



Love

a dog story

by sally seiffer



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Love.

A dog story.



Sally & Sifer
day.

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Preface

No prologue goes unread by me. I love a good backstory. I love broad context to give meaning. Every 'situation' has a backstory. Every human, every living thing, every 'thing' has a story.

Context.

When we are consumed, stuck or spinning, and reacting to life we miss the context - we miss the bigger picture, the broad view. Situations become isolated events that we respond to in often very scripted or routine ways. People become the role they are assigned by the perceiver, or perceivers. People become the role they assign themselves, consciously or unconsciously, as the receiver. The roles have rules as to how we act and respond. We become these robots, these vessels of predictable routine and behavior.

This is not living. This is not alive.

Keeley tells a story of love, without conditions attached to the love. Great love. Keeley is a dog. My dog. The dog I received. The lessons she taught me are easy to see now that she has been dead for five and a half years. The story of Keeley represents something more. Something bigger. We all certainly must have Keeleys around us all the time, everywhere. 'Keeley' exists. Love

exists. We just choose to open up to it.

Love transmits. It has to be received. To turn away from love and possibility is suffering.

1

keeley.

Michellie.

Pronounced Muh-kee-lee.

Keeley for short.

Keeley was my first conscious understanding of what pure, whole, honest love must feel like.

I was living in Hemet, California. When asked about Hemet, I would refer to it as the poor man's Palm Springs. It was a relatively small (but not small...) and growing town west of the San Jacinto mountain range - the other side of Palm Springs. I had just bought a home. It was in the midst of the southern California housing boom. My co worker friend and I went to look at some new builds during lunch. I found a one story, three bedroom that was being constructed. I walked into the trailer and said I wanted it. I wrote them a \$100 check for a home I later received \$77,000.00 that paid for graduate school tuition,

just over two years later...(and that was after I had refinanced - original price \$172,000, sold \$310,000...it was a good time to buy a home in S. Cali).

The small housing development was on a river bed. The river bed, which was mostly dry, was observable from an easily navigated 'cliff' behind my across-the-street neighbor's backyard. It was a massive expanse of open land - no buildings or civilization in sight, just the front range terrain of the San Jacintos. I was a runner at the time and the expanse of land was drool worthy. An organic path system had been formed. You could see natural pathways from the lookout on the cliff, they followed the dry river bed. The land was an Indian reservation. The Soboba Indian Reservation had its share of 'tales' that I had heard about - what happens on the land stays on the land, sort of tales. The only thing the 'tales' did for my naive 31 year old self was suggest that I needed a partner to navigate the land with.

I was playing Bunco with a group of teachers and their 'others' from my best friend's elementary school. Bunco. Teachers. Yep. It was actually a lot of fun. On one Bunco night there was mention of a pregnant dog. A pregnant purebred boxer who stayed in a cage outside - a large cage that was part of a gorgeous fenced in pool and outdoor living space. The home was further away from where I lived, but it was built on a massive expanse of land that also spawned from the San Jacintos. All this land was being developed, the housing boom was in full force, a lot of wild was being disrupted. The pure bred boxer got knocked up. The hunch was something 'wild' had shown up in the night.

And then came Keeley.

I visited the puppies shortly after they were born. There were two distinct types – half were big and white with fluffy fur, and the other half were smaller, tan with white spots – not so fluffy. I chose one of the ‘not so fluffies’ with a white necklace marking around its neck. The dog owners had a little boy. I told the little boy which one I wanted. He told me later that he put Keeley in his bed at night. I picked up Keeley at 5 weeks old. Clueless. The puppy still slept mostly, and moved seldom. I had nothing – no blanket, nothing. I laid it on the passenger seat. It didn’t move.

I had no intention of ever writing this story. I suppose I also had no intention of ever not writing this story. It is a story that lives inside of me. It feels emotional to share as I type the words, but not because it’s sad. Keeley isn’t alive and hasn’t been for some time. The emotion dwelling up, as the memories surface, is the emotion of love. The gush x 100.

I introduced ‘the gush’ in the original course. The gush is the inside, felt experience of what I call love. Expansive, open, light, free. A feeling unattached to conditions or outcomes. It exists. It shows up. It just is. We ‘get’ to feel it.

