

When Letting Go is the Only Path to Healing – The Story of Tucker and Aggression in Dogs

by Dawn E. Hayman



I kept thinking, “this just can’t be happening.” But it was happening and at an alarming speed as if I couldn’t make sense of anything. My 20-month-old Golden Retriever/Border Collie mix, Tucker, was standing in front of me with the softest eyes as the veterinarian showed us his radiographs on the monitor. “There is a foreign body obstruction in his intestine. Nothing but surgery can fix this”, he told us. But I knew surgery wasn’t an option for Tucker. Our options had run out. He looked at me with those loving, soft eyes and spoke straight to my heart. “Its ok to let me go now. I can’t do this anymore.” The words came out of me as if I were watching someone else say them. “We have to euthanize.” The vet knew this was a possibility if what we found on the radiograph confirmed what he thought he felt on exam. He quietly nodded and prepared the space for Tucker. Ten minutes later, as we held him in our arms, he was gone. My heart felt like it was going to explode with grief. I wanted to run outside and scream. I knew Tucker was free at last from

the past 18 months of hell he lived in. I could feel his freedom and joy. I knew it was the right thing to do. But all I could feel was that I just killed my best friend. A beautiful, vibrant, healthy young dog lay motionless before me on the floor and that was the only vision I could remember when I thought of him. Yet, Tucker was so much more than that and deserved to be remembered for his love and light and life, rather than for his pain and torment. It was a hell we walked through together. I knew someday that I could share his story, our story, and help others who were going through the same thing. You see, Tucker wasn’t euthanized because of the obstruction in his intestine, we could have fixed that with surgery. But I had to make the decision to euthanize him due to aggression that was getting worse and worse as he grew older. Nothing we could do, and we tried many things, could set him free from the hell he lived in within himself. No amount of love could heal him. No amount of money could cure him. Nothing or no one had the answers. And the only relief he could get was to move on out of the body that confined his beautiful soul to a prison from which he couldn’t get free. No one can understand the kind of pain that comes from making this decision with a vibrant young animal unless you’ve been there yourself. If telling my story can help another, then it is worth the telling and worth the honor of my dear friend Tucker.

Myth number one: Aggressive dogs are mean dogs. It would be so much easier to understand actually if that were the case. However, Tucker, like other dogs suffering with aggression, was a loving, sweet, soft, and gentle soul. That’s what made this so unfair. Because of his issues, I became closer to him than any other dog I’ve ever had in my life. We could read each other so subtly that it was like a dance. I knew when he needed help and I knew exactly what he needed. And he knew I could hear him and that he could tell me when he was in trouble. He was such a heart dog. He loved people. He loved other animals. He loved life. And he was so easy to love. His sense of humor made me continually laugh. Everything had potential to bring on a moment of play. If he could make us laugh, you could see him light up with joy. Yet by his final days, more than 90% of his life was spent living with the demons that chased him inside his brain. It was harder for him to find his own light. He was trapped in a body from which he couldn’t get out.

Myth number two: Aggressive dogs are that way due to poor training and management. Sometimes that may be true or contribute, but it is not always the case. Tucker started out life just fine temperamentally. Then suddenly, at 6 months old, something went very wrong. It was like someone flipped a switch and we began seeing signs of aggression. First it was directed toward the other dogs and generally around food. So we separated him at feeding times and figured it was no big deal. Until one day I heard him growling and turned to see what was going on, only to find that he was staring at me with his teeth fully bared and a look in his eyes that looked like he wasn't even home. When I called his name you could see him fight to come back. I called him again and he began to snap out of it and act normal. But I knew he wasn't normal and something horrible was happening to my dog.

Myth number three: You can love them and train them out of it. I believed that because I loved him as much as I did, certainly we could heal whatever was going on. And certainly, it must be something I was doing wrong or misunderstanding about him. This one took me many months to understand and accept that this wasn't about me at all. This was about something happening inside of him. Something that he had no control over and neither did I. I never felt more desperate in my life. Please tell me this isn't happening to me. Because I understood how dangerous he was getting and I understood that although he hadn't bitten us, it was because we worked with him every minute of every day to read his every cue and know when we had to intervene and put him in a room by himself BEFORE anything happened. Because of this, I knew every subtle nuance of his body language, facial expressions, mood, and energy. I kept saying, wow, if this were a healthy thing, we'd have an incredible connection. And we did have an incredible connection. We connected in a way I have never connected with any other dog. But it was because I was constantly on call to know where and how he was and what was happening with him. I only realized after he was gone how very exhausting and all consuming that was for me.

Accompanying the aggression, Tucker also had an obsessive/compulsive component. He would obsessively eat rocks, and not little ones. The first time, at 8 months old, we thought it was a fluke. We'd never even seen him play with rocks, let alone eat them. But there we were having to do surgery for the removal of 6 good size stones in his stomach. Needless to say, we began watching him closely when he was outside. But 4 months later, it happened again. This time it was 3 good sized rocks stuck in his stomach. We rushed him into surgery again. This time, he had a harder time recovering. He had horrible drug reactions. He was allergic to his antibiotic and then had what we believe were horrible hallucinations on his pain meds. From this episode, he became very fly phobic. To the extent that we started to not be able to get him to go outside during daylight hours. Thanks goodness this was late fall and soon the flies were gone and the snow fell and covered any rocks. We had a reprieve and hoped by spring that he'd be better. In the meantime, we tried to find medical causes for his continuing aggression. His episodes seemingly had a seizure like component to them. He knew in advance when it was coming on and so did our other animals. Our cats, who loved to snuggle with Tucker, would sometimes suddenly not enter a room when they saw him. Each time this happened, an aggressive episode would shortly follow. Watching our cats became a good barometer. We tried drugs to no avail. We brought him for a thorough neurological exam and an MRI. He was diagnosed with a probable seizure disorder in the emotional center of his brain and prognosis was very poor. But we would try one last course of meds. I had to wean him off the first med over a 2 week period, then wait 3 days, and start the new med. It was



the evening before we were to start the new seizure med that he began vomiting and we knew what we were facing. We rushed him to the vet knowing that if he had another obstruction, then we had reached the end of our path together.

Nothing can prepare you for that moment. But the realization that he didn't have to suffer anymore gradually overtook our own loss and pain. If Tucker had been a wild animal, he would have found a way out of that tormented life on his own. But being kept safely in our house, the only way out was the decision we had to be brave enough to make with him. We had to look past our own pain and allow him to find his freedom and his healing. Sometimes healing doesn't look the way we want it to. Sometimes it doesn't have the outcome that we consider to be the best option. But in the end, we find out that we are not the ones in charge and we cannot always make things turn out the way we think they should. For Tucker, he could not find wholeness here in the body he was in. His path to wholeness was outside of this realm. It was not an easy journey. It was a painful process to go through. I write this now 10 months after his death. It was a process for me to accept and understand that the pain would heal. I can look at his photo now and laugh – remembering all the love and fun he brought into our lives. I still shed tears – missing him and feeling sorry that we couldn't have had longer together. But the one thing I am most grateful for is the opportunity I had to love him. That connection – the healthiest one of all – lives on in my heart. And I know he is now free of torment. And I know his journey continues forward – renewed, healthy, and alive with new possibilities. For that, I will forever be grateful for every moment we shared together. And if sharing his story helps someone else going through the same process, then the story is worth the telling, and is an honor to a dog with a huge heart who loved to help people.

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