

Excerpt from: **The Ten Perfections: Spiritual Lessons from a Life with Dogs**

By Ellen Finnie

Prolog

My young Golden retriever Leo and I are sitting together on the rug in the school counselor's office, waiting and watching for a particular student, one of Leo's favorite friends. The rug, like the room, invites calm. It is decorated with a scene of a small pond, bursting with lily pads and frogs, its shores linked by a fanciful wooden bridge. I've chosen to sit on the bridge, the place where our connections begin. As the student comes through the door, her round face lights up, a miniature sun warming the room.

"Leo! My Floof!" she calls, with her special nickname for Leo.

This young girl knows Leo well. We have been visiting as a therapy dog team for many months. Leo's presence offers the elementary school students relief from academic or social challenges, or any extra burdens they carry.

As soon as he sees her, Leo gets up to greet the girl, his tail wagging softly, his face relaxed, his mouth loosely open--a doggie smile. He rubs one of his long, broad sides and then the other back and forth against her, and begins a quiet but high-pitched cry, his song of joy, reserved for greeting his special people. The girl's small hands move with sureness across his back, caressing him with her strong fingers, thrust deep into his thick, creamy coat. Leo leans a bit towards the girl as she massages him, and his voice changes from his greeting song to a low moan of pleasure. She smiles.

“I’ve waited all day to see you! Wanna go to the playhouse?”

They walk side by side, the girl’s hand on Leo’s back, and tuck themselves together in the small structure. It is a cozy retreat for children in the counselor’s office, a tiny house full of pillows, its doorway lined with miniature stuffed squirrels, owls, and other woodland creatures. The girl perches on the small chair, Leo at her feet, and she pets him rhythmically. Leo lies on a quilt, places his head on his paws, and his eyes partially closed.

Their peace and joy – their ease and happiness together -- are a force-field, and I am pulled in. We sit, the girl’s hands on Leo, her face glowing, her eyes bright.

She leans forward to kiss Leo’s massive head, and murmurs “I love you, Leo.”

The moments in this room are simple, and brief. And yet they are a brimming cup of what matters most in life: Love, joy, connection. Every time I am in that force-field, I feel gratitude and wonder at how the shared joy in these simple moments can be as meaningful as anything life – even a very fortunate life, like mine -- delivers. This bounty is possible because of Leo. Leo, the loving source of all the joy and ease. Leo, here with me in this room, is the miracle. Our moments are a simple but full expression of the magic that dogs can heal, and help us find happiness. His gift is to offer his love, purely, and avidly, without asking for anything but connection. His gift is to transmit love so genuinely through his soft almond eyes that his gaze warms your bones and opens your heart.

And yet our presence together in this room is not only about Leo. It is a culmination of my own growth, growth through partnership with Leo -- and with all my dogs. Through them and their qualities of heart, I have found joy, and peace, and, at last, my calling.

It has not been a direct route to reach this point. Leo, here by the student's side, calmly connected, is the same Leo whose wild, intense hunting drive, whose eager energy and excitement, are such vital forces that friends gently observed they could not see him ever being a therapy dog, and perhaps might do better on a farm. How the wild and wonderful Leo and I made our way into this little room is a story – one story from a long passage of over sixty years, a continuous, unending journey of growing and learning from my beloved dogs.

I share these stories of Leo, and all the dogs that came before him, in gratitude for all they've taught, and all they've given. And I share these stories as my small tribute to the love and happiness that people and dogs, through their ancient, powerful bond, find together.

Note to reader:

When my mother was asked to write about what characterized each of her children most fully, she reported just one thing about me: "Ellen always loved dogs." From my earliest years, I've shared my life with my dogs, and they have brought profound blessings. Their love has brought me safely off a mountaintop in a blinding storm and across a marathon finish line; their open hearts have connected me to others in ways I couldn't manage on my own, including finding me true and lasting love. Their companionship has supported me through every one of life's difficulties, helping me navigate a circuitous career path, a failed marriage, health challenges, and my self-made demons too. Living with them has brought me to dig deeper for compassion and understanding and to find the peace of no secrets.

All my dogs have encouraged me in their own ways to develop what are described in Buddhist teachings as "qualities of the heart," or the Ten Perfections: Generosity, Morality, Renunciation, Wisdom, Energy, Patience, Truthfulness, Determination, Lovingkindness, and Equanimity. These "Perfections" are not intended as a path to perfection or even to self-improvement. They offer a different kind of path—a path of kindness, which in turn yields happiness. Happiness for ourselves, and through us, for others. The promise of the teachings is that by developing and expressing these qualities of the heart, we can become less weighed down by suffering, less burdened by shame and judgment, and more loving and open to others and the world. We become happier.