I became quite familiar with the gush when I received Keeley. I didn’t have a name for it, but something was happening on the inside of me that was strong. It was stronger, and got my attention, more than anything else I had experienced up to this time. I realized at some point that what I was feeling must be the inner experience of pure love. There was no transaction between Keeley and I. Keeley existed. The feeling wasn’t synthetic, something I could make more or less of necessarily. I couldn’t hug her enough, give kisses enough, or tell her enough. I had

to just have the feeling. I 'got' to just have the feeling. I could 'do' nothing but surrender to the feeling. Allow the feeling. The feeling was present when I was present with it.

By comparison, I think with other humans or even with other living systems, there is this actionable quality associated with 'love'. Little did I know at the time, I was entering into a rough ten year period. I say 'rough' because I am exposed to other people's 'rough' on a daily, and in hindsight, my 'rough' doesn't seem to compare. But. Feelings are feelings. And dark, empty, obsessive, controlling, hateful energy in motion (emotion) sucks no matter what the story attached reads like. As I went through the next ten years, I ironically - but obviously, so not ironically - got to do it with Keeley. Easy to see...now.

It's funny with dogs, we think we are in charge. We think our pet is so fortunate to have us. So easy to recognize now that love was ever present during my (what felt like) endless process of undoing and exposing the limiting, destructive stories that I was telling...about me.

2

wild.

I love this word.

To be wild is to be free. To not be held captive to other's ideas, expectations, rules. Like all words, 'wild' holds a vibration. An energy. A current. To some, the word wild might suggest a different interpretation that feels uncomfortable, out of control. A wild fire. 'The kids are acting wild' - unable to be contained. 'The crowd went wild.'

I became curious about the word 'wild' the summer after I had my first official teaching year at Cary-Grove high school in Cary, Illinois. I had the wonderful opportunity to grow up in Cary and attend Cary-Grove high school. When I was hired to teach at the high school, there were still a number of teachers who had taught me as a student. One of the teachers, Francey Zender, was wild. Francey lived by herself in an apartment just outside of Cary. Francey taught Humanities 1 & 2 at CGHS. Francey's wisdom and expansive thinking was lost on me as a high school student, and I can't say I was completely absorbed as a twenty-

something-first-year-teacher to what Francey had to offer. Francey loved me. My guess is that she picked up on my energy - my potential. I like to think I do the same with students that show up in my experience - you feel their truth. Words and actions become largely irrelevant...you pick up on a feeling, a spirit. Teacher becoming the space holder of love and possibility.

So when Francey, whom had received a reputation amongst students in my generation to be one of the 'it' teachers (I hadn't picked up on the why - I think she was the Dead Poet Society version to CGHS in the 80's for sure...again, lost on me), when she shared with me a flyer on a 6-credit hour English course offering out of Northern Illinois University that was to be held in the Tarryall mountain range located in Colorado, I was certain that this would grow me and my enlightenment. Let's just say that at the time I wasn't too sure what enlightenment even meant.

Francey never shared her age. I tried to peek at her driver's license when we rented our fly fishing equipment. I think I figured it to be 77. Badass.

The course included six reads to be completed prior to the 3-week experience taking place in the mountains. The books would be discussed at campfire throughout the trip.

As you may assume, the books were stories about the experience of the wild. I can only remember two - Annapurna and Out of the Wild. They might have been the only two I read, although I like to think at the ripe old age of 26 I had matured enough to read all six as per course requirements. Whatever.

The 3-week Colorado trip was to allow for the experience of what the stories from the books shared. Let's be honest, there were two English professors at NIU, one had a lifetime friend who owned a base camp in the Tarryall's, both professors passionate about the outdoors. They created the course - a paid adventure.

