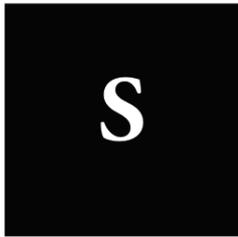


ELIZABETH ANNE JOHNSON

Sage *the* Healer Dog



AGE WAS an approximately 10-week-old yellow lab mix puppy that came to me in a dream. In that dream, she told me her name and asked me loud and clear to please come get her out of

her cage. In the haze of the dream, it looked like she was in an animal shelter.

I was at a seminar with my husband at the time. He had just lost his Bloodhound/Australian Shepherd mix, K.C., at age fifteen. His heart was sore and tender. Sometimes, the only thing to repair the loss of a beloved dog is another beloved dog. We were staying at a hotel and the next morning I went to the front desk to ask if there was an animal shelter nearby. I was told it was just one block away. I talked my husband into stopping on our way out of town and there she was, little Sage, the puppy from my dream.

I recognized her instantly and she recognized me, responding immediately to her name. We lovingly packed Sage in the car and off we went. Sage was a smart little thing and resourceful. A wee bit feral and yet very devoted to our existing pack family. She was a Metal element in Traditional Chinese Medicine's Five Element Theory – purposeful and quietly introverted. However, she also had a strong secondary Fire element and a tertiary Earth element, which both required her having the comfort and stimulation of family and friends around her...all the time.

That quickly became apparent as she had a terrible problem with separation anxiety. She had initially bonded with me and would chew anything that I had touched before leaving for work. One sad morning it was the toilet seat!

My husband's grief over losing his last dog kept him from bonding with her. He was a new middle school teacher and was working long days.

I had two other dogs going to work with me each day and did not have enough time or energy to take puppy Sage, so she stayed home with uncle-dog Riley, the best puppy sitter in the world, for the first two weeks.

After the toilet seat massacre, several eviscerated pillows, two disemboweled plants, and a family discussion, she proudly went to school with her dad and their bond was formed. She was the most perfect and cute pup, and all the school staff and students fell in love with her sweet, sociable Fire element side. Her Earth element formed deep lasting family-like bonds with many kids, parents and teachers. Her primary Metal made her the star of the school as an unofficial therapy dog and Sage was quickly recruited to work in the library for Reading with Rover time - before there was such a thing. She spent her days in my husband's classroom as well as other classrooms, a vigilant mascot for signaling physical and emotional issues in children while also providing a calming Earth element touchstone for little hands and hearts. In a few years, this included Sage taking the special education children for walks when they needed a friend or any emotional assistance. Turns out she had a knack for signaling epileptic seizures in the classrooms and had a gentle, calming influence on ADHD and anxiety-ridden children. She just knew who needed what and when.

Even in our home pack life, she always took the Metal/Earth role of nurse and often alerted me to issues with our other animals, showing me exactly where in their bodies they needed care. She also became mascot of the surf team, spending early mornings on the beach carefully counting heads in the water and notifying my husband - the coach - if someone was having a hard time out there. Sage had an amazing working dog career for thirteen years. Then her Fire/Metal element dad retired from teaching and both he and Sage flopped into a slump. With the loss of her job and the emotional withdrawal of my husband, she too



Elizabeth Johnson (l), handles Sage while working with Dr. Georgia Edwards, a retired oncologist turned National Association of Canine Scent Work (NACSW) certified nosework instructor.

became apathetic, bored, and depressed. Her grief was palpable. Sage began to develop a slow growing tumor on her nose that eventually affected her breathing, exactly where she had been bitten by a rattlesnake when she was three years old.

At the time, I had a precocious and highly intelligent Labrador-cross pup named Luna (also known as the “tiny terrorist”) who needed a job. Luna had an excellent working mind and was an amazing scent dog, so I put her in a nose work class in preparation for doing search and rescue work with me. One day I had Sage in the car with us as we were arriving at Luna’s nose work class. Our instructor Georgia, a retired oncologist turned nose work instructor, immediately spotted Sage’s tumor and her obvious apathy. We talked about Sage’s amazing life adventures and her current depression, and Georgia invited Sage in to do some nose work. Sage loved it! Finding biscuits hidden in boxes and cubbies, what could be better? This fun work brought her out of her doldrums, and she lived two more years, to the ripe old age of fifteen.

Sage’s last service work was a month before she passed. She and I were asked to do a nose work

demonstration hosted by the American Cancer Society. The ACS goal was to show that there can still be ways to have fun during life with cancer, even for our animals. Sage, wearing a pink bandanna, pink harness, pink leash, and her now large pink facial tumor, raced through the boxes, finding the scents in record time. The crowd roared! What a sweet “Shero” she was. She left her mark on so many hearts, right up to the end.

Sadly, on my birthday, Sage was quite clear it was her time to go. I carried her down to the ocean for her last earthly feel of the water she loved and knew so well. After a dip in my arms, a long glance out into the waves – one more surf check – and a big sigh, she looked at me and said goodbye. To sort through my sore heart strings, I went back to the beach, walking slowly with both sadness for the loss of her sweet spirit and joy for having had her amazing magic in our lives. A large balloon came floating towards me and landed in the branches of a tree eye level where I stood. On the balloon was a yellow lab puppy and the words, Happy Birthday Mom! I wept and laughed and wept and laughed some more. I will always wonder how she managed that amazing goodbye! ■

