

# Happy Holidays!

As I walked out of the bedroom this morning, I did what I've done since I moved into the house 14 years ago: I looked around to see where Angus was. Of course, Angus isn't here now. And while it's sad not to have him, I still think often of the joy he brought to the world. I still shed tears for him, Rama, Odin, and even Susy. I have shed far more tears for dogs that have passed than for people. Perhaps it's just the simple purity of their character.

Humans aren't allowed the luxury of simplicity. We like to think that we are guided by pure values—and we may be—but applying those values in our world is so much more complicated than in a dog's world. They know that eating the bread off the counter is wrong (or at least has consequences), and they choose to do it or not do it. They chase a rabbit, catch it (or usually not), and kill it. They don't suffer over it the way I do when I pull the trigger hunting.

Dogs might ponder about the difference between innocence and plausible deniability, but my guess is that they think about it in terms of either punishment or disappointing the pack leader. Not that they aren't sneaky! When Odin and I lived in Burlington one summer, we stayed with people who had cats. Odin would casually walk by the cat food and snag a single cat kibble. But instead of swallowing it, he would chew once, with as little movement as possible, wait a second or 2, one quick chew again, until he could swallow it.

Once I saw Rama walking away from me and there was something different about how he was walking. "Rama! Whatcha' doing?" His head dropped, and he dropped something and kept walking. I went over and picked up a delicate wooden suet feeder that had been sitting on the picnic table. There was barely a tooth mark on it. Apparently he planned to take it somewhere discrete where he could open it.

Not being a pack leader is not the norm for me. My life is defined by my four dogs: Suzy (when I was 6 - 20), Odin (22 - 36), Rama (38 - 52), and Angus (53 - 67). I have learned much from the people in my life—my parents, lovers, friends, teachers—but some of the most important lessons I've gotten are from my dogs. I say "gotten" because I haven't "learned" them all yet. I try to love unconditionally, experience joy in the moment as if there is nothing else, and live simply, but I have a lot of learning and practicing left. On the other hand, I have learned to eat with abandon. Or did they learn that from me?

Perhaps now, as I leave middle-age behind, I will be able to truly learn those lessons my dogs have tried to teach me over the years. And perhaps I will have another teacher in my life. For the moment, there will be an interregnum—or more accurately, an intercannum—where I practice on my own without a master. Fortunately, I am still graced with visiting dogs who remind me that my goal in life is to be like them.

My wish for all of you is that you find a teacher who is as patient, respectful, and joyful as mine have been. And that you have a joyful holiday!



*Angus: 2007, 2011, 2021*



*Rama, circa 2000*



*Odin, 1978*



*Suzy*