We took two backpack excursions, one for three sleeps and the other for five. I had never slept in a tent. We even did a solo sleep sans tent. This wasn't the first time I jumped in the deep end before learning how to swim. I still have the tendency. Rock climbing and car camp trips to explore some lesser popularized areas of Colorado were driven to and experienced. I bouldered, I climbed, I fly-fished (hated it). I mountain-biked. I even ended up in a care clinic to have the scree washed out of my ass after I had endo'd on a mountain bike ride and, when landed on my feet, only had more adrenaline that proved to be too much as I next hit a rock and lost control - tossed off the bike to slide down a portion of the path. The scree embedded up my left thigh into my butt cheek (had I been wearing spandex this would not have been an issue). I kind of felt cool - but not when it was scrubbed out - nor did I feel cool when the healing process was juicy and smelled and would continue to rip open and bleed every time I got up out of the car on the road trip back to Illinois. The medic on duty in Woodland Park had held my leg down like a chicken wing and scrubbed me out like the bottom of a baking dish that hadn't soaked long enough. All this happened while I scream-laughed at a volume 15 (scale to 10) - the Bill Clinton impeachment trial taking place in the background... 'I did not have sexual relations...'

I'm getting a little carried away in these stories that took place

LOVE.

well over a decade ago – a decade? 26? um...over two decades... all because of this present time monthly course topic, *love*, and my love teacher – Michellie (Keeley). Keeley was not in existence yet. I wouldn't move back to California the second time for another four years. The point of the summer mountain English class trip is to talk about 'wild'. It was at a campfire conversation that I was exposed to new thinking: what does wild mean to you?

Keeley. Wild. Untamed.

Love.

3

impermanence.

I think most dog owners can look back at their dog's life and point to lessons learned. In my case, the broad lesson, or theme, was the conscious experience of what love without conditions feels like. Now I recognize that love without conditions just 'is'. It is an energy that exists. We can call it well-being, infinite intelligence, spirit, flow, etc. It exists within laws that govern that energy. The awareness and understanding of impermanence was second to the lesson of unconditional love. Impermanence being the lesson that stubbornly revealed energy as dynamic, flowing, ever-changing...form and formless.

In the school setting, working with elementary age, there is a stage of development where the student's recognize impermanence. This can be a difficult shift for children. Any 'shift' of a belief allows for change. Change and trauma go hand in hand in my opinion. My generalized definition of trauma is that it has a range and is experienced on different levels by most people. Trauma is a life event, circumstance, or situation that was unexpected and changed one's experience of what was

assumed to be 'normal'. The result of trauma is some level of emotional dysregulation and (what seems to be) a lack of control, to varying degrees, over the dysregulation.

Impermanence is the recognition that life energy is dynamic, ever-changing. Things are not meant to be one way and stay. Can you see how this one contrary belief about permanence, and the mindset we create around it, could unintentionally lead toward outcomes (observable behavior and the results that show up) that resonate with one's need to control outcomes that, by nature and the laws that guide it, cannot be controlled?

Keeley was maybe six years old when I realized this wasn't a forever thing, she and I. I was going out of town and a nearby veterinary clinic had a kennel. For Keeley to stay at the kennel she had to have a wellness examination. I think this is how the story goes. She had a 'tooth thing'. The vet lifted up her gum and her back tooth was covered up by her gum - swollen, red. They were going to pull the tooth, and until they did it was uncertain what the significance of the 'tooth thing' was - the 'c' word was mentioned. I went on the trip wondering for the first time, what if this was all the time I would have with Keeley?

There was no significance to the 'tooth thing' and I went on to forget about being present and attuned, and Keeley went on to get really overweight and began to lose chunks of fur on her back. If impermanence is the chapter theme, then this segment theme is denial.

There was nothing I loved more than Keeley. How was it that she gained 20 lbs (on a dog body) and literally had at least four,

maybe six, relatively large chunks of fur no longer attached to her, resulting in large, black, grinch-skin-like open patches. The weight and the skin patches were present for months before finally one night in bed, petting her, with huge chunks of fur coming out in my hand, I realized there was a problem.

Back to the vet. The vet had told me at the initial tooth thing that Keeley needed to lose weight. Denied. Now the vet had my attention and I realized that she needed to lose weight. How do I help her lose weight? I asked. BY NOT FEEDING HER MORE THAN WHAT WAS APPROPRIATE FOR HER SIZE. Ohhhh...the table scraps, the endless treats given out of guilt for being gone all day? Wait, I am the one responsible for the weight? Weight was only one thing. She also had a thyroid problem which she would begin to take medication daily, lasting the rest of her life.

