

Beagle Bodhisattva

Most pets teach us about unconditional love. For Charlie, that was just for starters.

By Amy Paturel



On a rainy Wednesday, my 8-year-old son Max and I coaxed our beagle out of his crate with treats. I carried him to his bed and covered him with blankets. Just as my husband Brandon and our three sons gathered around Charlie, a veterinarian rang the doorbell.

I imagine Charlie knew something was up, that he sensed we were sad. But he couldn't know he was about to receive two injections—one that would numb the pain and another that would end his life.

"Are you ready?" Dr. Lorry asked, nodding at Brandon and me.

Absolutely not, I thought to myself. Brandon and I had been flip-flopping for weeks, trying to determine whether our nearly 15-year-old beagle was suffering. We watched Charlie drag himself across the floor, listened to his hacking cough, and tolerated his yelping seemingly around the clock. He'd started to remind me of my dad, who lived his last 16 months confined to a bed.

I couldn't imagine putting Charlie down, but I also couldn't imagine his continuing like this. "He sleeps all day when he's not yelping," Brandon said. "Is that contentment or just existence?" Who's to say? This whole notion of "you will know when it's time" felt like nonsense.



But I knew we had an opportunity to do for Charlie what we couldn't do for my dad. "I think it may be time," I said to Brandon, after Charlie puked five times inside of two hours. He agreed, and we told our kids Charlie's life was ending.

We explained that pets rarely have a "natural" death because their existence isn't wholly natural. The puppy who once yanked so hard on his leash during walks that he nearly lifted me off the ground was barely able to scoot to his water bowl. If Charlie were in the wild, he wouldn't be able to contribute to the pack due to his age and ailments, and he would have likely fallen to a predator.

"So, we're going to put him down?" my other 8-year-old son, Brian, asked.

I didn't realize Brian knew "putting him down" meant ending Charlie's life. But even at their tender ages—8, 8, and 6—all three of our boys seemed to get it. They also knew Charlie's life had been complicated—that he had belonged to another family long before they were born.

Developing Resilience

At just 8 months old, Charlie lost his owner, Brandon's first wife, in a car accident. A decade later, he developed cancer. At age 12, a vet amputated his

left hind leg to stop the incessant bleeding from a wound that wouldn't close. And this past March, he underwent another surgery for a suspicious growth. He'd navigated nearly his entire life emotionally or physically handicapped. But he didn't let his disabilities hijack his happiness. Instead, he taught our boys, by example, to be resilient.

Within days of losing his leg, Charlie was nosing around in our flower beds. At the same age when many beagles call it quits, Charlie traversed rooms littered with Legos, lapped up spilled milk, and plopped down on top of our board games mid-play. Our three-legged beagle even managed to jump onto our picnic table and snag my lunch when I wasn't paying attention.

He taught our boys to be persistent. He taught them to be loyal, loving, and affectionate. Now that his rich brown spots had turned a faded auburn, he was teaching them how to age gracefully and die with dignity.

Max insisted he wanted to be by Charlie's side when we said goodbye. Brian and Jack, the youngest, followed suit. This is an opportunity, I realized, for us to teach our sons about love and loss. It's an opportunity for Charlie to teach them how to hold space for a loved one who is dying—and how to keep moving forward, even when your broken heart is trailing behind you.

When the day arrived, our sons drew pictures of Charlie as a send-off gift. Brian included the heart-shaped spot on Charlie's belly. Jack drew Charlie next to a rainbow bridge with a caption that said, "giddy up." And Max's masterpiece showcased an angel welcoming Charlie to heaven.

I distracted Charlie with corned beef as Dr. Lorry delivered the first injection, a sedative. He squirmed a bit, but those final bites of food seemed to comfort him. As the tears fell, I cradled Charlie's face and smoothed his soft fur. Sobbing, Brandon held him from the other side, close to his remaining hind leg.

"Is he dying now?" Max asked as Dr. Lorry delivered the second injection. The answer, of course, was yes.

Leaning in to Love

I grabbed Brandon's hands, nestled over Charlie's white fur, as the boys sat quietly, presumably trying to process what was happening. None of them had

ever seen their dad cry. Jack climbed a few stairs and planted his head into the carpet to hide his tears. Max sat beside his brother, rubbing his shoulders. Watching my boys show up for each other was heart-melting.

Charlie had a heck of a run, I thought, as I watched Dr. Lorry and Brandon load him onto the stretcher, then outside and into her vehicle. It felt as if our family was broken, like we were missing a limb. His daily wails were deafening, but not nearly as much as the silence he left us with.

The irony of this grand send-off? Brandon and I are not dog people. If his first wife hadn't fallen for Charlie as soon as they locked eyes, and then tragically died, my boys might never have discovered the lessons that come with dog ownership. They watched Charlie suffer, then recover. They knew he loved and lost, then loved again. Through the ups and downs, Charlie grew into a stronger, more grateful companion who knew how to adapt to change ... and, in time, so will we.

I suspect the boys and I will be lobbying Brandon for a new puppy within a few months. For now we're focused on celebrating Charlie's memory. I have framed pictures of Charlie in the boys' rooms. I have one in my office, one on the windowsill, and one on the shelving outside the bathroom. Most important, I know we all feel Charlie's calming presence even when we can't see him.

One morning when I went for a run with Max, we met a beagle walking with his owner. "What's his name?" I asked.

"Charlie," the owner replied.

Transfixed by the coincidence, I told him about our Charlie. The owner told me there was another beagle, also named Charlie, living in our subdivision. That means at one time, there had been three Charlie beagles living in our neighborhood before our Charlie passed.

"I bet Charlie sent him to us," Max said. "He probably wants us to know that he is good now and has four legs again."

My heart fluttered a bit. I know I taught him to think that way, to watch for signs after someone dies. Still, I was struck by his insight and understanding that even though Charlie didn't need four legs anymore, he was once more perfect and whole.

"I think you're right," I replied. 🐾

