

Blessings Come In All Shapes And Sizes

Puppy Lesson 1-5 (A Work In Progress)

As owners of a nine-room bed and breakfast, we were extraordinarily nervous about adding an eight-week old black Standard Poodle puppy to our lives. How would we keep him from bothering the guests? Would his barking annoy them? Keep them up? Wake them early? Would he be a nuisance in the kitchen? Would we lose prospective guests who were afraid of dogs? And what about our freedom? We were already tied to a business; did we really want to be tied down further by taking on the responsibility of a growing dog?

To be fair, when we weren't fretting about the impact a four-footed critter would have on our business and personal lives, we spent plenty of time eagerly anticipating his arrival. We knew he would bring plenty of smiles to our days, add exercise to our lives, and contribute that famous doggy dose of unconditional love to our home. We even named him Porter, since we knew he would always have a job at the inn!

Well, of course, now that Porter is here, his positive influence on our lives tips the scales in his favor every day. Yes, he does sometimes bark in areas of the inn where guests are sleeping, but the smiles he's been spreading among our clientele more than make up for it. People come to our kitchen door to compliment the breakfast, ask for directions to local attractions, and practically demand to see the Poodle! Contrary to our concerns, our puppy is one of the inn's most popular amenities.

But the most wonderful discovery about Porter is that he's turning out to be one of the best little teachers to come into our lives in a long time. We hadn't had him more than two weeks before he started to impart the following "Puppy Lessons" to us:

Enjoy Your Body. From the very first day Porter pounced, squiggled and wagged his way into our lives, this lesson became clear. His little puppy body was a constant source of fascination to him – and us! We loved watching him get ambushed by his hind half while his front half was busy sniffing out some new find. Or seeing him first discover his tail and then learn that it was, indeed, attached to him. Likewise, we've enjoyed watching the way he's learned to

Blessings Come In All Shapes And Sizes

squeeze into small spaces to retrieve beloved toys, discovered how not to flip end-over-front when chasing a ball, and how he completely abandons himself to marvelously intense stretches like a small doggy yogi. Sometimes, Porter will simply flop down on the floor to scratch an ear, find that it's more pleasurable to chew on a paw and be surprised by an itch on his hind leg. During such moments, he's a windmill of motion and sound, as he lets out a moan that is half delight, half exasperation. Every time we catch Porter learning to use his body in a new way, we are reminded how valuable it is to continually learn to love, use and stretch our own human frames.

Wake Up Happy. As someone who is self-avowedly not a morning person, this lesson, above all, has been a true gift to me. I may wake up feeling fuzzy, tired, and not wanting to go through the same motions as the morning before, but the minute I approach Porter's crate I'm reminded of the real way to wake up – like it's the morning of a really exciting vacation. Or the day of a long-anticipated party. Or the morning Santa has left his loot under the tree. It doesn't take long for Porter's exuberance to cut through the haze of my morning malaise and there I am, right by his side, bounding down the stairs and heading outside to see what the world holds for the both of us.

Treat People Like It's The Last Time You'll Be Seeing Them. Whenever my wife or I leave a room in which the three of us have been sitting, Porter reacts as though we had fallen through some terrible black hole from which we are irretrievably lost. Of course, when we come back into the room, we are treated with a greeting worthy of having survived such a battle with the void. In fact, whether we are gone for ten minutes or two hours, Porter treats us to that unbeatable greeting, furry black puppyiness practically crackling with electric glee. This, of course, is followed by his steady and devout companionship – as if letting us out of his sight might mean never seeing us again. What a different place the world might be if we all appreciated each other's company just half as much as Porter appreciates the presence of his human pack-mates.

Take Time Out. It's 8:15 a.m. I woke up late. Barely got the coffee service out. There are dishes to do, breakfast to ready, guests to serve. The water cooler needs a new bottle, the trash needs emptying, the breakfast room needs to be set with two extra places. And where am I? On the kitchen floor with Porter, my hand buried deep in his fur, my mind wandering far from the duties at hand. Sometimes, when we walk Porter on a warm summer day, he will be

Blessings Come In All Shapes And Sizes

happily trotting along, breathing in the scent-filled wonderland that farm fields must be to a dog, and he'll just plop down underneath a shady tree and give us a look that says, "C'mon, let's just enjoy this nice cool spot. What's your hurry, anyway?" If there ever was a creature who embraced the ideals of living in the moment and seizing the day, Porter is it. His wonderful minute-by-minute, take-time-out approach to life has worked its way deep into our own operating systems. Which is why, here I sit on a busy Saturday morning, being lulled by the feel of my puppy's breath rising and falling beneath my grateful hand.

Don't Worry So Much About Appearances. I have quite a collection of Porter pictures; some I've actually snapped and some that are just stored in a special corner of my mind: Porter lying on his back, rear legs splayed in opposite directions, front legs bent into a posture of complete surrender. Porter trotting toward me, snout covered with the evidence of a particularly hearty meal. Porter flopped down in a patch of English ivy, tongue lolling earthward, one ear flipped rakishly back over his head. How refreshing we have found Porter's complete lack of decorum. He may never walk down a runway, but he's certainly a model of childlike abandon that keeps our egos in check and reminds us that "going to the dogs" every once in a while isn't necessarily a bad thing!

Now of course, we've only had Porter for two short months and he's already taught us a bundle. We can only assume that more lessons are forthcoming and that, like any good teacher, he's simply waiting until we're wise enough to truly understand what it is he has to show us. And so, our puppy lessons at this point will remain a most enjoyable work in progress!

Biography: Michael Franco. When Michael isn't playing fetch in the farm fields or rolling around on the floor with his Poodle, he is kept very busy managing two businesses. The first is an advertising and creative writing service entitled Clear Cut Creative. The second is the Churchtown Inn Bed & Breakfast — located in the Amish Country of Lancaster, Pennsylvania — which he owns with his wife, Diane. Michael is a published poet and has found that Porter is wiggling his way into more and more of his writing! More information about the Inn as well as periodic photos and updates about Porter can be found at www.churchtowninn.com.