You may think I'd have 'woken up' and began to 'pay attention' a bit more. The next incident came on a walk. I noticed that she had huge growth of her anal glands. When did this happen? She looked like a boy dog from behind.

The last and most significant event happened and finally got my attention. Literally, got my attention. I was now awake. It was after the Breckenridge summer. October.

I was busy. When Keeley was having these 'situations' occur I could have noticed ahead of time had I been 'attuned' to her and 'present'. I was working two jobs. I worked full-time at a high school, and then worked part-time at an alternative high school setting that started at 3:15pm. I loved working at the alternative school setting. It fit because the students I spent time with at

the day school were transferring to the evening school to gain credits to graduate. Still. Too much. And my focus was totally skewed. I was miserable – but I had yet to realize that I was the one who could change it.

I had the big Breckenridge summer awakening (see introduction to *self-care* course) and moved into my cool duplex off 6th avenue in Denver. I was working the two jobs, so my paycheck ‘looked’ good – it looked like what I should have been making in one job (I mentioned that pay had been frozen years prior and continued to stay the same). I was ‘thin’ – I knew this because all my clothes fit after a summer of Crossfit, running, swimming, hiking and my version of a paleo-ish diet that was popular with Crossfit. Great. I was enlightened and creating my perfect life. No more big feelings. Riiiiight.

Fall Break. Busy. Didn’t buy Keeley dog food. In the week leading up to break, I switched dog food on Keeley three times. She had started doing the deep, tummy, pre-throw up thing. Denial. Not a good time to get sick Keeley. You’re okay.

I dropped Keeley off at a different kennel situation that was in a big warehouse close to the airport. She had been there before. The owners were hardcore dog people.

I left for the airport. I landed in Florida. Parents picked me up and we stopped at a restaurant in Fort Myers. Ah. Now it was time to relax. Checked my phone. The kennel called. Keeley’s stomach had twisted due to the discomfort and her ‘throwing up’ thing – all the gas created this space for her tummy to bounce around and then twist, cutting off the flow of oxygen. The dog

people were aware of the twisted tummy as it happens to dogs of a certain size. Keeley was now at the emergency vet and her 'numbers' were all over the place. The vet I spoke with told me that 'putting her down' was a reasonable option.

So now I was present. I loved Keeley. It was not something I could explain. I felt it. Keeley was my set point. Keeley existed. I had Keeley to return to when the other things were feeling out of my control. I wanted to say goodbye to Keeley. I remember being in the bedroom at my parents – sobbing. I couldn't see in my mind's eye the markings on her body. I wondered how I could love something so much but be so unaware of what she actually looked like. I had this thought that if Keeley could live through this then I was going to know her markings. I was going to be present and attuned and appreciate this dog.

By now, I have probably lost you if you aren't a dog person. Drama. If you are a dog person you most likely get the love thing. If you are human, on some level I'm guessing the attunement and presence resonates. How is it that these things we love are also things that we...wait for it...might...take for granted (?)

I spoke with the vet on duty through the night – she had just gotten on shift when we originally spoke. She was going to call me if it was imminent to put Keeley down – obviously I didn't want Keeley to suffer just so I could get my ass back to Denver to say goodbye. Gawd I wanted to see her, touch her, hold her, whisper to her what she meant to me and how thankful I was to have her as my dog.

I got the first flight back the next morning. Funny (now) story.

The flight I booked was going out of Tampa. My parents had picked me up in Ft Myers the evening before. They live in between the two airports, about thirty minutes closer to Ft Myers. On the way to the airport that morning I was obviously upset and distracted. I finally noticed the sign on the road said something about Ft Myers airport. "Dad. Are we going to Tampa?" "No, Sal." It was too late to turn around so we went to Ft Myers and I spoke to the ticket agent who got me a ticket out of Ft Lauderdale, across the state. I made the flight within, not kidding, a minute before they shut the door. Headed to Dallas and then home to Keeley.

