

Letting Go of the Harness for the Last Time: A Descriptive Realism Approach to Exploring the Ending of Working Relationships with Guide Dogs

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Abstract

In this research, I use a combination of feminist methodology and descriptive realism to explore my experiences and the experiences of other totally blind individuals who have ended working relationships with guide dogs. Little research has been done on the approximately eight thousand blind people who are partnered with guide dogs in the United States (Eames & Eames, 2004). A primary goal of this qualitative study is to give voice to the unique narratives of people whose experiences are rarely explored in academic literature (Contreras, 2003; Schneider, 2005). I blend information I gathered during interviews with five blind authors and ten blind participants with my autoethnography to illustrate how concepts can be applied to broader social issues, such as policies at agencies that provide guide dogs to blind individuals (Denzin, 2001; Ellis, 2002).

Introduction

Even though she is covered with dozens of acupuncture needles, my beloved black Labrador guide dog Lily is comfortably dozing on a dog bed next to me. As I write this, I occasionally stop to pet a small patch of unquilled fur on her head. Although the acupuncture is reducing the pain she experiences because of degenerative arthritis in her back, nothing will stop the inevitable. Lily must retire soon.

Despite her pain, Lily is still eager to get in her harness and guide me through hectic days of running from class to class, dashing to catch buses, and climbing stairs to volunteer at a shelter for victims of domestic violence. Just yesterday, she stopped me from being hit by cars twice. I cannot imagine my life without her by my side for almost every moment of every day; she has been guiding me for over seven years now. Beyond keeping me safe, she has been my closest companion during important events in my life, such as witnessing the birth of my granddaughter and staying by my side when I was hospitalized for a major surgery.

In addition to my emotional turmoil about Lily's impending retirement, I have logistical concerns. I do not want to leave her for two weeks to train with a successor dog, I do not want another dog, and I do not have enough income to afford another dog. Giving Lily away is not an option because our bond is too close.

As Lily's physical condition deteriorates, my autonomy is gradually being taken from me. The freedom I once took for granted is vanishing. No longer can I just walk to and from the store if I need something, nor can I walk to the campus if I miss the bus, or the buses are not running. I must depend more and more on others to provide transportation for me.

During the visit with the vet today, I broached the difficult topic. I said, "I probably have to start thinking about retiring Lily." With a sigh, the vet, who is next to me the most devoted to keeping Lily working, sadly replied, "Yes, at some point you will have to give up too much to keep Lily working."

The above narrative is my own. In this research, I use a combination of feminist methodology and descriptive realism to explore my experiences and the experiences of other totally blind individuals who have ended working relationships with guide dogs (Denzin, 2001; Ellis, 2002). In the following pages, my narrative is blended with passages I extracted from interviews with five authors and ten participants to describe some difficult aspects associated with ending working relationships with guide dogs; in addition, I conclude with a discussion of my findings and suggestions for further research.

I derive the concept of making the Obvious Dubious from Michael Patton, who explains researchers use

this approach, "(t)o disabuse misconceptions ..." (1990, p. 423). Except for information pertaining to me and the names of authors and their guide dogs, all other names of people and dogs are fictionalized.

Making the Obvious/Dubious

The role of schools and the role of veterinarians during and after a working relationship ends may appear straightforward. The schools provide successor dogs, and veterinarians provide medical care and advice. However, my research indicates that these roles entail many nuances.

The role of schools

Wynona: "I make the choices, but confirmation from my school is valuable for me. I also feel like I owe it to the staff to keep them informed. I feel loyalty to them and gratitude for their investment into training my guide dogs."

In addition to training guide dogs and blind people, the participants expressed a wide variety of expectations for the roles they think their schools do or should fulfill. Maintaining good communication between staff members at schools and blind clients, preparing blind partners for the reality of ending working relationships, and expanding training options were major themes that reoccurred during my interviews.

Good communication between blind individuals and staff members at schools can prevent problems and build bonds of trust between graduates and staff members. Some of the participants who experienced mismatches felt that when they expressed concerns while training with mismatched dogs, staff at their schools did not take their concerns seriously. Bob: "When I had problems during training, my instructors blamed me. They did not see that the dog was not working. After I brought the dog home and he still did not work, a trainer came out to evaluate us. He told me that the dog needed to be retired, and it wasn't my fault. Having that acknowledgement was good, but I would have liked to have an apology."

