

Shelby's Purpose Revealed

“Hear our humble plea, O God, for our friends the animals who are suffering; for any that are hunted or lost or deserted or frightened or hungry... We entreat for them all your mercy and pity, and for those who deal with them we ask a heart of compassion and gentle hands and kindly words. Make us, ourselves, to be true friends to animals and so to share the blessings of the merciful.”

—Albert Schweitzer

Numerous and diverse are the images of angels in the human imagination, images from lithe-bodied, rosy-cheeked individuals with wings and luminous halos highlighting owing, honey-colored tresses to sweet, four-winged, tousle-headed cherubs barely able to assume an upright position.

In sync with my own mind's eye is the concept of a four-pawed, tail-wagging angel on a leash. Intending no disrespect for the angelic hierarchy, I am aware the Lord engages other species as His messengers. After all, the gift of giving love, compassion, empathy and companionship welded to the ability to bring comfort and healing does not pertain exclusively to human beings.

Perhaps my love for animals conditioned my thoughts—perhaps not. Maybe my visualization of the angelic hierarchy was somewhat unrealistically formatted—maybe not. I was visualizing canine angels.

Was I lost in some mythological fairy-tale realm? Or was I one of the privileged few willing and able to appraise all living beings, attributing merit when due regardless of a creature's species? And why should animals be excluded from the 'roster' of kindhearted heroes and doers of good? Somehow, I knew better. Call it a seventh sense or whatever. It truly matters not.

As days rolled into weeks, I noticed Shelby was having difficulties reaching the sofa and chairs. More precisely, she needed help joining Rommel, Greta and Spartacus, comfortably curled and nestled beside me. Moreover, her stride seemed lopsided and somewhat wavering at times, especially when a busy schedule zapped her energy at day's end.

Tough I knew she had been hurt, I had not even an inkling regarding how serious her wounds were. Observing her on a daily basis, I was shocked to notice her rather severe handicap status. Frustrated, she tried her best to keep pace with the other dogs, probably unwilling to disappoint and/or worry me.

However, the suffered movements, the interrupted mobility due to stiffened joints and the muffled whimpers sent a red-light flashing. Shelby was in pain!

“Joe,” GERALYNN called, interrupting my thoughts. “It’s such a beautiful evening. Why don’t we take Shelby and go for some ice cream? I’m sure she’ll love the ride.”

I had to admit it was a very enticing suggestion. though a balmy mid-September day, a cooling breeze rendered it inviting to be outdoors after sunset.

“Sounds like a great idea,” I blurted. “I’ll get Shelby’s leash.”

Since Joe and Jenna were at home to give company to Rommel, Greta and Spartacus, the moment was opportune. There was no way we could have calmly managed four dogs at an ice cream shop filled with kids and other dogs. Besides, Shelby needed the diversion to distract her from the physical woes making her life a difficult trek.

I parked and we exited to get the frozen yogurt. The setting was perfect—children running about frolicking and animated sounds of life being lived. It was an ideal setting for Shelby to get a glimpse of the real world.

Once I helped her out, Shelby seemed to enjoy stretching her legs and being out in the late summer air. Consequently, I thought it best to prolong the outing. Adjacent to the ice cream shop there was a beautiful park. Usually bustling, it offered adventure for dogs and kids. I was certain the still-verdant grass, lush and so underfoot, would be a delight for Shelby.

“Let’s take a little walk,” I suggested to my wife. “Are you up for it?”

“Sure,” Geralynn responded. “What about Shelby? Do you think she would like to join us?”

“Let’s ask her and find out,” I quipped coyly, “though I do not want to leave her alone in the car. It might frighten her or rekindle bad memories.”

At the sound of her name, Shelby sat up at attention, her ears erect. The “ready for action” demeanor together with the sparkle in her eyes shouted, ‘*Count me in.*’

“Well, I guess we have the answer,” Geralynn said, smiling, giving her a quick pat on the head.

Dogs need socialization and the opportunity to familiarize themselves with the world around them. Although, at home, Shelby interacted with her family—human and canine—I believed she should develop a better feel for strangers, children, traffic, other dogs and the sounds of a lively environment. Like children, puppies should be acclimated to their surroundings and feel secure when away from the all-too-familiar residential milieu.