I am not a Buddhist scholar or teacher, and I am in no way an expert in these teachings. I came across them at a time of crisis in my life when my daughter was struggling in school and was

being tested for learning disabilities. Nothing I could do seemed to help, and the pressure of trying to do the right thing merely revealed my powerlessness in the face her heart-wrenching difficulties; it made me feel my mind was breaking apart into shards of glass. Desperate for some way to pull the fragments into a focused whole, to reach something I vaguely thought of as mindfulness, I found these teachings in a book by Sylvia Boorstein, *Pay Attention for Goodness' Sake: Practicing the Perfections of the Heart—The Buddhist Path to Kindness*. And with them, I found a different way to approach life: not as an endless, linear climb towards some arbitrary vision of success but as a path of the heart, a path of kindness, focused on being present for life as it really is. A path that can lead to internal peace and happiness.

My dogs helped me along this path. These stories are about how my partnership with them has encouraged me to develop these heart qualities as I interpret and understand them, not as an expert, but as a fellow traveler on life's journey. Their perfections have been my practice, a lifelong effort to let kindness in and to let it lead me—and, I hope, lead my beloved dogs and the people near and dear to me—to lead all of us to happiness. It's not a journey that concludes, not a point of perfection to reach and hold onto. It's a journey of getting up every day, looking into the face of these beings who are so loving, so attached, so trusting, so open, and bowing with gratitude for the unearned grace of heading out for another walk together. And so I share these stories to celebrate, thank, and honor my beloved dogs and to commit to trying to be worthy of them. Not only do they reflect the Ten Perfections—they *are* my Ten Perfections.

Yankee – Morality: The bliss of blamelessness

My neighborhood friends called to me as I made my way on the short path between our houses. They were engrossed in a game of TV tag, guessing the names of television shows from initials scratched in the dirt, sprinting off when they cracked the code. I liked that game, but today I had something more important to do. I called out “Gotta go!” and kept on towards the sidewalk along the busy street. I felt for the lump in my pocket, where I’d put the money my grandmother had given me for my birthday.

Today was the day. My Puppy was waiting for me.

My world as a child was roughly bounded by the train tracks at the far side of a field; the road, thrumming with traffic; the woods behind our small neighborhood houses; and as far up the hill as the swing set behind my friend’s house at the top of Rockaway Lane—the one with rusty metal legs dug just a little into the ground, chains holding three plastic seats, where we liked to sit and beat our legs back and forth, our knees pumping hard, the effort sending us soaring up into the sky. But now that I was eight, I could go way past the swing set. I was allowed to walk across the street or up the road to the shops, as long as I got home when called for dinner. I would hear my mother’s voice singing out into the gathering dusk and would trot back down the hill to our house. But today she wouldn’t be calling any time soon. I had plenty of time before dinner.

It was a warm afternoon for November in New England. The grey clouds were soft and close, holding my secret. I passed the edge of the athletic field and turned up toward the Heights, where I often visited the five-and-dime store, the library, and the church—the one with the crisp white paint, bright red wooden doors, and a tall steeple pointing up so high into the silver sky that it almost lifted me too. These were all important places for me, but the Heights also held my most favorite place—the pet store.

I walked past my neighbor's house and thought how much their dog, Pal, the cocker spaniel who had become my friend, would like to come with me on this trip. He could help me find a puppy just like him—with his shiny black coat and long wavy ears, his huge round brown eyes, and his short wiggling tail. Whenever I knocked at Pal's house, his people would smile, grab his leash, and hold it out to me. Then Pal and I would be on our way. He was my special buddy, a partner for trips into the woods, to Eagle Rock, and across the road to the hidden swamp behind the gas station, where we looked for tadpoles together. When I was with Pal, everything felt right.

But I could not take Pal with me today.

A slight shiver went through me, even though I wore a light jacket and my favorite shirt, my brother's old plaid flannel. I started walking faster, past the houses where my friends lived, past the old tracks where we'd leave our pennies to be crushed by the trains, and past the church, where I went to Sunday school. My family didn't go to church anymore, but all the other kids in

the neighborhood did, and I had asked my mom if I could go. She said I could if I wanted to. Just this past week, we had read a story from the Bible about people surviving a fire in a huge furnace. I felt funny reading that story. It didn't make sense to me. Nothing like that happened in my world. I didn't even see magic like that on my favorite show, *Lost in Space*, where Will Robinson and his astronaut family lived through so many unexpected things in every single episode. But I knew how the teacher would want me to answer the questions in the Sunday school workbook, and sure enough, I got all gold stars. It didn't feel as good as I thought it would. But maybe if I kept at it, I'd be more like the other kids, the ones who seemed to share things I didn't understand.

