



The Mya Chronicles: Adventures with a Foster Dog

Greetings! Late October 2013, our family took in a foster dog, a five-year old German Shepherd named Mya. A survivor of neglect, she had been surrendered to a shelter. A friend pointed me to the shelter's call for a foster home and well, after having the picture of her burned into my brain, and even though I wasn't even considering a new dog in the house, I contacted the shelter. Ah, she had already been placed in a foster home! So, wasn't meant to be, and I so I went about my business...but Mya's sweet face was always in the back of my head. So, when I learned that she was in search of another foster home, it seemed like it was something saying that we were meant to take her in this stage of her life.

So, we made the three-hour drive to the shelter, our dog Cora in tow. We met, and well, we took her home.

Thank you for reading about our adventures 😊

—Deb and Mya

October 2013

Bringing Mya Home

She needs a foster home...needs some work...mouthing, jumping, obedience, self-control, socialization. No problem, I thought. After all (visualize me sweeping back my superhero cape), I am a PROFESSIONAL...a PROFESSIONAL DOG TRAINER.

Fast forward. We've brought our foster dog home. A beautiful 5-year-old GSD named Mya. Mya is essentially a pup in a 71-lb body. Within the first few hours of having her home, I realize, "holy cow, it's been a long time since I've trained a dog". Sure, I teach classes to folks all the time on how to train THEIR dogs, but it's different when you're on the front line, training the dog, living with the dog.

You see, my last dog, a sweet rescue named Cora, was (and remains) a really easy dog. Calm, sweet, fell right into line with training so easily. My last difficult dog was my GSD pup Isa—and that was a decade ago. I guess it's human nature to forget the tough stuff. And, Isa was TOUGH...a hard-headed, willful, high energy, high drive dog with her OWN agenda (which never seemed to match mine). But, once we got through that stuff, Isa was an impeccably trained, solid, reliable dog. I had forgotten how much work that takes...

I am humbly recalling times I've told students... "Biting...no problem do X, Y, Z" or "Jumping? Just do blah blah blah". Not that I don't acknowledge how much energy, dedication, time and patience it takes my students to train their dogs...but it had been a while since I was experiencing it myself.

So, here we go, Mya and me...stay tuned for our adventures.





October 2013

Mya Chronicles Continue...COURAGE

Mya, my 5-year-old foster dog, looks like a cross between a GSD and one of those hair-challenged, partly naked Chinese crested dogs that always wins the “ugliest-dog-it’s-cute” contest. You see, she’s got quite a few bald spots from her battle with neglect. The hair does seem to be growing in, but in oddly formed patches and varying lengths.

She gets many looks and lots of attention. My 71-lb Chinese Crested Shepherd.

But, that’s not really the story I want to tell you today.

So, Mya and I made a trip to Stowe VT this past weekend to meet up with my good friend and dog training business partner, Maryellen. Maryellen’s from Stowe has the scoop on all the dog-friendly stores. Thus, she was our perfect Virgil (sorry, couldn’t help but slip in a Dante reference there)—leading us through various stores and introducing us to dog-friendly staff who would love to give my partly-naked, but strikingly adorable foster, some affection.

Did I mention that because it was quite a nippy day in Stowe, I put an old Mariner’s sweatshirt on Mya to keep out the cold? Yeah, it only added to her total cuteness. Look at the picture and tell me I’m wrong.

But sorry, I digress.

So, as I watched Mya, still struggling with trusting people, meet new folks in the stores, two lessons become crystal clear to me. As she greeted the new folks, her front end was accepting, open, curious: soft eyes, a muzzle nosing a leg or hand, ears forward in interest...all saying, “I’m here, I *think* want to meet you, I *think* I want your attention”. At the same time, her backend was tentative, still fearful: legs shaking, tail tucked, hind end low—a clear but different message, “please don’t hurt me, I’m worried”.

Lesson 1: Dog communication is complex, and it can carry mixed messages. Sound familiar? I’m sure we’ve all been there too, with conflicting feelings: unsure yet excited about an opportunity, fearful yet exhilarated by a challenge, etc.. Dogs are no different.

Lesson 2: Courage. Despite the fear, the worry, whatever past she experienced, Mya continues to be open to human contact. Maybe slowly, maybe tentatively, maybe with mixed feelings, but she still puts that beautiful nose out as an invitation to engage. What courage!! What resilience!!