With Shelby’s story still a dark unknown except for the history built on her scars and wounds, I was prepared for the worst-case scenario. Therefore, realizing that any hesitancy or withdrawal on her part was undeniably a corollary of the abuse endured, I wanted her to feel as comfortable and at ease as possible in any setting. Perhaps the memory of torture could be substituted by new pleasurable experiences and

loving gestures in her regard. It was in a sense like reeducating a waking coma patient. But it was worth a try.

Explorers on a quest to conquer new territory, Geralynn, Shelby and I headed in the direction of the park. Even if her tread was far from brisk, she kept pace with our measured strides. Lifting her head just high enough to catch a gentle breeze, she doted on the cooling pulse of air caressing her face.

Geralynn's gaze met mine. Our smiles were reciprocal reactions. How pleasing it was to see our sweet puppy enjoying a moment of pleasure, especially after all she had been through— both the known and the frightful unknown.

We were about a half-block shy of the park at the special location in which two senior housing complexes stood overlooking the flora and those men, women, children and dogs who were blessed to stroll through, savoring and participating in the beauty of nature. Though a panorama definitely not scattered with primrose, it represented a vision of serenity to an observant eye.

Nearing one of the buildings, I noticed a wheelchair-bound gentleman of a certain age seated in front, witnessing life unfurl before him. Realizing that perhaps some individuals, especially those somewhat physically infirm, may feel intimidated by the proximity of an unfamiliar dog, I shifted direction, moving Shelby to my left while distancing myself just enough to ensure a safe passage.

“Hello,” the gentleman greeted, flashing an ear-to-ear smile as genuine as a one-hundred-dollar bill newly released by the Federal Reserve. “What a beautiful dog you have! Can you bring her over? I'd really like to meet her!”

Though thrilled and proud of my pit bull pup, I was abruptly thrown off-guard. Reconciling myself to the good sense of exercising restraint, I hesitated, somewhat uncertain regarding the merits of granting the gentleman's request.

A question sprouted in my mind: Would Shelby, perhaps plagued by flashbacks of her abuse, recoil in fear, be reluctant or turn aggressive? What if he raised his arm to touch her, signaling to Shelby imminent violence or danger? What if she misread the stranger's intentions?

The truth was I could not predict how she would interact with unfamiliar people. But I had to make a decision and I had to do it quickly.

“Sure,” I responded to the elderly gentleman. Put on the spot, what alternative did I have? “We’d love to chat with you.”

Feeling a rush of blood surge from my heart to my face, I hoped for a serene moment—nothing more, nothing less. Just let Shelby remain calm, even indifferent, I whispered.

Pausing, I knelt beside my faithful companion. “Shelby, see that man seated in the wheelchair?” I said, gesticulating in his direction with my right index finger, contradicting my sermonizing to my children that it was rude to point. “He wants to meet you. I’ll take you over. He’s elderly and ailing so we have to be gentle.”

A moist nose nuzzled my hand, confirming she was willing. Approaching the gentleman, I instructed myself to breathe slowly and deeply. If I was calm, perhaps Shelby would pick up on it and, like a child, fall into imitation mode.

Just a few steps short of the wheelchair, Shelby’s eyes met mine. I smiled. Rotating her head, she immediately fixed her gaze directly on the gentleman’s face. I was no longer breathing.

When her tail began to utter, my heartbeat intensified. I was incredulous. This was a perfect stranger. Usually shy and reticent with humans, Shelby needed time to sniff and study those who crossed her path. Even I had to exercise patience while cultivating a trusting relationship over time, before I was greeted with a tail wag!

Introducing Shelby to my parents and in-laws netted a timid reception. Making neither eye contact nor seeking proximity to another human, she presented herself as distant and unavailable. Tucked low, the pit bull's tail remained immobile, her ears relaxed, limp in a sign of disinterest, and her sniff quotient totaled zero.



A sweet soul.

