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## Why Dogs Are Better Than Therapy

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It was one of those days in our house where an argument was hanging in the air like a gas leak -- just waiting for a spark.

Like most houses, the combustion -- when it inevitably came -- was not the kind that lifts the roof off. More like a sustained rumble of muttered asides and one-word answers.

Then my daughter walked in and asked a question that changed everything: "Where's Polly?"

Polly is one of the two yellow labs that share our home with us -- the other is her brother Stuart. Unlike Stuart, who knows a good thing when he sees it, Polly tends to heed the call of the wild. All it takes is an open door, and the wolf-voice says "Go for it."

After a quick and fruitless check under the table, we scrambled like fighter pilots. Check the upstairs, check the yard, get the leash, call the neighbors, grab the dog treats. Move, move, move!

My last snappy comeback in the ebb and flow of our suspended argument was shelved. I made a note to save it. It was good.

As usual, Polly turned up an hour or so into our frantic search, not too far from the house. She bounded up to us with great surprise and joy -- "It's so cool that we would run into each other like this."

It's amazing how these limpid-eyed, flop-eared creatures change a family.

What is it about the light snoring at the foot of the chair, the chorus of alarm that a squirrel has breached the perimeter, or the clip, clip, clip of paws across a kitchen floor?

I have my own theory.

As a parent with a son on his own and a daughter tumbling into her teen years, dogs are like having eternal two year olds around the house -- everything is love, everything is great, and every toy -- even one with the squeaky long ago ripped from its innards -- is a wondrous discovery.

Of course, there are more scientific thoughts on the matter.

Perhaps it's simply biophilia -- an oddly scary term for an interesting idea: we are genetically programmed to interact with nature. It's an instinctive search for connection with other living things. It's the reason we run back into a smoke-filled house to save the hamster.

It might explain the soothing effect of a dog in our lives; why petting them has been proven to lower blood pressure and elevate moods; why a major study showed that heart attack patients with dogs were eight times as likely to be alive a year later than patients who are dog-deprived.

Maybe it also explains why dog slobber is not as disgusting as it should be and why we trail dutifully behind them, plastic grocery bag at the ready. It's all part of the natural order of things.

With Polly safely back under the table, Stuart sprawled out on the floor, and things returned to normal, I was ready to stoke the argument with that snappy comeback I had saved for later.

The problem was, I couldn't remember it.