

Thoughts and tales about creating families with dogs (and cats).

**Bridging Species: Thoughts and Tales About Our Lives with Dogs**

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# Bridging Species

Thoughts and Tales  
About Our Lives with Dogs

Robyn M Fritz



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# First Things First: How We Created Our Multi-Species Family

One day I grew up and decided I wanted to write about dogs. That was a revelation, because for years I'd lived with dogs and written, but rarely combined the two.

Naturally, my next (logical) thought was, what did I want to write about dogs? I wasn't a vet, trainer, nutritionist, behaviorist, pet sitter, animal psychic, or anyone you'd remotely call an expert on things "dog." Granted, I rescued dogs, but mostly I just lived with one.

Yes, but what a dog.

Murphy Brown, my self-named Cavalier King Charles Spaniel, came home with me in October 1998, when she was 11 weeks old. Within two days she demonstrated health problems that would derail my finances, my ego, and, ultimately, my view of life itself. Over time my special needs girl and I explored the gamut of conventional veterinary care, from vaccines to medicines to surgery, until my horror of repeated

illnesses, escalating bills, and indifferent vets launched us on a search for something else.

For health care that assumed wellness, not illness.

For, okay, Lourdes for dogs.

We certainly found it, my girl with the scrambled genes and sorry luck and I. “It” included alternative care, from (sadly) nutrition to supplements, TTouch, massage, acupuncture, and homeopathy to the woo-wooeey New Age stuff like acutonics, animal communication, and energy healing. You name it, we did it. Together we entered a world I barely knew existed and mostly scorned. Yes, I was desperate, but I was also curious, determined to do right, and open to possibilities, even when I cringed at how dorky they seemed.

After all, I was a rational, anal-retentive, overly intellectualized atheist who hyperventilated in churches (with good reason, having grown up in one). I preferred key lime pie to meditation, liked yoga but hardly did it, and had an abnormal fear of waking up at a sci-fi convention dressed like a Klingon. New Age people looked weird, had peculiar thoughts, and were scary in a goofy sort of way.

Yep, I was just the person to dip into flower essences and talk to animals—and hear them talk back.

As you can see, I can manage to offend most of the world in one sentence. Sensibilities, religion, politics—I

figure anything “given” is open to challenge. Still, I found that these new things buzzing in my head were offering challenges of their own. Pretty soon everything I used to think was sane, rational, and the okeydokey order of the universe, a.k.a. Seattle, was, well, different. One day, I woke up and discovered I was seeing the world in a new but ancient light, recognizing a rising mass consciousness, uh ... I, the intellectualized, highly inappropriately educated, middle-aged single woman was a hippie. I would have fainted dead away if I’d had the time.

Well, okay, this didn’t happen overnight. Lots of other crap happened first.

On February 28, 2001, the earth moved. Literally. At about 11 a.m. Seattle was hit by a 6.8 earthquake—an ear-shattering bucking nightmare that lasted just long enough to demolish my cozy little world. Not because of the earthquake (we get about a thousand of them a year here, most too small to feel), but because for a full two minutes before it hit Murphy knew it was coming and went bonkers trying to get us out of the house.

That demonstrated consciousness of a kind and intensity that eludes many humans. It demonstrated prescience, because Murphy knew the earthquake was coming (or perhaps felt it coming) way before it was detected either by humans or by any of the scientific

tools we think we have at our disposal. It demonstrated fear and knowledge of self and others. It demonstrated concern. Bluntly, it demonstrated love.

It was clear to me that it was time to start thinking about dogs in a whole new way. And *that* was something someone should write about. Someone being me. So I did.

I set out to write socio-cultural commentary on the connections between dogs and people. I didn't quite know what that was, but it sounded really neat. I thought it'd also be funny, because I was, occasionally.

Some of it was funny, but most of it came in a voice I never knew was in me, a serious, mannered, wells-deep place where pure raw emotion careened into intellect. I've heard that comedy comes from pain, but so did this voice. It roared out of me, unnerving and compelling, and as it ground its way into life and onto paper it taught me that it was okay to be controversial, thought-provoking, confused, goofy, and even wrong, as long as I kept going.

I wrote these commentaries over three grueling years, 2001-2004, while things arced dramatically over me and, some would say, the world. The first published pieces were originally titled "Reflections from Murphy," and later "Reflections from Murphy and Alki," because Murphy's new Cavalier brother, Alki, wanted in on



them. For the first two years these pieces were gut-wrenching cathartic releases. I cried buckets of tears and ruined wads of paper and tissues until I finally reached a place where I could write more easily. It took even longer for me to see this for what it really was—the necessary way a heart learned to love, the process by which a soul learned to speak.