When I finally got to the vet, prepared for the worst but also kind of knowing that she wasn't done yet. Keeley greeted me as Keeley. Keeley was a nervous dog - (now I interpret the entire experience as all the energy Keeley took on of mine that was totally messed up). Keeley had gone to the kennel and was then taken to the emergency vet. That's a lot of transition for any dog, especially a nervous dog. The original vet I had spoken with had just returned back on shift. She looked at me and said 'hm. She hasn't been like this since I have seen her.' SO YOU WERE GOING TO PUT HER DOWN!!! - that's another story.

Keeley came home with me. We got her stomach stapled later that week. There were two sleepless nights that I stayed up with her. I was present. I massaged her back gently while she cried like dogs cry when they are hurting. I was present. I allowed the space of love to be what it was and have the experience by choice. Michellie's markings continue to be etched into my memory.

Keeley lived two more years. We continued to run in the

mornings up until the Friday before she died (on a Tuesday). She took a daily thyroid pill and now another pill for gas and was put on a special food that I purchased at the vet.

I did not hesitate to use credit to pay for all things Keeley. I also didn't hesitate to use credit to pay for all things mindfulness. I was determined to end the bullshit big feelings and teach others how to do it. Next phase: working 3 FTE jobs and a 1.5 workload (yep - paycheck was looking fabulous). And then I didn't get the full time job I anticipated. I had all this debt and now a job contract for .7...²/₃'s of a full time contract. This is another story. A story titled: Bankrupt.

4

guide.

Over the ten years that I 'got' to have Keeley, I can look back and see the guide that she was. Keeley was an external reference point to what I couldn't yet experience on my own...my set point, my equilibrium.

As discussed and confirmed: I loved Keeley. In the midst of what I would call my suffering, which included me taking on other's energy and not knowing how or what to do with it and, as a result, continuing to feed this powerless state, Keeley held the space of love. The space that exists, the space of well-being, of balance, not too much, not too little, enough.

To receive the love, I only needed to be open to it. When you are the dog owner (or the parent, the teacher, the person in the perceived role of power) you assume you are the one in charge, the one that others rely on and need in order to function, to exist. I suppose there is evidence to support this.

When I would get stuck or consumed, I would think of Keeley

and feel relief in my body. Love. She existed. I got to go home to Keeley. I got to cuddle with Keeley. Intentionally creating the audible sound of Keeley's breath in my imagination became a skill I used often to slow down when I first began to practice mindfulness.

The interesting thing about dogs, and this experience of love, was that the dog holds this space and all the human can do is allow it. One cannot consume the dog. The dog has these natural boundaries that 'force' you to just accept the feeling, to allow the feeling. This experience is available often in nature when we allow it, when we open up to it. The awe of existence.

Why would someone EVER do something unkind and dismissive of that which they genuinely felt such a pure love for?

Insert judgment.

Insert comparison.

Insert criticism.

Judgement, comparison, and criticism is a double edged sword. An assumption that there is ultimately a right and a wrong. If you have read the story up to this point you can reference back to the wild section. Keeley and I were wild together in the dry riverbed of the Soboba Indian reservation. Keeley was free - gawd was she ever free, and I desired to be free. What a match. In the riverbed, the unspoken rule was that there were no rules. Everyone who entered did so on their own volition - there were no laws or governing bodies. It was just a huge expansive space

of unknown, in Keeley and my case.

And then we moved to Denver.

One of my first desires when I moved to Denver was to find the 'space' to run and be free. I assumed the people in Denver appreciated space and freedom as much as I did - it was the Rocky mountains. The biggest and best dry riverbed EVER!

I did not like to have Keeley on a leash. It seemed totally reasonable and totally Denver to me. Let's just say that Denver and Colorado are two different mindsets. For the sake of telling a story, I am creating broad themes that connect to bigger ideas - but I was a novice, inexperienced, and largely clueless dog owner. I was definitely the owner that assumed all other humans loved and appreciated Keeley as much as I did - how could they not, right? Lesson learned.

I do not even know where and what begin to tell and share here - there are so many instances. There was the woman at the dog park who told me that my dog was a pit bull and that pit bulls were 'put down' in Denver. It was the law. There were the dog fights...the forever presence of the potential dog fight that I eventually clued into and attempted to steer away from. I just wanted to run free and wanted Keeley to run free. I assumed that dogs had a way that they figure their shit out. Keeley was WILD. I was wild. Together we were a disaster in the open space where laws and rules were to be followed.

