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## The Dogs of Destruction

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One of my rules of life is never to sit beside anybody who is three weeks into a low-carb diet or just bought a puppy.

I still remember listening to a weepy friend tell me of the tragic passing of her beloved dog, which might have been a beagle. And as I consoled her I thought, "It's just a dog. If you feel that bad about this, go get another one." To me, it was like replacing the vacuum cleaner.

I'm religious about the low-carb rule. But I have had to adjust my outlook on dogs. I got one. And then I went out and got another.

The only thing remarkable about that -- at least for me -- is that both my husband and I not only didn't like dogs; we were afraid of them. I could never shake the thought that anything descended from a wolf harbored -- however deeply -- a genetic predisposition to bite me.

But now that I have somehow ended up with two large Labrador retrievers barreling through my home and my life, I get it. I now understand the term biophilia. It sounds oddly like a perversion, but it is really the idea that we have an instinctive need to connect with other living things.

Now, nowhere does it say that those living things have to weigh 80 pounds and prefer to spend time on the furniture.

Why not a hamster?

Exactly. That was my suggestion to my daughter when she started insisting that our family could not be fully realized without a dog. But the hamster distraction failed -- as it has for so many before me.

Had I known about it at the time, I might have suggested another idea. There is a growing industry -- particularly targeted at apartment dwellers -- in dog rental. Pick them up, get your fix, and then turn them in.

The advantage of course, is that you get the lower blood pressure and the surge of serotonin that dogs are proven to deliver, without the attendant upheaval in your life -- or, if you time the visits right, the scooping.

Somehow, I now know that is not enough.

I have pondered how a combination of apathy and fear morphed into an intense desire to have my dogs always at my side, I realized that the chaos they inflict on your life is not the cost; it's the gain.

Dogs are the destroyers of routine.

We were introduced to chaos in stages.

First came Stuart, sweet, but -- well -- the object of an ongoing debate: "He's not dumb, he's just stubborn." His stubbornness defied training by us, several dog experts and even dog boot camp. Certain members of our household -- unkindly, I think -- sometimes call him "Stupor."

Stuart is disruptive, but in the sheer force of his inertia -- the kind where objects at rest stay there. When my daughter puts him in bed under the cover with his head on the pillow, that's where Stuart wakes up.

Then came Polly, a wiggling mound of velvet-coated anarchy.

We never knew disruption. She is too smart, too independent, too rowdy, too quick and too sweet to ever speak to harshly.

She has learned to work a door lever in her occasional dash for freedom. She sits on command when guests arrive, but only to get better leverage for her next leap into the air. She arrives in the kitchen precisely at 5 every day, loudly reminding us that it's time for dinner. She lives by a simple code: if it's stuffed and I can reach it, it's a dog toy. And it's mine. That includes my daughter's prized stuffed animals, which Polly constantly hides.

None of us have suffered the perils of Polly like Stuart. Stuart was six years into his reign as only-dog when we brought Polly home. She wind-milled across the floor, a blur of puppy feet, and clamped down on his ear. It's been like that for him ever since.

But we started to notice something about Stuart. He started to mimic her ecstatic greeting when we return home; in the past we might merit a turn of the head and one or two swishes of his tail. He is chasing balls and playing with toys. He has even found the occasional energy to get in trouble -- invariably following Polly's lead.

I've noticed something about all of us. A great big diversion has belly-flopped in the middle of our self-referential lives. They make us think less and laugh more. They pull us outside of ourselves, and bring us together in the collaborative lookout for their wellbeing.

Polly had just skidded around the corner with her newest purloined prize from my daughter's bedroom, followed by Stuart, followed by my daughter.

My husband said: "Do you know how simple our lives would be without these dogs? I smiled and said: "Yes, actually I do."