But My Puppy would not care about any of that.

I quickened my step and kept on, glancing at the house with that perfect bike propped outside, the one with the banana seat and butterfly handlebars, colored streamers attached. I could use the money in my pocket for a bike like that, or even for the cowgirl boots I dreamed of. I would love to be a cowgirl, flying on horseback, free. But there wasn't any doubt in my mind. This money was for a puppy. I didn't need that bike or those boots like I needed a puppy. My Puppy.

My feet were now fast and sure, nothing holding me back, not even the requirement that I be polite to Mrs. O'Leary, who met my brother and sister and meat our house after school on days like today when my mother was off at night school in the city. I could picture the scrambled eggs Mrs. O'Leary had made today, with the yucky white specks in them. I had left most of

them on my plate. It was so good not to be looking at those eggs or at Mrs. O'Leary's expectant face.

At the corner light, where the Heights began, I looked across to Mr. Baruch's store, the one where I'd bought the ceramic statue of the boxer and her puppies with the money I stole from my brother's coin collection, popping the dimes and nickels out from the cardboard display. I felt a bit queasy thinking about that, just like when I looked at Mrs. O'Leary's eggs.

I crossed at the light, looking up the hill, my eyes on the sign for the pet store. I ran the last few steps and pulled open the door. As I burst into the familiar, narrow dark space, the bell rang, as always, announcing my presence to the man behind the counter. He looked up from his magazine. He didn't exactly smile, but he didn't look mean. I clenched my fist tight in my pocket around my money, my chest still heaving from my sprint up the hill. I tried to keep from gulping air, pretending interest in the guinea pigs darting around in their cage, stirring up the sweet smell of cedar shavings, and the parakeets chattering from their perches along the wall. I glanced sideways towards the back of the store.

There they were, eight wriggling puppies in a big box. All black. Like Pal. I walked slowly down the aisle and bent over them as I had when I'd visited the week before. But today was different. One of these puppies was My Puppy. He'd be by my side, my best friend, just like Pal. The man came out from behind the register and stood near me as I looked at the puppies. "Can I help you?" he asked. Today he seemed enormous, towering over me, his huge eyes peering at me from under tousled hair.

I froze. *Maybe I should just ask about food for my guinea pigs.* But I looked down again at the puppies, now climbing over each other in the excitement of people nearby, and told him quietly, “I want a puppy.”

“You mean you want to buy a puppy?”

I quickly pulled the money out of my pocket where he could see it. He had to know I could pay.

“Yes, I have my money.”

“Perhaps you’d like to hold this one,” he said, choosing the largest puppy, who had his paws on the edge of the box, scrabbling at the side. He placed the puppy in my arms. Warmth surged through me. I held him close as he wriggled, his fur shiny black, his tail a tiny whip of joy, his floppy ears hanging so low they laid upon my arm.

“He’s a good one, the biggest boy in the litter. He’ll be the size of a cocker spaniel,” the man offered. *Like Pal, I thought. But mine, just mine.*

I buried my face in the puppy’s warm fur, my voice muffled. “I can take him now?” “He’s ready to go,” the man said. “How about a collar and leash for him?” He grabbed a slim red collar and a silver chain leash, clipping both to the puppy and draping the leash across my shoulder. Then he turned and made his way back to the counter. I followed him, carrying the puppy, not daring to breathe.

Behind the register, the man paused. I stood before him, the puppy in my arms. My stomach felt strange, like when I'd given the man at Baruch's five-and-dime my brother's special coins. "Ten dollars please," he said.

I put the puppy down and dug for my cash, holding it out over the counter.

"Your parents okay with it?" he asked, kind of quickly, as he took the money.

I was ready. "My parents love puppies. He's for my birthday."

It wasn't quite a lie.

I held the leash, looking down at the puppy sniffing and darting, happy with his freedom outside the cardboard box but twisting a bit against the unfamiliar constraints of the chain. One of my hands went to my stomach, Mrs. O'Leary's icky eggs churning in my gut. The puppy pulled and jumped, the parakeets shrieked, and guinea pigs took up the chorus with their high-pitched squeaks and squeals.

"Well okay, then. Hope you enjoy him, kid!"

I didn't wait for him to say more—I picked up My Puppy and strode to the door, the bell sounding sharply, like an alarm, as I fled. My Puppy at my heels, I ran down the sidewalk, feeling just like I did when I swung so high on the swingset on Rockaway Lane that the thin metal legs pulled right up out of the earth on each forward pass of the swing. I felt that same terrifying, glorious sensation that was like flying, and just a bit like falling too.

