Time to say Goodbye

*by Nannette Newbury*

I was putting the finishing touches on packing for a weekend judging assignment.

Make-up. Check.

Nightie. Check.

Directions to show site. Check.

Money. Check.

The phone rings and I recognize the name as a potential pet puppy buyer. I let it ring again, deciding whether to pick up. Do I really have the time to talk to this person? On second thought, I really am on top of things with the packing. I’ve already checked in for my flight on line. “Hi Janet. How may I help you?”

As a breeder I often get calls from families asking for puppies. My screening for potential homes is intense. Friends refer to it as the ‘interrogation!’ Janet’s call started out like a typical inquiry. They were looking for a new puppy for the family. She told me she was familiar with the breed. Her children were 10 and 12 years old. Someone was home during the day. So far Janet has passed some basic hurdles with me. “Janet, you’ve had Australian Shepherds before. Tell me about your last Aussie.”

Janet stumbles a bit and her voice quakes as she tells me she still has her Aussie, but it’s not doing well. Hearing this, I’m now confused about her puppy inquiry. “What is the situation with your current dog Janet?”

Janet conveys that her beloved Zuni is nearly blind and deaf. I ask Zuni’s age.

“Sixteen,” she replies.

The call has taken a dramatic turn from a new puppy call to something entirely different. I take a deep breath, shift thoughts, and ask Janet to tell me about her life with Zuni. Janet speaks lovingly of this loyal dog. Her voice breaks often and I find tears welling up in my eyes listening to the story of this remarkable family member.

Janet then tells me that Zuni is relegated to the backyard, with supervision most days as she cannot control her bodily functions. She is blind. She is deaf and she can no longer stand on her own. In the evenings she comes inside with the family. They build a ring of towels around her when they go to bed so if she loses control of her bladder or colon, it will be contained.

Janet pauses. I take a deep breath and ask her if she wants some feedback. I sense that Janet is relieved to talk to someone about her situation with Zuni. I share my experiences with older dogs assuring her that no matter how many dogs you’ve had, it never gets easier to let go.

I tell Janet that we are truly blessed to have the option of euthanasia for our dogs. Dogs who always give much more than they receive. I share that the one gift we can give leaving us with dignity and peacefulness. Perhaps we can avoid their pain and suffering which is a small gift for dogs who give so much.

Janet listens quietly. I hear an occasional catch in her breath; a sigh or a light sob. She quietly asks me, “When do you know it is time?”

“Often they tell you with their eyes.” It is not something I can describe, but dogs who are the master of non-verbal communication, let you know when they are ready. “Janet, are you close to Zuni right now?” “Yes, she is right outside under the shade tree.” I ask Janet to go outside and sit down beside Zuni. “Put her head in your lap and talk to her.”

I can hear Janet talking to Zuni over the telephone. My heart breaks for them. There is a pause and Janet comes back on the line. “You know my 10 year-old daughter told me last week that this was no way for a dog to live.”

“Janet, I would never presume to tell you that it is time for you to let Zuni go. Rather, that is a personal decision for you, for your family and for Zuni.” Janet asks, “What if it is the wrong time?”

I tell Janet the story about the loss of one of my “heart” dog years ago. I agonized over my decision with my vet. I knew the dog was ready. He was tired and ready to move on. I however, was not ready. I begged the vet to tell me that I was doing the right thing; or should I keep him alive just a while longer? The dog still had a relatively nice quality of life, but I was committed to him not suffering or enduring any undue pain due to my selfishness. My vet looked and me and told me that there is no right or wrong time. That saying goodbye is not a timing thing. “Yes, you may be saying goodbye early. He may have a few more good days or weeks or months left, or he could collapse tomorrow in agony.”

My time is running short to catch my shuttle to the airport. “Janet, I only have a few more minutes, but there is something I think you and your family should do tonight.” I ask Janet to have each family member spend special one-on-one time with Zuni. Talk to her. Tell her how much she has meant to you; remind her of the joy and love she has shared with each of you. Tell her funny stories about her behavior or quirks. And when each of you is done, tell her it is okay to let go.

Janet listens and still lightly sobbing thanks me for my time. I tell her to give Zuni a hug from me. We hang up with a promise to touch base when I return home after my weekend assignment. We started out with a seemingly light puppy inquiry and minutes later we are bonded by a common sense of impending loss of a dear family member.

The next afternoon I turn on my smartphone sitting at the airport. I was surprised to see a new email so soon from Janet. It read:

*I just wanted to thank you for all your advice and support yesterday. We took your advice and sat down with Zuni for a long time yesterday evening and told her it was OK to go if she was ready. Well, this morning my husband came downstairs and found that she had passed in the night. So thank you so much for your suggestions, it really helped us, and you were right, she was ready to go.*

Rest in peace Zuni…