I leave with a quote I saw recently, “*Courage doesn’t always roar...sometimes courage is the quiet voice at the end of the day saying, ‘I will try again tomorrow.’*”





November 2013

FALLING...

Mya, my 71-lb lap dog. She decided she didn't want to sit on her bed and chew her bone, but instead gently climbed onto the recliner, into my lap, stretched out, chewed her bone a little while, and fell asleep.

And, what do you do when a very large GSD decides she wants to chew bones on top of you? You let her.

How can I not fall head over heels in love with this dog?



November 2013

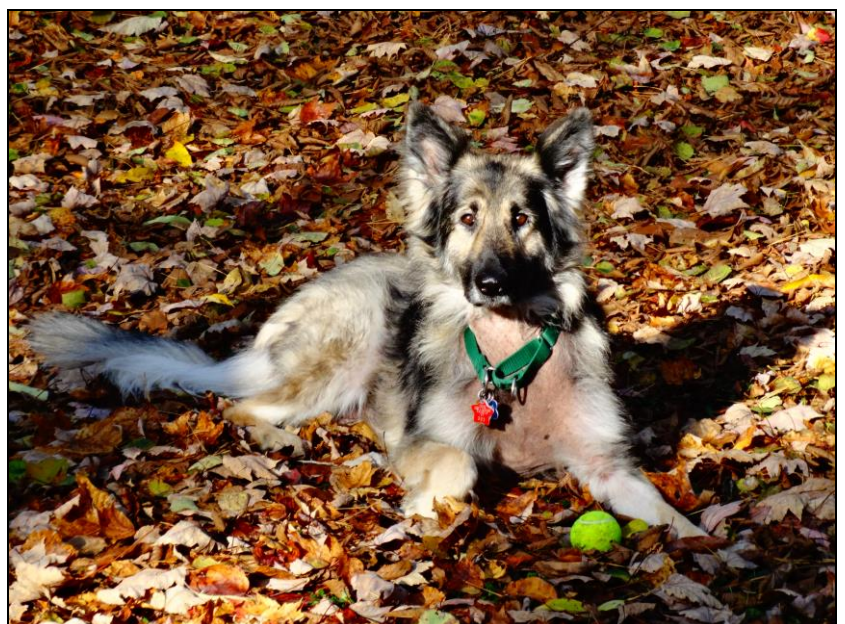
Mya Chronicles Continue: BALANCE

It had been a pissah (throwing back to my "bahstan" roots) of a day. The car wouldn't start, an important work deadline had been moved up one week, and a million stupid little nagging tasks were picking at the back of my head.

All I needed was a quiet house so I could concentrate. Barking at nothing, getting into things, asking to go out every 15 minutes, pawing at me—Cora (my dog) and Mya (my foster dog) did not get the memo about them having a sleepy, don't-bug-Deb morning. Not their fault—I'd abbreviated their morning walk and training session to get on a conference call. They clearly did NOT understand the pressures of being a human.

Cora is a pretty low-energy dog, so eventually, she was content to curl up on the couch and take a snooze. Mya, my Chinese Crested German Shepherd (to get that joke, you'll have to read my last chronicle, www.goldstardog.com), however, was not going to comply that easily. Mya shoved her tug rope at me and tried to climb between me and the laptop. *Oh please, just take a little nap or go chew a bone...we'll play later!* No way, Mya was NOT going to give up.

Hell, I thought. I am an EXPERIENCED GERMAN SHEPHERD PERSON. What do you do with a hyper GSD? You make use of the natural instinct to chase and bring back toys, and then do it AGAIN AND AGAIN.