Somehow in all of that I found an audience, editors who believed in my new voice and readers all over the world who responded to it. I was grateful that I could write about what was important to me, and honored that doing so touched that same deep place in others. It was, of course, just one of the ways the wonders of the animal-human bond are beginning to be felt.

Yes, I write it deliberately as “animal-human bond” because the other way sits too deeply in purely human perspectives to sweep out those dusty attics of our minds. But whatever you call it, this bond resonates with people, as heart matters do. I’m just one person offering unfamiliar perspectives on everyday things, just one person going about the job of respecting souls.

Now, back to the story. The earthquake was bad enough, but there was one more seismic jolt waiting for me. It landed with a thud five months later, in July 2001.

In those five months—since the earthquake and Murphy’s clear if misinterpreted warning—I thought it

might be time to update Lassie. Seriously, wouldn't it be great if next time doom was upon us Murphy could just yell out, "Hey, earthquake coming, let's run!" Well, that was obviously what she'd done, but not what I'd heard, or we wouldn't have been trapped in our condo's hallway on what I thought was an urgent mission to do a Number 2.

Animal communication, that was the key! Besides, it was a hilarious idea for a comic novel. So, since novels required research, I threw myself into the quest by reading lots of spooky books and practicing on Murphy. Being typically American, i.e., impatiently awaiting instant gratification, I closed my eyes and practiced for about five minutes, sending a mental picture of a food bowl to Murphy while asking what she liked to eat. Back came a procession of food bowls, each filled with a different food, including a heaping bowl of dog cookies. Ha, too easy, I already knew what she liked to eat. True, but when I opened my eyes I saw my previously sleeping dog sitting bolt upright and staring at me, eyes wide with shock. I laughed, pretty sure we'd connected, but not so sure about what.

Days later it dawned on me that Murphy was the reincarnation of Maggie, my beloved, long-lost English Cocker Spaniel. "You are, you're Maggie, aren't you?" I asked, stunned and delighted. Murphy's eyes filled up as she ducked her head and shyly blinked at me.

Oh. My. God. I *was* a hippie. Until that moment, I figured reincarnation was just an idea that drifted in and out of religions, not settling anywhere at all. Now it was real, New Agey perhaps (Old Agey, too), but real.

For obvious reasons, the feeling that Murphy was Maggie was something I kept to myself, but one thing was clear: the issue of animal communication was now too raw and real for me to use it as fodder for a comic novel. Bummer.

So along came July, and with it a fundraiser for my Cavalier rescue work. At the urging of a close friend I'd invited a "real" animal communicator to give short readings for people and their dogs. Because of my obsession with Murphy's health, I wanted to ask how she was feeling and what I could do for her. Knowing Murphy, I suspected she'd have her own agenda.

Well, duh. Murphy marched up to the communicator and announced she was a Cocker Spaniel. The communicator stared at her, brows furrowed, and said there were two dogs standing there, Murphy and a black dog. Now, Murphy is brown and white, but Maggie was a blue roan English Cocker, a color most people would call a mottled black. I gaped at Murphy and sputtered, "I knew you were going to do that."

But the communicator was still staring at Murphy. She asked me what the difference was between the

breeds. The first thing that popped out of me was that Cavaliers were susceptible to early heart disease. She winced and nodded.

"That's it," she said. "She says she's come back to heal your pain. If she has to, she'll absorb it into her body and die to take it away."

Well, didn't that just stop the party cold. Stunned, I angrily insisted that no way was Murphy going to do that.

"Bodies are easy to come by," Murphy replied.

No matter what I said, Murphy stubbornly clung to her choice. I had to either let her go or do some serious, prompt work to change her mind.

Shocked, appalled, grief-stricken, I embarked on a quest to prove to her that dying for me was unnecessary. (And, quite frankly, rude, after all that time and money I'd put into her.)

That was the defining moment of my life. That was when I looked at myself and decided that everything had to change.

But first I had to straighten Murphy out. For that we had private sessions with the communicator, where I quickly learned that talking with animals has nothing at all to do with getting your own way. Murphy had made up her mind. Period.