When I walked into our small house along with My Puppy, I braced myself for a strong reaction from my parents. But my father surprised me. He put his hands on My Puppy's round head, stroking his long ears. Looking into his huge eyes, he said, "If we keep him, we'll call him Yankee."

Yankee didn't turn out to be the size of a cocker; he was like an oversized version of the retriever in my dog book, with long wavy ears and fur and the solid muscles and wild eagerness of a young sporting dog. He seemed so happy as we explored the wonders of our world together—the squirrels, the trees, my neighborhood friends. His tongue would hang loose, as if he had forgotten to attend to it with so many sights and sounds to enjoy. When I caught his gaze, his brown eyes shone, pools emitting their own light. With him next to me, I was home.

But as the days shortened, and Yankee got bigger and bigger, I began to feel smaller and smaller. One cold day after school, when we were out together, Yankee saw a squirrel and took off into the woods with me attached to his leash. I fell into the leaves, and he dragged me along the ground. The squirrel escaped up a tree, and Yankee leapt and whined and scrabbled at the bark. I lay on the ground, the leash still wound around my hand. I was scratched, stinging, and covered in dirt and leaves.

After the squirrel disappeared, Yankee seemed to notice me again and jumped gleefully back and forth over me, licking my face. We made our way back to the house, Yankee bounding with excitement. But my shoulders were slumped. I'd read *The Rin Tin Tin Book of Dog Care* many

times, borrowing it over and over from the library, and I could tell that Yankee wasn't acting at all like the striking German Shepherd on the cover, who posed calmly and had clearly learned to "heel," "sit," and "stay" just as the book explained. Yankee wasn't anything like that dog, and certainly not like Rin Tin Tin, the famously well-trained movie-star dog. Yankee wasn't even like my calm and quiet buddy, Pal.

Then one evening as fall was turning towards winter, when my dad was grilling a steak in our backyard, Yankee lunged and grabbed the entire hunk of meat right off the charcoal fire. My dad shouted and began running after Yankee. The steak was meant as dinner for all five of us, but Yankee was too fast for him and managed to consume the whole thing before my father caught him. The dog was alight and wriggling with his unexpected treat, his mouth open, eyes sparkling. My dad's lips were in a tight line, his jaw taut, as he led Yankee by the collar back into the house.

Whether it was my being pulled down so many times, or whether it was the steak, not long after that, my parents told me Yankee needed a new home, a better place for him, where he could run and play. I lay awake in the night, trying to picture the place My Puppy would live. Fields? Woods? A farm? Someplace where he could run free all day. I tried to believe it would be better for him, like my parents said. But as I lay in bed in a crumpled ball, the sheets pulled over my head, my whole body hurt. I didn't cry. I knew the truth: I had begun my life with Yankee in a lie, and then I had failed him completely. I had gone to get my puppy all on my own, and my father had let me keep him. But I had failed in my responsibility to care for him and train him. Even with all I'd read, I could not find a way to get Yankee to walk on a leash without

him pulling me down or to keep him from stealing steaks and running wild. I had failed him and lost him as a result. There was no one to blame but myself. I did not deserve to grieve.

Many years later, I came to understand why my father had let me keep Yankee, for a time, even though I'd acquired him without permission. My father's life back then was overflowing with demands and commitments. He had three young children and was building his career. We had other pets—guinea pigs and cats. Most fathers in this situation would have said no to more pets. But what I came to see decades later, as an adult and a parent myself, is that when I was eight and walked through the door with My Puppy, what my father saw in the face of the long-eared pup with the wide, soulful eyes was his *own* Yankee—the dog who had come into his life at about the same age I was back then.

At ten years old, my father's future had been laid out like a smooth road before him, his name already painted with pride on the door of his father's roofing company: "Bruce Finnie and Son" carefully rendered. But on one otherwise unremarkable day, his father was suddenly taken to the hospital and never came home. He died under mysterious circumstances that my father never understood. What my dad did know was that after his father died, he was "lost and alone." The familiar heat of the Memphis sun, which had warmed him when he and his father fished in a small rowboat in the Mississippi river delta, was suddenly swept away. That safe and comfortable world was replaced by the alien gray chill of a Midwestern winter, where his mother—now a widow, though only in her thirties—had retreated to her childhood home. Awash in grief, she moved my young father and his sister, Sallie, to live with their grandparents, and tried to build a new life.

