

# A Gentle Nudge ... A Little Wake-Up Call

By Patience Renzulli

**W**e get a sudden eye-opener. This might sound ludicrous to those few of you, dear readers, who have yet to experience the rare privilege of living with a Hound that is certifiably ancient. Other people, even dog people, can look at our extremely senior canine citizens and think that their time in this sweet world is short. But we can be unprepared for a Very Old Dog's Very Bad Day. No matter that we know that every day is a gift. There is a different song playing in our heart.

We fall into a comfortable, predictable routine with our Very Old Dogs. Several years ago my Ancient Shadow waited at the top and the bottom of the stairs for my assistance. The Old Queen barked to be covered up. Her back legs trembled when we stopped to chat with neighbors on our walks; his back feet dragged on the sidewalk after we got going again. They were not what they used to be, but they had been what they were for a while.

We would laugh. I asked the Old Queen, "What does a cheerleader say?" She got a sparkle in her eyes and danced around to wind herself up and let loose with a perfect, "Rah, rah, rah!" Unless, of course, we were performing the trick in front of guests, in which case she answered, "Arf." And then she winked at me, and when the human conversation had turned elsewhere, under her breath she whispered, "Rah, rah, rah." This routine hadn't changed since she was a puppy.

And on our walks, my Ancient Shadow showed his exuberance in the form of modified leapiers. When he was young he had the most delightful habit of leaping straight in the air, off all four feet with legs pogo-stick straight, levitating up as high as my five-foot-five-inch head. Staying perfectly parallel with the ground. A capriole. This did not involve the slightest pull on his lead. One moment he was walking along in front of me, and the next moment his butt was at eye level.

It was usually accompanied by sort of war whoop, "Wooahrrrr!" And it was saved for special times. The first warm, sunny



Photo Laurie J. Erickson .

day after a long, gray cold spell. Exiting the van and finding himself at a lure trial, or a walk with a special visiting friend. In his dotage he performed the modified leapy. It was frankly more of a lurch than a leap, and I always gasped in fear that he would fall, because he had. Yet these modified leapiers made me smile all the way from my fuzzy socks to the pompom on my hat. Because I could easily see that young, sparkling dog full of health and promise, even in his old, gray, wobbly body.

We settle in to the Very Old Dog reality show as though it were an oversized down comforter wrapped around our shoulders. We forget that the privilege of loving these souls comes with an exorbitant price. Then we find ourselves on the day that our Very Old Dog isn't right, not even the older version of right, and we sputter. We smash face down into the fact that our dog is vulnerable, and so appallingly mortal. And when my darling Old Dog gently reminded me that part of the deal was to go on without him at some point, I wanted to negotiate a new contract.

My Old Queen's self-assigned life's work was to generate laughter. Trotting around, shaking the bejesus out of a squeak toy or back-talking you with smiling woo-woos when you pointed an accusing finger at

her, and then the wagging dances when she achieved the laugh she was after.

And my Ancient Shadow, even as an impossibly tiny puppy, was so concerned about his humans. He couldn't bear human sadness, cocking his head and drawing up his eyebrows until his forehead was raked with wrinkles. Three times this dog had cried tears from his eyes. When we were mourning my father-in-law's death. When I moved away from my friends. And when my first Whippet died. When I was overcome with sadness, so was he, and that snapped me out of it.

**S**o a bad day comes in the form of a gentle warning. An overheard whisper of what will come. A chance to brace ourselves, to steady our steps. To laugh louder for the Old Queen, and to shout "Woo-HOOOO!" right out there in public at the top of my lungs for each modified leapy the Ancient One attempted. To dawdle a bit more during the geriatric amble around the block, let them go ahead and bark at the stupid squirrels. To sneak a lot more people food from my plate to certain waiting lips.

It is, after all, our very special privilege. And it is never long enough.

SR

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Patience Renzulli's articles have appeared in numerous magazines, and the second edition of her book, "Mama Pajama Tells a Story," is currently available. Patience

bred the only Whippet to have received the prestigious AKC Award of Canine Excellence, 'Willow,' alias FC Warburton Song Sung Blue, CD, FCh, CR, TRP, TT, AV, Delta Therapy Dog. She lives in Paducah, Kentucky, with seven Whippets and her un-complaining husband, Bill.