And so my real life's work began. In part we worked with the animal communicator, who also did energy

healing. But I spent most of my time simply waiting for “the light” to settle upon me while also thinking, studying, learning, and, of course, sulking (itself an enlightening, if sometimes frustrating, process).

Eventually it came to me that Murphy and I were embarked on a quest for mutual healing. I had thought her intention was to heal the physical pain that had, essentially, crippled me, but instead it was to heal pain I was only vaguely aware of—heart pain, the kind that’s only healed by learning to love. Over time the disquieting parallels I’d already seen between Murphy’s health challenges and mine became billboards on the road to nirvana and informed my daily life, my writing, my mystical and physical wellness.

And, of course, my choice. I finally saw that the only way to straighten Murphy out, to change her mind, was to change mine, to make a sacrifice for her as great as hers for me. If Murphy chose to die for me, then I chose to live for her, in a way I had never imagined. It was simple, really. By example, Murphy had shown me how to love. I just had to follow it.

Today I’d say we’re both much improved. We’re healthier in all ways, we’re off on new and ever-amazing adventures, and, thankfully, we’re both just as ornery as ever (proving that some things merrily chug along in old familiar ways).

I have learned to never take anything for granted. I've learned that species doesn't matter, that the physical body a soul takes on is only a form and not a sentence. I've learned that nothing can come between beings who love except the refusal to love at all. Every day I strive to be worthy of the love of a soul who would embark on a cycle of death and rebirth, over and over again, to help me truly live. Every day I know that, regardless of my imperfections, the person that I am is worthy enough, because love is all it takes. That truth doesn't keep me from continuing to improve, but it certainly helps when I flub up.

Every day I'm learning how a woman and a dog can bridge species and become a family. Every day I'm learning how that family can grow to enthusiastically embrace others, in our case, currently, a mischievous dog, Alki, and an exuberant cat, Grace. Every day I learn how we each contribute to family dynamics, in both amusing and annoying ways. Every day I learn a little bit more about love and choice from Murphy and Alki and Grace, and they learn from me. Together, we've bridged species and built a family.

Every day I learn that love is the one true thing. It isn't always easy, it isn't blind, it isn't cut and dried. But it is real, and it does change everything—absolutely unequivocally everything.

Love took Murphy and me—and Alki and Grace—to places I, at least, didn't know existed. There's no turning back. It's kind of cool, really, because if somebody like me can come to love, then anybody can. Everybody can.

So that's how I came to write about our lives with dogs (and a cat)—by living one. I've learned firsthand about the power of love and choice in a multi-species family. I can share the stories and observations of hearts beating in time, chronicle lives lived together at the dawn of a new age, lives that bridge species from the bully pulpit of love. It's a sweaty, gritty, purposeful work that's pleasingly blurry around the edges, which is great, because it's only the beginning, just the framework of a search for meaning.

Any time you have love to share, the possibilities are endless. It helps to have a sense of humor. So from our family—a woman, two dogs, and a cat—to yours, I say welcome, and let the sharing begin.

Robyn M Fritz  
Murphy, Alki, and Grace  
March 2010

## Dissing the Dog

**T**he neighborhood birds diss my dog. Completely unafraid of her, they're certain her life's goal—to have a pigeon fly into her mouth—just isn't gonna happen. Now, Murphy is a Cavalier King Charles Spaniel, a living, breathing beanie baby, and, okay, a danger only to squeaky toys and cookies. Probably any pigeon she's gonna get will require serious suicidal tendencies, if pigeons even get those.

Birds here taunt Murphy. Tiny brown birdy gangs hide out in the bushes, la-la-la'ing the day away. Anything going by, pretty much a squeak, and they go mute. Unless it's Murphy. Then it's loud, melodic birdy laughter, which just plain makes a dog look bad.

The gulls and pigeons aren't any nicer. They'll watch Murphy think about retrieving a stick, pretending they don't see her veer towards them, waiting for the last possible moment to casually fly off, cackling. It's embarrassing. It's not that I really want a pigeon to fly into Murphy's mouth, a willing sacrifice to her extremely



latent birding skills—she is, after all, a spaniel, although reconfigured for laps. It's just that if she can't be a high-achiever, she should at least be able to save face.

So the day we met Speedbump I thought the universe had answered Murphy's pleas for pigeon tartare.

That morning we'd gone out for a potty break and spotted a pigeon hanging around our garbage cans. Pigeons don't usually hang out here—we're locals, not handout-happy tourists. Besides, this pigeon was acting strange. Drunk strange.