My dad would speak of that time only when asked, and only much later in his life. But when he did, he invariably mentioned his Yankee. "Yankee brought me joy in the darkest time of my life," he told me, his voice reverent, quiet. When he spoke of Yankee, his voice always softened that way, and his eyes, especially if he had a glass of whiskey in his hand, would mist over a bit. One time he told me that "Yankee mattered so much to my sister, and she was so alone after our father died. She had no one. My mother was distracted by her grief, and I couldn't be there for Sallie. But Yankee was. Yankee was such a comfort to her."

Because of the way my father talked of Yankee, and the rarity of his reflections, Yankee became a kind of mystical creature in my own mind until, deep into my own middle age, I found a single picture of him, tucked into a pile of unsorted photographs that had come to my father after his mother's death. The photo drew Yankee out of myth and into reality: I looked down at the photo in my hand and saw him, a handsome brown and white spaniel with long floppy ears and a wavy coat. Across the better part of a century, I was held in the presence of this dog, this dog who meant so much to my father. There was Yankee, sitting loyally at the side of my father's sister, Sallie. His sincere brown eyes were attentive, as if he were still sharing his vigilant, wise, and loving care.

My dad was not much for using words like "love" or offering up how he felt about things. But I see now, after his death, that whether he knew it or not, when he spoke of his childhood dog and his sister, he was telling me as much about what Yankee meant to him as to Sallie. I can see so clearly now that the day I walked into our house with a puppy I'd bought without permission, my father wanted me to have the lasting love he'd had with his Yankee. He wanted me to have

my own Yankee, my own friend and supporter. That wish he had for me was more important to him than my transgression.

When my father lay in a hospital bed at the end of his long life, in what turned out to be his final hours, the confusion caused by his failing kidneys briefly lifted. And when he found the energy to speak, it was of his most seminal memories. With his mind turned to the deepest, most core, most significant relationships of his life, he spoke of Yankee.

“Yankee was a hero for me. He got me through my father’s death. He was always there for us.”

As he was dying, my dad was at last able to say it: “I loved him.”

Despite the profound and devastating loss of his father when he was only ten, my father’s final message to me was not how easily you can lose love, but how it lasts. Nearly eighty years after his Yankee stood by his side, my father’s life now laid out behind him, he was once again held in the warmth and love and protection of that good dog—a dear, trusted companion to lean on in his final journey.

My generous father never faulted me for seeking that kind of love with my own Yankee. I managed that, all on my own. My selfish action, and its results, have haunted me. I have been tormented through the years by recurrent night terrors, bursting out of sleep into the horror

that I have let a puppy die by forgetting to feed him or give him medication or by mistakenly leaving him abandoned in a vacation house without food or water. In the first moments of these terrors, the torment of having caused the painful death of an innocent and deeply beloved creature due to my own failures rips through me as if my soul is being sliced out of me with a burning saber. The psychic agony of those moments is a sharp dive into hell. Inconsolable, frantic, despairing, and desperate, I scream. I writhe.

And then, some small part of my brain tries to save me, to draw me out of the crushing anguish, to begin to believe that perhaps, just perhaps, I didn't kill a puppy. At least not that night.

I don't know for certain whether these recurrent terrors stem from what happened with Yankee, but I believe there's a connection. I crossed a moral line as a young child and did something selfish and reckless that involved another being. I wanted a puppy, and without consulting anyone, I got myself a puppy. I was only eight, but somewhere in me, I knew this was out of bounds. I let myself be blinded by my own needs and desires, and I told myself I was prepared to take care of Yankee, but I wasn't.

I have come to understand the reverberation of my actions through the lens of Buddhist teachings. In Buddhism, morality can be described as a practice of five precepts. The first of these in some sense encompasses the others, as all five precepts are different ways to say "I'll do no harm." The first precept, like the others, is simple: "I vow to abstain from harming living beings." This vow, as with practicing each of the Perfections, is seen as a path not to self-improvement or even to noble altruism, but to happiness. The personal payoff of doing no harm is "the bliss of blamelessness." I've been seeking that bliss since I was eight, when I felt

the double torment of harming Yankee, my dear, cherished friend, and losing him as a result of my own self-centered actions.

I have learned from Yankee to pause and consider how blindly pursuing my own desires may impact others, especially those closest to me. But this practice of not doing harm isn't something I can accomplish once and for all. I will never dance through life in blameless bliss. None of us can. Life is too complex for that, and we have to take actions without knowing everything, especially when we are young. And despite our remorse, we can't fix the past.

While I can't go back and repair what I did to Yankee, I try to honor him and to make amends by pausing before I speak or act, to do my best to avoid harming others in my pursuit of my own desires. My efforts often fail, perhaps more often than not. But that feeling of blamelessness—that awakening from dread and terror to the tremendous, blissful relief that, at least today, I haven't harmed a beloved—that feels a lot like happiness.