Receiving accurate and thorough information about their successor dogs from the staff at schools is important to many blind people. Because of unpleasant experiences some of his friends have had with guide dogs, Clark is concerned about getting a successor dog with behavior problems, such as destructive chewing. Clark: "There is a risk factor, and I am afraid of the unknown."

After finishing training and going home with her third guide, Penny was concerned when Freesia started having accidents in her home and at Penny's work place. When Penny called Freesia's puppy raiser to ask if Freesia had a history of accidents, Penny was dismayed to discover that the puppy raiser did not housebreak Freesia. Being told that her third guide dog was not housebroken before bringing Freesia home could have saved Penny much frustration and damage to her new carpets. Penny: "I had thoughts of sending her back, but I like her, and I decided that we would get through this. She is a sweet dog. It took several months, but I housebroke her."

Some participants expressed frustration because staff members at their schools did not take their requests seriously. Carey: "When I applied for my third dog, I made it very clear that I did not want a male. I even refused to go to an earlier class because the only available match for me was a male. I got to the school expecting a female, but I got a male; Poplar. I was very disappointed, but I decided to try to make it work, mostly because I didn't want to wait for another class/dog if there was no female available among the dogs in that class string. I'm a terrible cane traveler, and Awesome was already settling in with her adoptive family. One of the reasons I didn't want a male was that I didn't want to have to deal with "marking". Poplar did try it once we got home, but figured out pretty quickly that it was not to his advantage to continue the behavior."

Nevertheless, Cary appreciates the support she has received from her school. Carey: "I don't know what I would have done without the wonderfully supportive, caring staff. When I needed an ear, a hug, advice or validation, I always knew where to go: I was never disappointed. I retired four dogs in five years. It was one of the most difficult times in my life. In my lowest moments, I felt I must be doing something wrong. The truth is, that no one was at fault; there was nothing that I, or anyone at my school, could or should have done differently. The things that happened were simply beyond our control."

Maintaining open communication and bonds of trust with trainers at schools often helps graduates feel supported when they make difficult decisions. Many of the participants expressed appreciation for the trainers who visited them in their homes and helped them make decisions to end working relationships. Having a trainer observe her and Endive working helped Penny make a choice to retire him. Penny: "I had the trainer come out to watch

Endive and me work. She said that his work was excellent, but he was working too slowly. ... I move fast, and Endive was just too slow. People did not help when they questioned my decision to retire Endive. He seemed fine to them. Having the school back me up on my decision to retire him really helped."

Some of the participants told me that they did not think their schools did enough to prepare them for ending working relationships. Randy thinks schools should do more to prepare blind people for the realities of having to end working relationships. Randy: "My first guide worked for 10 full years and died in my home. It was so traumatic that I very nearly refused to apply to receive another guide dog. My second guide dog worked for 6 years and suddenly lost his own sight. A year or two after retiring him, he died in my front yard. Again, the experience is so traumatic that I sometimes feel that guide dog schools are negligent for not preparing students for this experience in any way and for not providing adequate services for those who lose their guides by whatever cause. My third guide dog only worked two years and was retired for inappropriateness for the work. Again, I should have rejected her in the first six months, but the experience of losing a guide dog is so difficult, I tried in vain to make the relationship work for a couple of years. I am only 4 months into the successor dog relationship now. I feel pretty certain that this will be my last, simply because I find building the relationship to be such a great investment and, though the good working years are truly invaluable, the ending experience simply swings the overall balance of the experience too far toward the unpleasant side."

Because of a disturbing experience he had when one of his retired guide dogs passed away, Randy believes that schools should provide detailed education and preparation for graduates. Randy: "That would include education and preparation for the retirement and the death of guide dogs. Schools should prepare us for both. I had a dead dog in my house, and I did not know what to do with the body. Who should I call: the police, the fire department? How could I go through thousands of dollars worth of training to get a guide dog and not know what to do with my dog's body?"

According to Katherine Schneider (a retired clinical psychologist who has written on ending working relationships with guides and has much experience with retiring her own guide dogs), staff at guide dog schools should focus attention on retirement when people are in class to get a successor. "Because if a person is having trouble moving through the grieving process, the bonding process with the new dog can be adversely effected...Left overs from a previous dog can get in the way of accepting a new dog. In the business, we call it second-dog syndrome, but second-dog syndrome can happen with any dog. Schools should put articles about retirement in newsletters. If a counselor is available at the school, the counselor should call people before they go to class to see how they are dealing with the ending...I do not think one transition group meeting during class is enough...Having articles available at schools for students to read during class is also a good idea because some people don't want to talk." Speaking about the role of instructors during a difficult ending, she said, "My perception is they know it is hard for people to retire their guide dogs, and the way they choose to deal with hard is to not deal with it unless someone is a meltdown: which may be too late and not always public" (Personal Communication, January 25, 2006).

