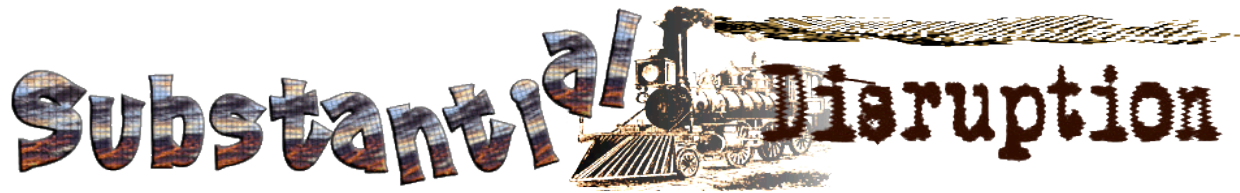


Substantial Disruption



Ghost Dog

By Mike Tully

I saw Holden a few mornings ago. It was in the quiet hours just before dawn, the time when we begin our ascent from the abyss of deep sleep and enter the magical pre-dawn cusp where dreams and reality can reach over and touch one another. He was there, walking past me in our living room, as I walked back from the kitchen. The lights were off, except for a dim light at the end of the hall and all I could see was a shadow. A ghost dog. But the shadow was Holden, there was no doubt in my mind. It was genuinely a visitation and when I finally awoke fully and the twilight dream-state ebbed away I had tears in my eyes.

Holden had died a few days earlier on August 21st. He died peacefully at home in his own bed, ushered from mortality by a kind veterinarian who quietly put him sleep as I scratched his ears and muzzle and massaged the back of his neck. He did not appreciate the back of the neck massage when he first came to live with us on November 18, 2005. He was sitting on the floor behind my chair and I absent-mindedly reached over to scratch the back of his neck, something I had become accustomed to doing for Augie, one of Holden's predecessors. Augie had died of cancer a few months earlier, four months after Spot, a beloved friend I raised from puppy-hood and who was my constant companion until his time came nearly 19 years later. As I reached for the back of Holden's neck, he angrily barked and snapped at me. Of course. That can be a hostile gesture to a dog. I apologized to him. We had to get used to each other.

He was shy at first. Before Holden was Holden he was known as Rocky, a name given to him by his original owner in Las Vegas. The same owner who surrendered him at the animal shelter. He was then moved to a facility in Kingman, Arizona, basically a dog rescue penitentiary with lots of chain link fences and limited hope. In April of 2005 an angel named Cynthia Taylor drove from Tucson to Kingman with six crates to bring back six dogs. She chose six, but there two more who wanted to go with her so badly that she invited them into the cab of the truck to ride with her. One of them was a dog named Rocky.

But they didn't call him Rocky. After he was cleaned up and offered for adoption, they called him Hudson. Rocky, they decided, sounded too aggressive. So, they renamed him Hudson, as in Rock. We decided to call him Holden, after Holden Caulfield of "Catcher in the Rye." I thought of Spot, who could catch nearly anything that was thrown at him – or near him. Holden, bless him, couldn't catch a cold. But, true to the "Catcher in the Rye" myth, he was protective, concerned and loyal. He was a long-legged, handsome mutt, with Vizsla eyes, a Ridgeback body, and long, rangy legs. He was a herder and soon showed off his genetic inheritance by herding us at every opportunity. A shy dog who didn't want to be touched suddenly became the "dog in chief." That's what I called him. Every day when I left for work I'd tell him, "You're the dog in chief. Take care of the house and take care of Penny." Penny is a sweet Vizsla female we adopted two weeks before Holden came to live with us. She is adjusting to being an only dog.

We don't know how old Holden was when we adopted him. He was fully grown, no puppy residue in his bearing, at least three years old. Perhaps he was older. As I came to know and love him, I could not imagine how somebody could have surrendered him at the Vegas pound. I don't know what happened, but it could not have been Holden's fault, whatever the basis for taking him there. He was too smart, too responsible, too – wonderful.

Holden's last year was trying for him and us. He contracted an infection that caused neurological damage to his spine and he could barely use his hind legs. Suddenly there were no more walks, no more trips to the dog park, no more rides in the car, no more hopping onto the bed when he felt like it. Advancing age comingled cruelly with his disability and he developed a liver infection. The monthly medication bill was equal to a car payment. But he was still able to walk, albeit gingerly, still had an appetite and, most importantly, still cherished the human-dog bond that blesses both species. We nurtured him as best we could, even when he began to lose bowel and bladder control, and as his hind legs gradually atrophied to where he frequently dragged his left one. I slept lightly, listened for the sound of Holden's nails scratching the floor, a sign that he needed to get up and go outside. Sometimes he made it, sometimes he didn't. Sometimes I found myself mopping the floor at 1AM or 3AM and often got up with him five or six times a night. But as long as he could walk, eat, and stay engaged with life I was going to do whatever it took to nurture him, accommodate him, help him, love him. My love was called upon in the cruelest fashion in mid-August. Holden could no longer get up by himself. I had to learn how to lever him onto his feet gently but quickly, and he had come to rely on me to help him get up. But in mid-August he would start to get up, then fall. He could not walk more than three or four steps. He was too weak to stand and eat or drink at the water station. I would take his dinner and water bowls and set them in front of him, between his paws, and he would eat and drink while lying down. Then he began to lose interest in his food. I could see the end was near and started emailing our local animal hospital with nearly daily updates. On August 21st I finally spoke with one of them, Dr. Amanda Maus. I had asked to have her call me because I needed to hear what she needed to tell me. She told me about Dr. Sheila Kirt, the veterinarian who would help Holden cross over while I sat on the floor with him, massaged the back of his neck, and cried. When it was over we brought Penny in to say her last goodbye to her adopted brother and Sheila and I carried him on a stretcher, wrapped in a sheet, to her car. I picked up his cremains two days later.

If you are wondering why I wrote this for a blog that focuses on the prevention of bullying and cyber-bullying, here is why. Because of this blog, as well as my day job and other interests, I spend a lot of time considering the human capacity for aggression and the way it manifests itself in the hallways of our schools, in our workplaces, in the streets of Ferguson, in the deserts of the Middle East. Sometimes the evidence of human cruelty and undisciplined aggression is so overwhelming that I feel a constriction inside, as though my heart was recoiling from it. And I sometimes feel my heart growing cold. Then I reach for a fuzzy ear to scratch, a golden rolling belly to rub, a pair of bright eyes to confess to and my heart grows warm again.

Benjamin Franklin reportedly said, "Beer is proof that God loves us." I don't disagree, but I prefer to expand on that and observe that "beer and dogs" are proof God loves us. But that love is not a gift, it is an opening to a *quid pro quo*. We have to love back. And I try, one cold nose, one scratched ear, and one massaged neck after another. As for the beer: I raise a toast to the Ghost Dog.