GOLD STAR Dog Training

So, out to the yard we went (Cora snoring on the couch). I called Mya's name as she sniffed about, and when her eyes came up, I pulled out the MAGIC YELLOW ORB ("tennis ball" to the lay person). Mya's eyes widened and locked on to the fuzzy object. Triumphant that this would finally expend her energy and let me work, I hucked the ball. Mya watched it fly through the air, dropped into play position, and gave me the "let's party!" look. *Yes! This will work!*

Then, Mya leapt straight up (remarkable for such a big dog!) and barreled toward me, soaring into the air and hitting me full force in the chest. I said hello to the (wet, cold) ground with a very unpleasant thud. Ball forgotten, Mya jumped around me in play. What fun!! Wet nose on my cheek, paws on my legs "Are you okay? Getupgetupgetup! Let's do it again!" What a goof! Had to smile at her antics. (couldn't laugh on account of the wind getting knocked out of me) 😊

It isn't always easy to juggle the demands of our human lives and make time for what our dogs need. Some days we do it better than others, other days not (today was an example). But if we are committed to our dogs' needs and try every day to meet them, we're already one step closer to doing so.

So, I leave with this note to self: *Teach Mya to chase BALL and retrieve. Borrow my cop friend's Kevlar vest. Try again tomorrow and laugh it off today.*

November 2013

The Counter Surfing Snafu

Deb to Mya: No no, you cannot put your paws on the kitchen counter to see what's up there. That's not what good doggies do in the house.

Mya to Deb: Okay, how about if I just stand up, walk around the kitchen on my back feeties, and check out the counters THAT way? I'm NOT putting my paws ON the counter!

Deb to Mya: Okay, you have a point.



December 2013

Mya Chronicles Continue: SADNESS and HOPE

Of all the dogs I've had, I've only named one of them myself—Isa, a GSD pup we got from a breeder. All of the beautiful souls who have graced our home in the past decade have come with their own names, histories, and personalities. First was sweet GSD Jordan, my first therapy dog partner, who came to live with us at age 13—a gift from a good friend and mentor. Then came Khese, a boisterous, intelligent, energetic GSD who came to us at age 5, from a local police officer. Cora, our GSD mix, came to us a little under a year of age, a stray from Mississippi. Each of them unique, each of them holding a special place in my life and memory. I could probably write a long essay on each of them (and for those who have passed on, I have), but this piece is about someone else.

And now living with us is Mya. Mya came to us as a foster dog, my first foster experience.



I can't watch those shows on TV about abandoned and tortured animals—Animal Cops (and all the spin-offs) and the others in that genre. I can't even watch the ASPCA commercials. A few years ago, I attended a lecture about the connection between animal cruelty and child neglect: I had nightmares for months. I'd rather not know the boundlessness of human apathy and negative intent toward those helpless beings entrusted to our care. I've volunteered here and there for rescue groups and humane societies, and I was always shocked by each dog's story and the depths of human selfishness. (I do recognize that some people are struggling as well, and that this impacts their ability to care for others.)



I sit on the couch, and Mya sits next to me. She had been chewing a bone intently but now sits up, looking into my eyes. Eye contact was not easy for her but now she knows she can communicate and connect through it. I stroke her hairless chest and neck, covered with the dark patches that skin takes on when it's been neglected for a sustained period of time. I tell her that the days ahead will be better and whatever came before was NOT HER FAULT. I tell her she is beautiful, even with spotty hair and mottled bumpy skin, and I tell her she's a GOOD DOG. I don't know if it means anything to her other than the tone of my voice. I know, it sounds stupid to talk to her in this human language as if she can understand me, but it makes ME feel better.

Sometimes when I look at Mya (and this was also the case when I adopted Cora, my rescue from Mississippi) I am filled with an overwhelming sadness (and anger)—for her and for all the animals who are caged, hurt, lost, abused, neglected...and ALONE. None of them have control of their daily lives, who they fall into the care of. The numbers and the experiences of these animals is staggering. It feels like an overwhelming tidal wave that cannot be driven back. Mya and Cora remind me of this.

What sort of dog could Mya have been if her prior five years had been radically different? I find myself, even though it is counterproductive, thinking of this fairly often. She is SO smart, so engaging, so social...but so inexperienced, so timid, so unsure. She's got a sense of humor and quick wit about her that reminds me of Khese, one of my Sheps. Yet, she is obviously struggling to trust new experiences, nearly every new encounter a challenge. She is an exceptional German Shepherd even now, but what else could have been if she had received the love and care every dog deserves?

Then, there are those experiences that wrench me from this depressing state. MOST people see Mya and are instantly drawn to her beautiful eyes, that heart-melting face. Her naked spots and mottled skin become not a reason for pity, but a badge of courage and survival. They think she is beautiful.