Nationally known activists in the assistance dog movement Ed and Toni Eames both support having grief counseling available at schools. Ed: "A lot of schools have started having grief counseling sessions for folks getting successor dogs. You need to have trained people doing it. The counseling staff needs to be separate from the instructional staff (Personal Communication, January 29, 2006). Expanding options for training with guide dogs could benefit many potential and current blind partners of guide dogs. Most of the schools require blind individuals to travel from their homes to live at residential training centers for two weeks to a month to train with guide dogs. Attending residential training programs is unpleasant for some, and some have difficulty leaving work, family, or other responsibilities to go away for training.

Randy did not like taking a month out of his life to live at a school to train with a guide dog. After staying at a school to get his first guide dog, he switched to a school that offered options for home training. Randy: "I always half joke that one of the worst parts of getting a guide dog is being locked up in prison with a bunch of other blind people."

Ruth: "My school is very nice—even when we disagree. The staff tries to get me a new dog as quickly as possible. The school gave me home training with my last dog, and the home training option helped a lot."

Having a choice to train with a guide dog at home instead of traveling to a school could prevent difficulties with employers. Lynn: "My work never got in the way of me going away for training for a new dog until I got my fifth dog. I had explained to my boss that I needed time off for training, and my boss was very upset. I almost did not get my fifth dog because getting away from work was so hard, but after appealing to human resources and upper management, I did get the time off."

In some cases, expanding options for home training could help parents not be forced to choose between their needs for mobility and their children's needs. I delayed getting my first guide dog for several years because I did not want to leave my children to go away to train with a dog for a month. When I did go away to train with my first guide dog, my children were seven and nine. Leaving them in the care of family for a month was terribly painful for my children and me.

Brightwater-"I was nursing my daughter when I decided to return to train with my second guide dog. My daughter was only fifteen-months-old when I left for class. I weaned her sooner than either of us was prepared to handle. I lived in an area where I did not feel safe traveling with my cane, so felt I had no choice."

The role of the veterinarian

Clark: "Having a guide dog is a major way to get independence. Yes, that independence is kind of expensive, with vet bills and so on, but that independence is worth the price. I love these dogs, every one of them. I tell other visually impaired people to get one: even if they are expensive. Having the privilege to work with them is unreal."

Within the community of blind people who are partnered with guide dogs, the belief that veterinarians treat both members of a working team is common. When a guide dog is unable to work because of serious health problems, the dog's blind partner often faces inhibited mobility and reduced access to daily activities. Veterinarians are often called upon to provide preventative and diagnostic care, dispense health advice, make blind partners aware of serious health concerns, provide advice about when to retire a guide, and/or support both members of a team through euthanasia.

In some cases, a skillful veterinarian can keep a team working: despite a guide's serious medical problems. Receiving treatments for arthritis from a veterinary acupuncturist has made it possible for Lily to continue enjoying her work well past when Lily would have had to retire without the acupuncture. However, my limited income prevents me from being able to afford the care Lily needs. Fortunately, Lily's veterinarian has been willing to donate her services to keep Lily working, but many veterinarians cannot offer their services for free.

When Sarah's first guide dog, Buttercup, started having seizures a few months after the two were partnered, a veterinarian's careful attention to prescribing medications that controlled Buttercup's seizures without interfering with the dog's ability to work kept the two working together for eight years. Sarah: "When the seizures began, I had her just long enough to bond, and I did not want to give her up. Luckily, she responded to the medication and was able to keep working."

Regular injections in Oak's eyes to prevent blindness kept Randy's second guide working for several years before Oak finally went blind. Talking about bringing Oak to the vet for the injections, Randy recalled, "It was such a gruesome thing to watch. I had to hold him down during the treatments, but I was so proud of him. He never moved. He was always still. He was so good."

