that this dog would transform my life. Because of the challenges of recovering and the devastation from his passing, I was only able to share this story by telling it from my dog's point of view. Odd as that may seem to others, it was healing for me to pay him the respect and give him thanks he deserved for a life well lived and a job well done. Sharing my story in this manner also allows others to experience the

opportunities for personal growth and healing when you have a relationship with one of these amazing animals, even if for a moment. The story of this rescued German Shepherd that I renamed from Blood to Max is titled "Things I Taught My Master" because even though I was the "master" of the dog, he became my masterful teacher of life, not only helping me to get back in it, but to be better because of it.



Max. Photograph by Mardy Sitzer

Max's Story:

Things I Taught My Master

When I first met Mardy in 1993, she was as much of a mess as I was. A college professor on his way to school one day found me. He brought me back to his home and ran an ad to find me a place to live. It seems that when he called the ASPCA to tell them I had been found, there was something on my collar that informed them that I was a runaway from an abusive home and they thought I might do better elsewhere.

As I said, Mardy was a mess. I didn't know her story, but I could tell that she needed me. Once I got back to her place, making myself comfortable was easy. She seemed so willing to go with the flow of my ever-increasing demands. I realized how easy it would be to train her and so I calmed down, settled in, and focused on my master's lessons.

First, I needed to make her feel safe. That was relatively easy. After all, a 125-pound German Shepherd with a bark that creates sheer terror should do the job. I used to hear her say that she had trouble sleeping – that must have been before I got here. She slept as if she were in a coma, which made waking her up a challenge. Sometimes “harrumphing” would do it and sometimes I would have to bark. There were times that nothing less than pulling off the covers or a good whack upside the head with my nearly three-inch paw would be the only way to get her to move. After all, my 4:30 AM exercise session of “ball toss and fetch” was critical to her training.

I remained a loyal companion so that she would feel safe. I worked to give her a sense of stability through ritual and regular tasks. We had other tasks such as bathing and brushing, which were more like Zen-yoga exercises, but it built up her muscles and did wonders for my coat.

My next big task was to level out her behavior. She needed to remain calm and less erratic, so I decided that this lesson would be best taught through an ancient method of mirroring. My behavior was “*pari passu*” to hers. I responded to her every mood and energy level as if I were a mirror she could look into. In this manner, I was able to show her when she was stressed out. When she was depressed, I would enroll her to get busy with my caretaking so that she didn’t have time to stew. I made her go out for regular walks, which prevented her from hiding from the world as she seemed inclined to do in those days.

The next big lesson was building confidence. That turned out to be more complex than this old dog would have thought. It got confusing because I was trying to protect her, but that often caused anxious worrying that I might cause trouble. So I curtailed my aggressive behavior and slowly she became more confident that we were okay out there together. I also needed to give her confidence about talking to people. I don’t think she was shy but she seemed worried about talking to people. I was a great magnet as most everyone looked at me twice. Soon enough, she knew everyone and every dog in the neighborhood

and had to talk to each one of them. Getting anywhere when I was with her became a real problem.

I calmed Mardy, trained her to regain trust and confidence, and so my next big lesson was to teach her to strike out on her own. I had a plan for this all along so that she would stay at home with me all day. I really didn’t enjoy long hours at home alone and having her start a business at home would work great for both of us. Getting her started was not easy. It was that confidence thing again and something about money. So I gave her the idea to do a newsletter for a pet store so that she could barter for food and treats for me. At least I would be fed and we would worry about the rent and her food later. Well, her business took off, and the rest is history.

The last lessons were to teach her to open up and to let go. First, I worked on the open up part. We met Rob and after checking him out, I decided that he was a good catch for her so I did not maim, maul, or threaten him. I even tried to be friendly so he would come over more often. Jeez, I even shared part of the bed with him from time to time and let me tell you that this is not easy for an old dog – giving up his side of the bed!

Mardy opened up and let Rob in. As a matter of fact, he moved in last winter. Once I was certain that things would work, I was able to begin the last phase of training – letting go.

Walking and climbing the stairs was getting to be too much for me, so we decided that I would spend some time in Baltimore with her folks, my loving grandparents. They have a nice big back yard with bushes to pee in and lots of grass and leaves to lie in. Their neighborhood has parks to walk to and life there is good. So I spent the better part of six months there relaxing and having a great time with the family. By the way, the food there was far more plentiful and my grandmother would even serve me my meals outside if I so desired.

Grandpop Saul and I really bonded. It was a guy thing. We shared war stories, compared battle wounds, and every day we’d go out for walks – strutting our stuff, checking out the

babes and pups in the neighborhood. Like I said, it was kind of a guy thing.

On Mardy's last visit to Baltimore, I realized that it was time to begin the final phase of the final lesson. Sunday, December 5, 1999, was my last day on earth. Dog heaven is the front yard to the heaven all of you speak about. We pets hang out there waiting for you guys to show up. No rush. We have no concept of time. We don't forget you anymore than you forget us. I was handsomely rewarded for my loyalty and companionship and I hope that the lessons I taught my master remain learned in my absence.

Mardy Sitzer is currently a member of a pet partner team with Pilot, her standard poodle. Together, they visit hospitals, nursing homes, and psychiatric lock down units in New York City. Comments regarding this article can be sent to: mardy@bumblebeelc.com

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