The Cherry Park reservoir open space dog park eventually beat me into submission to the point where I assumed that no other

human liked Keeley, that they were all scared of her, and they all judged me to be a lacking, unskilled dog owner that really should not have a dog. So now we go from totally untamed to tame with no space in the middle.

The projection of what I was going through in my inside world to my outside world at the time is becoming even more clear. Keeley's external experience was a reflection of my inner experience that was not available, or I was not available to see it yet. I was in grad school. Holy hell of two years. All previous beliefs - religious and political, dominant views, etc - all completely disrupted - tossed up and spinning wildy in the wind to eventually settle, but not for what seemed an eternity. There was something about grad school from the first seat I took in class. I knew I was there to receive and not share.

There was the time Keeley jumped out of the back car window, the time Keeley took off after something and we lost each other - several walkers had seen a dog howling in the parking lot.. 'I'm coming Keeley!', the multiple times she went after the horses - there were stables connected to the open space park and on the weekends there were family trail rides THROUGH the dog park - (Keeley was not the only one disrupting that situation), there was the time she nipped the butt of the man in the service uniform, the puncture wound to my friend's dog when we arrived after a long trip in the car. The road trips. Many road trips with Keeley.

Keeley and I finally gave up on the open space dog park (much to other's appreciation) and began running on streets using an extended leash really early in the morning. Keeley and I ran most

early mornings of most of her life. We also went on crazy long walks quite often on the weekends. I was addicted to movement and exercise and I felt guilty for not being home so much during the week. So the win-win was running together in the early morning and then the afternoon early evening walk was bonus.

There had always been moments to capture the love. The space of the dog park held the possibility of freedom, and the moments of bliss. Aside from the mine traps of dog fights and horse chases, there was another riverbed that was often flowing. I had at least a 4 mile open run in the reservoir with about 2 miles running along the river (maybe 20 feet wide and 3 feet at the deepest unless there was a lot of rain or snow to really get it moving). I would run on the trail and Keeley would run through the water. There were pockets of water that were insane for dogs - I called it Doggie Disneyland. I found the 'ponds' that were off the main path. One had a bench. Not sure why not many people and dogs landed there. It might have been that we were there (?) After the run - sometimes I ran it twice, I would sit and Keeley would be in the water. There was plenty of bliss when I was available to it. Oh the space. The sky. The dirt path. The runs that felt so effortless at times. The times it felt like all the suffering was a mistake and now it would be okay. Not true at the time - my peace was still a ways from being something I knew how to sustain - but it felt so good, I would think to myself in these moments, it had to be like this.

Anxiety had never really been my thing. Depression was it. Depression and anxiety often seem to show up together with the students I have worked with over the years. I had a panic attack, or what I would call a panic attack, one time at the dog

park that made me forever empathetic to the students or to adults that speak of anxiety. I was in the space of the park. The setting was cued. There was wide open space, I was running, Keeley was behaving. Something just attacked me on the inside. I couldn't escape. All this freedom, space, movement outside and something inside was on attack - I couldn't run fast enough. I couldn't do anything. It had a grip. I think I cried and just kept running, eventually to the car. I'm not sure what happened next. I was years from meditating and having any true skills other than medication to help me. I ran. I no longer journaled. I watched Sex and the City. I called my parents and complained which only made it worse. They got upset and my dad would try and fix it by asking if quitting (grad school) was an option. Not sure about the panic attack - it must have just run its course.

So that's a lot of wild and untamed. When we moved back to the city after the Breckenridge summer, Keeley and I walked and ran in a really nice neighborhood, probably the nicest neighborhood in Denver - Country Club they call it. We steered clear of all other dogs. Moving to the other side of the street way ahead of possible meetings. Avoid.

I was allowing other people the power. Partly, I did need to be a responsible pet owner. The broader peice was my fucked up belief where I continually assumed I was doing something wrong. Never good enough. Never enough. Keeley was not at fault. I didn't teach Keeley. I was the fuck up.

the end.