Radiation treatments at a veterinary hospital allowed Lynn to extend her fourth guide's life for a year after Syringa was diagnosed with cancer. During one of Syringa's stays in a veterinary hospital, a deaf veterinary student stayed up late at night and studied as she hand-fed Syringa through a feeding tube. When the student was asked why she went through such extraordinary measures to care for Syringa, she just replied, "She's a guide dog." Lynn was able to keep working Syringa lightly until the last three months of Syringa's life. Lynn paid for Syringa's treatments by using a loan program at her school that allows graduates to request to borrow money for unusual medical expenses. The graduates must agree to pay back the loans with monthly payments, but the loans are interest-free.

After nearly a year of returning to her veterinarian's office to have Orchid treated for bladder infections and incontinence, Carey's veterinarian finally did an exploratory surgery and discovered that Orchid had a malformed bladder. Since most schools do not assist graduates with veterinary expenses, Carey was fortunate to receive financial assistance for veterinary bills from her school. Carey-"I made lots of vet visits. At first, I was paying the bills on my own. Once surgery became necessary, I asked my school to pay for that; they also reimbursed me for some of the other medical bills. Orchid was my dog; my responsibility. I finally asked for help because the surgery was very expensive and because we suspected, and then knew, that Orchid needed to be retired."

The role of the veterinarian can be especially important when decisions must be made about euthanasia.

The first step in making a decision that you can live with is to get a good assessment of your guide's condition from a trusted veterinarian. Some doctors will tell you when it's time but most believe that only you can make this most important decision (Samco, Retrieved January 18, 2006).

Scuba and her vet were very close. Always crazy about food, Scuba knew that she could mooch a virtually unlimited number of cookies from the vet during her office visits. The vet would always say, "I shouldn't be doing this," before tossing a cookie in the air for Scuba to catch. Scuba was a month away from her thirteenth birthday when I brought her to her vet for what began as a checkup and ended as Scuba's last visit to one of her favorite people. That day, I had noticed that Scuba was lethargic, and I was concerned because she refused to eat for the first time I knew her. When the vet told me that Scuba was seriously ill with internal bleeding and what looked like a fast-acting cancer in her stomach, I decided not to make Scuba suffer. I made the decision to have Scuba euthanized that day. The vet did not try to influence my decision in any way, but she did provide her support when I made the decision. When I started crying before the procedure, I am glad that the vet knew Scuba and me well enough to urge me not to be upset, for Scuba's sake. I did not want to alarm Scuba, and I am glad that I held myself together until after Scuba passed. The vet and I cried together after Scuba passed. I did not stop crying for days, and I appreciated the fact that the vet and family members took care of all the details regarding Scuba's cremation.

Endive lived with Penny for over two years after he retired. After a long battle with cancer, Penny made the difficult choice to end her beloved partner's suffering with euthanasia. Penny: "He could not evacuate his bowels... It has been over two years now, and I cried for days before and weeks after. I still grieve for him."

Ed and Toni Eames have given presentations about guide dogs at every veterinary school in the United States and in several veterinary schools abroad. They had much to share about the role of veterinarians. When I asked them if they include advice about dealing with blind clients who are ending working relationships in their presentations, Toni answered, "We do not give advice because some people have good people skills, and some people do not. We can only tell them what it has been like for us. We give no advice: just facts" (Personal Communication, January 29, 2006).

Ed Eames provided an example of how he conveys the importance of a working relationship and the veterinarian's role in a working relationship. Ed: "Echo was going blind, and I needed a vet to clearly tell me that working him was not safe. I kept asking different veterinary ophthalmologists at different schools, where we traveled to give presentations, if Echo was safe. I got a lot of equivocations. Then, I finally took Echo to a vet who emphatically said that I was risking myself and my dog by working Echo. When I was emphatically told that I was putting us both in danger, that is when I retired Echo. The vet has a great responsibility to keep a partnership going, but the vet also has a responsibility to let the blind person know when it is time to retire a dog. The blind person has the responsibility of educating a veterinarian about what the guide dog does so that the vet can provide clear answers" (Personal Communication, January 29, 2006).

Lena Contreras discovered that the number one reason for early retirement among her participants' guide dogs was medical problems (2003). Ed and Toni Eames promote increasing financial support to assist disabled individuals with veterinary expenses for their assistance dogs.

Since two-thirds of disabled Americans are unemployed or underemployed, they constitute the most impoverished segment of society. Many live on the federal Supplemental Security Income program, which provides less than \$500 a month.