Shelby's was the typical demeanor of a mistrusting soul, fearful and uncomfortable in her surroundings, especially in the presence of those with whom she came into contact.

Prepared for a similar reaction, I stood mesmerized when the script in my head did not play out as expected. In fact, an interesting and totally unpredictable happenstance occurred.

Shelby scampered over to the gentleman, wagging her tail. Fascinated, I watched in silence, not daring to make a comment to GERALYNN, who stood by, equally apprehensive.

"Hello, Shelby," the gentleman whispered, extending his arm to caress her. "You're such a sweet, beautiful dog."

Before I could bat an eyelash to clear my vision, Shelby placed her head

firmly on the gentleman's knee. Taken aback by her atypical behavior, GERALYNN and I exchanged questioning glances.

What just happened? Was I seeing correctly? Was this the hand of God? Is there a message here?

The gentleman's complexion brightened from the pasty hue of a shut-in shielded from the sunlight to an almost luminescent tone. Eyes, shrouded by the dimness of life's purpose lost, welled over with tears.

This scenario starred, in the role of protagonist, an utterly different Shelby. Though birds flew overhead, catching up on the day's events with their raucous chirping, and impatient drivers, anxious to get to the supper table, nervously tooted their horns, she stood her ground, neither losing focus with the distracting ruckus nor distancing herself. Instead, a kind, penetrating look and several licks along the twisted parameters of gnarled, arthritic fingers were the groundwork for a bond, linking the two.

It was amazing. Shelby found solidarity with a suffering man. Understanding his plight, she sympathized with his pain. Empathetic and patient, she offered assistance. Available, she graciously gave solace. Her shyness was invisible—her fear, non-existent. It seemed as if she never had a negative issue with another human being. But I knew better. Something beautiful and mystifying was at play here.

Captivated with Shelby, my attention wavered from the gentleman. Regaining my composure and concentration, I looked in his direction. Tears of joy rolled down his gaunt cheeks.

“Thank you, Shelby,” he said, his voice quivering, “you made my day. You made me smile. I actually forgot about my pain—and all thanks to you.”

What just happened? I questioned, flabbergasted.

I was reluctant to leave, as he continued to stroke Shelby's face. Several minutes later he reiterated his gratitude. Turning towards me, cordial and

gracious, Shelby took several steps away from the gentleman, her mission fulfilled. After exchanging courteous pleasantries, we parted, bidding the gentleman a good evening.

In silence, we continued our walk.

“Geralynn, did you notice what happened?” I asked, ending the stillness. “Yes, it was absolutely amazing—I couldn’t believe my eyes. Joe, if I had not seen Shelby and the man firsthand, I’m sorry to say I may not have given credibility to this event.”

Like a bolt of lightning searing through a cloud, an idea ran through my mind.

“Geralynn,” I said, abruptly halting my steps. “That was astonishing. It was so inspiring. Did you notice how nurturing Shelby was—as if she understood his pain and need for compassion? She seemed to relate to him instantaneously—it was all so natural. Like two people who have just discovered a common bond! Nothing orchestrated, no training. I think Shelby could be a therapy dog! Maybe that is the meaning behind her own personal journey of suffering. Maybe that is why she was born and why she came to live with us.”

Geralynn, still stunned by the unexpected, agreed. “That was awesome,” she kept repeating over and over, perhaps trying to convince herself it actually occurred. “I would have never believed it. I think you are right—Shelby is a very special dog. If I adhered to theories of reincarnation, I’d say she was a philanthropic soul in the body of a pit bull!”

Chuckling, we continued walking. A glowing dimness spread across the sky as the sun slipped into the horizon for a nightly rest. Though it was a relaxing setting, I could not break free of the thoughts churning and buzzing in my mind. I knew it was my mission to take action on the message the Lord sent me. Shelby’s undertaking was to be a therapy dog. It was who she is. All she needed was certification.

I looked over at Shelby. He eyes were glowing. It was time to lower the curtain on the heavy manacles of a tortured yesterday and prepare for a new experience, fulfilling the Lord's plan unveiled this evening. Shelby received her wings, the manifestation of her purpose here on earth. I was not in error. There are canine angels.