Murphy saw it. She perked her ears, pointed as well as a city dog can, and yelled, "*Lunch!*"

"No, that is not lunch," I said. Disappointed, she peed, and we went back inside.

Later, coming home from running errands, I walked up the sidewalk and stopped so fast I almost fell over.

The drunk pigeon was lying in the driveway, beak down, wings folded tight to its body.

"Get up," I ordered it. Nothing happened. "Get up!"

I was pretty sure what was wrong, but decency required that I check its pulse. I didn't want to. I also didn't know how. I looked up and down the street. No one. They probably all knew we had a pigeon emergency, and were in hiding.

Finally, I stuck my foot out and touched the pigeon. It was soft! Yelping, I jumped back, then tried again. Still soft.

Either it was not looking good for this bird or it was pretty danged patient to put up with all my nudging. Hmm. Maybe we could go on talk shows.

I nudged again, and over it went—belly up, eyes squeezed shut, legs hunkered into its belly, claws curled and limp. That bird was history.

“Oh crap, oh crap,” I said, about a dozen times.

Still no one came.

Time for Neighborhood 911. They couldn’t ignore that.

But they were, conveniently, not home. No one, that is, except D., who has single-handedly faced down car prowlers, weeds in his roses, and the Alki Lighthouse foghorn. D. could fix anything. And would.

I dragged him over to the driveway while he shook his head, wondering, like most people eventually do, what the hell was wrong with me.

We looked down at the pigeon. It hadn’t moved.

“Yep, it’s dead,” he said.

Taken aback, I stared at him. “You don’t know that.”

He gave me the eye, also something most people eventually get around to doing. “If you’re asking me to do mouth-to-beak respiration, the answer is no.”

I burst out laughing. Probably it was hysteria.

“Murphy finally killed a pigeon,” D. pronounced solemnly.

"No, she did not."

He laughed. "Even Murphy can kill a dead pigeon."

Now, that was rude. "It was dead when I got home."

He laughed harder. "You drove over it, didn't you?"

Oh, imagine the headlines: "Woman sideswipes innocent pigeon. Blames it on heart failure."

"I did not." I glared at him.

"What, you want me to clean it up? I'll bury it in the roses. Good fertilizer."

I was shocked. Somehow, it seemed indecent. Besides, what if this was Murphy's long-hoped-for suicidal pigeon? It *had* been hanging around. Murphy *had* noticed. I *had* interfered in the cycle of nature, if citified pigeons and dogs qualified for that. I *knew* Murphy's hunter-gatherer instincts were extinct. Obviously the pigeon's were, too. What if I just served it to Murphy on the good china? Who would know?

D. waited, head lowered, eyebrows raised. He'd know. Somehow. There would be repercussions.

"I'll clean it up," I said. "But I need moral support. I'll just go get some garbage bags."

I was quickly back with a dozen 13-gallon-size tall kitchen garbage bags.

The frown between D's eyes deepened. "You only need one of those," he said, reaching for them.

"No," I said, backing away. I used the bags to make

a funeral shroud, stuck my arms in up to my shoulders, and reached for the pigeon. The bags blocked my view, but I wasn't looking anyway, so when I finally made contact with its squishy deadness, I screamed like a girl. I just couldn't help it. I also couldn't help jumping away.

After about six scream-jumps, D. grabbed a bag and waved me away, shaking his head.

"We should have a funeral service," I said, flapping my garbage-bagged arms. Flapping was fun, but disrespectful under the circumstances.

D. looked at me in that "A what?" kind of way. He looked at my car—hard—and back at me.

"I did not smush that bird," I said indignantly.

He just looked at me. Now, D.'s into Vikings, his "look" could sink a frigate. Melting me into my garbage bags was on his mind. Instead, he sighed, made the sign of the cross over the pigeon, and said, "I christen you Speedbump. Go in peace." And with that he scooped up the pigeon, knotted the bag, and handed it to me.

I was left holding the bag and gawking at D.

"Bury it," he ordered, watching as I gingerly put poor Speedbump in the dumpster. D. went off muttering about wasted fertilizer, and I went inside to Murphy.

I may never live down the Speedbump story, but I swear I didn't I kill that bird. I didn't tell Murphy about it, either; probably it'd depress her. The neighborhood

birds still diss her, but she doesn't care. She has a goal:  
some day she'll open wide and that pigeon'll come flying  
home. The good china's waiting.

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