The last few weeks of Keeley's life had a few events that make me smile. As mentioned, we were living in a duplex somehow within the periphery of the oldest, most elegant and statuesque neighborhood in Denver. A typical walk took us past exquisitely designed homes that must have dated back to early 1900's. I have no reference point of eras for great architecture, nor do I make any claims to have extensive knowledge of what constitutes historical design. But. I know that the homes we would walk by were exceptional. I say this to paint a picture of wide neighborhood roads with massive, overhanging mature trees and professionally landscaped gardens. All relatively visible to the passerby.

The homes aligned next to one another. One old mansion sat long on a corner with a huge front yard. The home had a sense of being uncared for, it seemed lonely. Empty. Somehow I must have been privy to a neighborhood tale that there was a young, older man (60's) who lived there alone as his wife had passed and kids were grown. I never saw any 'life' at the home - which

was typical because these home owners probably had a dozen homes all over the world.

On a weekend afternoon, within two or three weeks before Keeley's last day, we were on a typical neighborhood stroll. The man stood in the wide, expansive front lawn with a black dog a bit bigger than Keeley. The man looked like his home. Disheveled but kind. As we walked by, he said hello.

The man asked if Keeley would like to say hi. He appeared to be training his dog as they were on the front lawn with no leash and maybe some sort of a toy to practice fetching. I gave the man my typical response and assumed he would nod in appreciation of me not setting up his dog for a 'tangle'.

The man said, gently - 'she's fine...she is giving the sign that she wants to play.' I let Keeley off leash and the two dogs played for maybe 20 minutes. The black dog I learned was still a puppy. An Australian Mastiff recently shipped to the states, and then to the new owner. Something about this experience felt so validating. Not validating me, as the owner of Keeley, but validating for Keeley.

There was another neighborhood character that I had befriended. A retired medical doctor that never retired. I wish I could remember the details of his dog story. The man and his Italian greyhound would walk around the neighborhood off leash. We were close to a popular shopping area with a big mall and extended streets that included more shopping, restaurants, coffee shops, etc. Plenty of benches and outdoor patios to sit and people watch. The dog owner had a presence and a certain

type of enmeshment with his dog that drew others to them - like street performers. They would sit and the dog would lay like a scarf around the owner's neck. I would always be awed that this man walked an Italian Greyhound OFF LEASH (the dog looked like it could go from 0 to 60 mph in a SHOT).

Our neighborhood was framed by busy roads. Within the neighborhood it was quiet and relatively spacious. Still, I was forever scared that Keeley would take off and get hit by a car. Funny how Keeley and I went from this untamed, wild nature to me being a hesitant veer-away-from-all leash walker.

The man and his greyhound walked by my duplex one early evening. My duplex was on the corner of a very busy one way street - 6th avenue. I had a friend from school over and we were sitting on my front porch. Keeley was inside and the big front window was open. My friend had a new puppy that was still happy to be on her lap or under her chair. The man and the off leash Italian-skinny-fast-crazy-disproportionate-long-legs-that-looked-like-it-could-jump-straight-up-20-feet, came onto the porch. He said, 'let her out here' - speaking of Michellie. I'm sure I turned pale. Like, what are you thinking? We are on a corner. He and my relationship was based on me in awe of him walking off leash with his dog without a care or concern in the world. He had all the confidence in the world that Keeley could manage on the patio. I let her out. She was so happy. No issue.

We drove up to Breckenridge the last weekend she was alive. We had gone for a run before we left and I forgot to bring water. Keeley was the BEST road trip companion. She had this way of sitting up and looking out the windows at the scenery as if

she was really enjoying herself. She had the slightly open jowl thing going on that looks like a big, happy smile. The traffic sucked and we ended up backtracking and taking an alternative highway that would take us another 3 hours. I was going up for a party and I dropped Keeley off at my friend's house (put out food and water) and then left for the event.

When I got back that evening, I recall letting her out to go to the bathroom and nothing seemed out of the ordinary. The next morning I got up and drank weekend coffee - I could do this for hours and it was typical for Keeley to stay sleeping in bed for up to an hour or two after I got out. It had been a long time. I went in to check on her and she wasn't moving. I picked her up and brought her out to the couch. She was distant and her gums were white. My best angle was that she was dehydrated. I brought water to her and she did drink.