Although veterinary care has not skyrocketed to the extent of human medical costs, it still represents a major investment for those at the lowest end of the income spectrum. Veterinary costs, combined with the cost of providing a high quality dog food, have been economic deterrents for many disabled people considering partnership with assistance dogs. It would be unfair to place the financial burden of reducing the costs of medical care for assistance dogs exclusively on the backs of veterinary practitioners, who are not the most highly paid medical professionals. We have called upon the pharmaceutical companies and dog food manufacturers to help defray the costs of care for assistance dogs. (Eames & Eames, 2004, p. 103).

In addition, Ed Eames believes that schools should do more to help students with veterinary expenses. Ed: "Personally, I do think that guide dog schools should provide more money for veterinary care. Only one currently offers an annual allowance for veterinary care. Making funds available to graduates to provide medical care for their guide dogs should be part of the schools' fund-raising efforts... Providing funding for veterinary care is a good investment to keep a team working as long as possible. When the schools put such huge investments into teams to train them, it would seem to me on a purely financial basis that you would want to spend even a thousand a year to keep a team working" (Personal Communication, January 29, 2006).

Conclusion

As I listened to numerous heart-wrenching accounts about the retirement or death of beloved guide dogs while gathering data for this research, my level of respect for the bond of mutual trust and dependency that develops between blind humans and highly-trained canines who work together as teams increased. The personal accounts that were contributed for this research reveal a myriad of hardships associated with the ending of working relationships; nevertheless, these narratives are not intended to be representative of all blind individuals' experiences.

By making personal stories public through this exploratory work, I am concluding this project with more questions than I had when I began this research. How can staff at schools improve communication with students and graduates about behavior and other problems exhibited by dogs before, during, and after being partnered? What can schools offer to effectively prepare and assist staff, students, and graduates with ending working relationships? Do schools need to expand home-training options? What can be done to increase blind individuals' options for paying for veterinary care for their guides? How can veterinarians be prepared to treat guide dogs and their partners as working units? Can objective criteria for basic physical and working standards be developed and used to help guide decisions about ending working relationships? Should schools or consumer organizations of the blind create memorials to honor deceased guide dogs?

Lena Contreras found that the average working time for the guide dogs in her study was 4.8 years (2003). I did not average the working time of the guide dogs in my study because my sample was not representative. Lena Contreras and I both used email lists to recruit our participants, and we both want to see future researchers go beyond email lists to recruit participants (2003). If the average working life of a guide dog is around five years, most guides are retiring when they are approximately seven-years-old. Is it reasonable to expect guides to work longer? If dogs can work longer, why are they not doing so now? If on average dogs cannot realistically be expected to work longer, potential and seasoned guide dog partners should be told so that they can make informed choices. At the very least, people associated with the guide dog community should avoid promoting arbitrary expectations for how long guide dogs can work (Schneider, Personal Communication, January 25, 2006).

I began this project with the presumption that a lack of research about the ending of working relationships has, likely, contributed to a lack of awareness of barriers many blind people face. I suspected that beyond emotional barriers, many blind people face social, economic, family, and other hindrances during the process of ending working relationships, but my literature review leads me to believe that few barriers have been identified through research. Difficulties leaving family or work to attend training at guide dog schools, costly veterinary care, and inadequate preparation and support for ending working relationships are some of the barriers that I identified during this research. Consumer organizations, such as Guide Dog Users, Inc. (GDUI) and National Association of Guide Dog Users (NAGDU) need to work together with schools to remove the social and economic barriers many blind individuals encounter when their guide dogs retire or pass away. If lack of funding prevents schools from expanding home-training and veterinary-assistance for blind people, consumer organizations and individual graduates from schools need to become more involved with fund raising and pushing their schools into expanding services. Both NAGDU (NAGDU Mentoring Program, Retrieved February 27, 2006) and GDUI (GDUI Empathizers Program, Retrieved February 27, 2006) provide peer-support counseling for people who are dealing with the retirement or death of their guide dogs; however, all schools should have professional grief counselors on staff who provide comprehensive preparation, training, and support for ending working relationships to blind students and staff.

The people who contributed to this project provided diverse perspectives, and their voices describe a broad range of experiences with the ending of working relationships. As a descriptive work, this research is intended to inspire awareness and more research. Sharing personal experiences to raise individual and institutional awareness and to make the personal political has been an effective and accepted practice among feminists for over four decades (Rosen, 2001). While common themes reoccurred during the interviews, and my literature review, those common themes reflect much diversity, because despite similar events peoples experiences and perspectives are unique. I hope what has been described in this work will initiate individual and institutional changes and will inspire others to expand upon the many questions that emerged from this exploration using descriptive realism.

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