

What Monty Taught Me Ken Q. Paris

In 1997 I went through the tragedy of losing my job. I was living with my girlfriend in a rented condo on the third floor, winter was approaching and days were already getting colder, I had many thousands of dollars in credit card debt, and was forced to contemplate bankruptcy. I was devastated and slipped into a depression.

This wasn't just sadness. This was a loss of feeling anything, even the cold. I could sit on the balcony in below freezing temperatures and stare at nothing wearing naught but gym shorts and a t-shirt. The cold didn't bother me. I was caught in an endless cycle of thought where I questioned every decision I had made, berated myself for the poor ones, turned even the good decisions into mistakes, doubted my ability to ever make a decision again, feared how my girlfriend would respond, wondered how I would pay my bills, how I could ever work again, how I couldn't trust myself anymore... It was a painful, endless, crippling spiral of self-inflicted doom.

So I decided I needed a dog.

I had owned dogs my entire life until I moved into that condo with my girlfriend. We had discussed it but were reluctant because of the complications of having a dog in a condo community (needing to walk it three times a day, food and medical needs, sufficient available time to spend with it, three flights of stairs three times a day...).

But I needed a dog. I had the time and I hurt with emptiness I needed to fill. So we went to adopt a dog.

My girlfriend wanted a golden retriever and had her heart set on a puppy. As we walked up to the place we decided to adopt from the last golden retriever puppy was already in the arms of its new owners, forcing us to abandon plan one and consider other dogs. That day there were few available. One of them sat in a small cage in the corner. So we asked to look at him.

Montana was a mutt. He was a mixture of dark and light brown fur with pointy ears. He wasn't a tiny pup and we found he was about 1 year old. His coat was greasy because he had recently been neutered and had to heal a bit before bathing. And he had a big square patch of fur missing from his back. We were told he had been found wandering the streets in Brooklyn and in one of the rescue joints he had been in he was attacked by another dog that ripped his back open. He had several stitches from the wound which was almost completely healed and the fur was beginning to grow back in. Our assistant told us he had been adopted twice already and both times was brought back with complaints of him being uncontrollable. Montana looked, smelled, and had the reputation of being a down-on-his-luck, broken dog. Kinda like me, I thought. I told my girlfriend I wanted him but we had to call him Monty.

I had an SUV at the time. We bought a collar and leash and walked our new dog to our car. He tried to jump in but it was just too high for the little guy, so I reached under and picked him up to help. He yelped as I had accidentally grabbed him by the parts that no longer existed due to his operation. I whispered in his ear, "Welcome to the family, Monty" and put him in the back of the car and took him home.

My depression continued. Having Monty around helped a bit, and taking him for his walks got me moving around. I wasn't sleeping much and would be awake very late, so I got in the habit of walking him at one or two in the morning, even when the temperature dropped more and it snowed.

One night I took Monty for a walk in the fresh snow. It was very late, very cold, and there was no one about. Monty and I owned the night. I walked him to a field nearby, letting the cord of his leash out as much as he wanted to run. My mind was full of misery as my thoughts churned in that spiral of doom. And then I saw him.

Monty ran from bush to bush sticking his face in the snow, doing his business, and moving on. He inspected everything with eager excitement. He looked up and back and around, crossing back and forth and behind me and back in front, running on ahead into the dark, crunching on the cold snow that must have frozen his feet. He was happy.

It brought tears to my eyes. While I fretted hopelessly about my pathetic failed life, this one year old dog who was still a stranger to me was happy as a clam. I didn't know what his first year of life was like, but what I knew wasn't good. I don't know where he was born, what happened to his mother or father or sisters or brothers. I don't know how we was abandoned on the streets in Brooklyn, or for how long, or how he ate, where he slept, or how he survived until he was caught. I don't know what life in the rescue kennel had been like, how he came to fight with the other dog, what fear and pain he felt when his back was ripped open, or how frightened he was when he was stitched and patched. I remember how sad he had looked in that cage. Lost. Had anyone ever cared for or comforted him? He had absolutely no control of his life or his destiny, and had experienced such pain and hardship in his first year of life that may have tempted him to despair and give up.

Yet here he was, with a total stranger, naked as the day he was born, playing in the snow. Happily. Without fear. Having placed the pain of his past aside he was living in and enjoying the moment. He wasn't worried about what was to come a moment from now, or a day, or a week. He knew things were okay now, so he played in the snow.

Watching him I realized that, unlike Monty, I had control over my life. I could make decisions and do things that would change my destiny and improve my state. Even the littlest things would be a great start. I could decide to stop wallowing in my past. I could move on with hope and expectation. All I needed was to do it. I had done that very thing and changed Monty's life. Why not my own?

Because, really, we are all as naked as the day we were born. And we all have the ability to rise above the things that break us down, tear us up, and bring us pain. Whether the message comes from a dog, a cat, a walk, a run, a book, a movie, a garden, or a friend, there is always hope. Always hope.

Monty taught me to play in the snow.