And, most people who want to meet her are so gentle and accommodating. When she barks at them in distrust and I ask them to bend down, turn away, and I put a smelly fishy treat in their hands, THEY DO IT. They are part of her recovery...every one of them in a small, but very powerful cumulative experience that teaches Mya that it's okay and the world can be a very gentle place.

And, so my anger, my frustration, and my helplessness are beaten back as I watch Mya experience the world and meet all those special strangers who take time to be part of the valuable life lessons that the world is NOT Animal Cops, or the ASPCA commercials...that there is redemption, goodness, and kindness.



January 2014

What Poop?

Deb: Mya, did you eat poop in the yard?

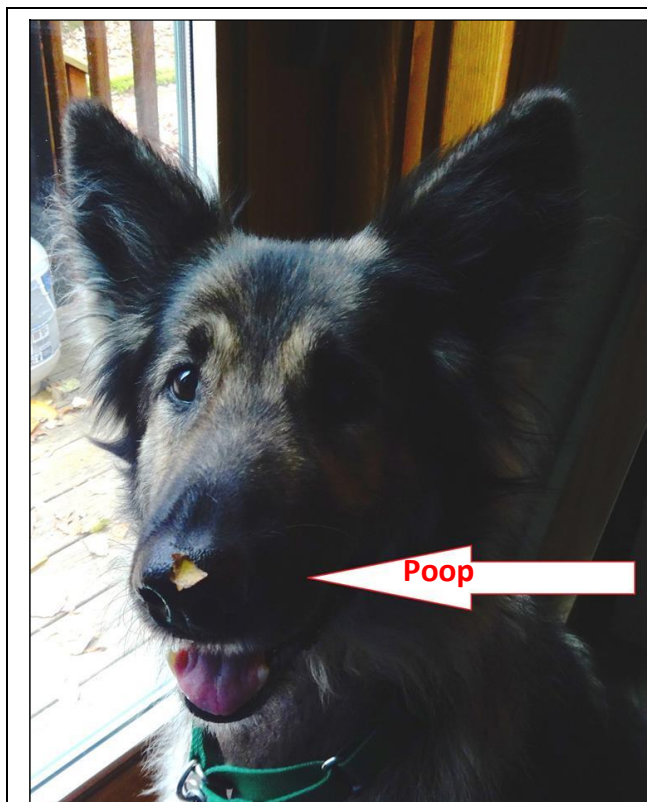
Mya: Um uh, nope... (GRIN)

Deb: What's that on your nose? That looks and smells like poop.

Mya: Um, uh, gee, I don't know how it got there.

****Mya wipes her nose on Cora****

Mya: Look ma, no poop on my nose! Can I have a treat?





March 2014

Not social? That's okay.

Of the dogs I've had, pretty much all of them were people dogs--that was one of their THINGS. They liked people...sought them out, enjoyed their company, were friendly and accepting of interactions with a wide range of humans. They each also had their OTHER favorite THINGS too. Jordan loved her tennis ball, vanilla ice cream, and French fries. Khese loved her retrieve dummy, sharing McDonald's fries from the drive through after dog class, and playing "you can't catch me" in the yard. Isa was a fanatic for the Frisbee and her squeaky red devil. Cora loves sleeping late and store clerks with aprons full of dog treats (and she won't turn down an ice cream either).

Mya, my foster, a 5-year-old GSD, does NOT like new people. After months and months of socialization and desensitization work, and quiet but steady encouragement (pressure?) from me to interact with people and LIKE it...well, I realized that people aren't HER THING. She's happy to be with us, to eat ice cream with Cora, to take walks and splash in the water, to ride in the car, to play with her tug toys and roll around in our bed. She has even gotten to the point where she likes being out and about, as long as she doesn't have to put up with people touching her or getting in her space.

And you know, I don't like people touching me and getting in my space either. I get it.

So, well, Mya is who she is and that's perfectly okay.



May 2014

Foster Flunkie

I AM A FOSTER FLUNKIE (and happy about it!). For those of you who may have been following my FB posts about my adventures with my foster dog Mya, I am happy to share the latest chapter in the story: we just couldn't bear to part with Mya ...and so she's become part of our family!

Of course, those friends and family who know me weren't terribly surprised. They said they knew from the first week with Mya that she was with us for life.

Oh well, they were right.