I managed to get her down the mountain. Once home, I gave her some water with electrolytes. She was laying on my bed. I laid behind her along the length of her. I held her and whispered through the alphabet. Each letter sharing an appreciation of what she meant to me. I distinctly remember the letter 'u'. Us. I love us Keeley. I love what we got to be together.

She actually rebounded and I went to work the next day. When I got home from work her little heart was still beating too fast, it seemed out of rhythm. I took her to the vet and the vet said she was good.

The next morning it was back. She moved so slow that I didn't need a leash. I took her out the front to see if she could walk to

the corner. She walked to the car and just sat on her hunches by the back passenger side door. I left her to get my keys. She. Unleashed on the corner. I knew I wasn't coming home with her.

It's weird when you think of what this moment would be like. I just knew. Keeley was out. She made the choice. Even when we sat in the garden at the vet. There was no last special moment. She was done. Ready.

After she was dead the vet said I could stay with her as long as I wanted. It didn't make sense to me. Keeley was part of everything now. I could feel it. She was not in that body.

Somehow I decided that I would just follow the feelings that showed up. I would cry when crying came - wherever and whenever within reason. I made the choice to enjoy the memories and be happy that I got to have Keeley. It wasn't that I didn't want to feel. Something about the entire experience of Keeley seemed like a gift that was intended to be enjoyed. Always.

Within the next week I moved. I went for a walk.

I met Smoosh.

Epilogue

love.

love exists.

Guess who no longer thinks she is a fuck up?

I was just beginning my new journey toward *love* when Keeley died – loving myself enough to recognize that *love* was ever present, an energy. That's not really true. I think we begin the journey back as soon as we come into this physical space.

When I practiced skills, tools, and strategies that aligned with the expansive energy, it felt good. It felt right. I had to care about myself (self-care) enough to be curious. If I could get curious, I could get to the next step. And then the next step. I can assure you that the space grows.

Keeley and I were on Sixth Avenue for two years after the Breckenridge summer. I wrote about the Breckenridge summer as a prologue to the first course, *self-care*. Life events happened that led to a bankruptcy, moving, and Keeley dying all at the same time.

That was six years ago. I know this because Smoosh just turned

six this year. Smoosh was just a puppy when I met her the week after I moved to Dakota Ave.

When I walk out my door the sign across the street reads, 'Unique'. Down from there is a dispensary, 'Livwell'. The corner across from Unique is a sign, 'Goodheart' – a veterinary clinic. Another sign: 'Sally' (beauty supply).

In looking back, it seems a painfully long process to get to my 'shift'. At present, as mentioned in the conclusion of *self-care*, I haven't had an episode in maybe close to three years.

I had the intention of creating online courses the school year AFTER the Breckenridge summer. I quit the full-time job the following school year and was certain mindfulness was going to be a hit. I was going to create online courses and facilitate workshops.

I got a part-time job at a virtual school which, to me, was all the evidence I needed – 'it' was happening. The virtual school didn't need, nor want, a social-emotional course creator – they wanted a school social worker.

I posted early videos on YouTube of the Check IN that I used at Virtual Academy – my first...technique?

I also created Movement.Breath.Kindness. for elementary classrooms.

My original idea was solid – online course creation and mindfulness as an effective tool to grow social and emotional well-being

was not lacking in potential. What I didn't realize was that the idea was just that – an idea. A seed. I planted it and like a novice gardener, expected results much too soon.

My PhD, or my culminating experience in this particular developmental stage, came in the form of Kung Fu Panda. I was Po. I'll give the five year old (when we met – we hung out for three full years)...I'll give him Master Oogway. Shifu was a beast. We went hip to shoulder for most of his third grade year into half of fourth. A master teacher. The furious five round up all lived on my caseload – each with superhuman powers that transcended common understanding. The setting for the projection of this Kung Fu Panda live action play was Westgate elementary school. It was exactly what I needed to grasp the broad view of not only what it meant to be a school mental health provider, but what it meant to trust *love*.

Po was chosen to be the dragon warrior. The chosen one to bring peace back to the valley. We are all Po. Po was out of tune. Po didn't fit in. Po didn't know his story. Po was clumsy. Po was 'extra'.

But Po was really good at one thing: being Po.

We are the only one who can bring peace back to our valley.

