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"A Different Light"

A Different Light –29th April 2023 – “Alfie teaching valuable life lessons ”

Well, it's grim. I knew it would be, when the time came, so I had methodically put it out of my mind for years. Alfie, our Sydney Silky terrorist. He is 15 years old and apparently that equates to being in his nineties in dog years (I was always thought that the ratio was 1 human year to 7 dog years which would make him 105 but I'm not going to argue with the vet on that hourly rate). He has been absolutely deaf for the last year, which has been somewhat frustrating all round. Barking orders to try to make him stop barking, clapping, screaming, to no avail.

Alfie used to be very Pavlovian, showcasing the psychologist's theory that dogs could be conditioned to expect things, such as food, with a sound. Alfie responded consistently to a whistle signalling a treat - a bribe to stop the endless barking. A knock at the door or on the table immediately led him into barking raptures, as he anticipated an unexpected visitor. The words 'walk', 'dinner' and 'ball' would elicit great excitement. For the last year his oversized fox-like ears have remained still, even when these sounds are delivered at high volume - totally oblivious.

For the last year Alfie has also put up with his trachea collapsing causing a loud medley of coughing, grunting, wheezing and snoring. Although his breathing has been somewhat laboured, he has continued to be remarkably chipper, trotting around with a terror-ish zest for life. On my birthday over Easter weekend however his vitality took a knock. He started limping with his hind leg hovering off the ground. A day later he started falling over and whimpering. Off to the vet. He was there for a day. Sedation, X-rays, and an eye watering fee. He had a benign tumour on his back haunch that was nearly as big as his head. It had been obscured by the long fur Sydney Silkies are known for. This had hindered his movement and in turn damaged his ligament. Both tumour and ligament could be operated on, "but" the Vet said in a solemn and knowing way "given his age -nineties in human years" I wouldn't recommend it.

As the next week progressed so did his bouts of whimpering and crying. At nights he has now started to have fits of agitated loud cry-yelping which are disconcerting to say the least – perhaps 'harrowing' would be a more accurate term.

Today as I'm writing, Alfie would not eat drink or walk all morning, barely lifting his head up. By midday he started perking up, eating some leftover scotch fillet steak - walking and drinking. He spent the bulk of the afternoon lying outside on the lawn in the sun. Still for long periods of time, looking vaguely regal as the breeze wafted his

long fur. I had to look closely to see if he was still breathing. As the day has drawn on, he has started deteriorating, his agitation and whimpering building.

Alfie spent that night this passage I am at home with the dogs. I've taken annual leave on the Monday between Sunday and ANZAC to create an elongated weekend.

He was barking, at what we didn't know. I ruefully wondered if he was trying to fend off imaginary tentacles protruding from his own mortal coil. In the morning I recalled to my wife how during the night he had his head on my pillow facing me, his breath surprisingly odourless. I soon realised it was a dream, as she informed me that he had not been on our bed (his favourite sleeping spot) at all.

On ANZAC day he followed the same pattern, starting with a near comatose state till noon, and then slowly improving. Sally and I talked all day about what to do with him. Trying to balance his bouts of relative friskiness with his periods of pain and distress. Trying to calculate our ability to provide palliative care as opposed to a one-way trip to the vet to avoid dragged out suffering. It's an arduous process at best. Miserable may be a more accurate term. As with anything that is close to the heart, to enjoy the good times, one has to endure the bad. Happiness does not exist without sadness. Our little dog is teaching us a big lesson in the extremes of the bittersweet.

Jonny Wilkinson is the CEO of Tiaho Trust - Disability A Matter of Perception, a Whangarei based disability advocacy organisation.