

For Digger
July 15, 1994 -- August 28, 2004

It is a Jewish tradition to observe one year of mourning for a loved one. It makes sense, for as we cycle through the year, in the normal course of living we find ourselves confronting a new and different sense of our loss each time we experience something for the first time without the one we love. It's jarring the first time you do all those things without your companion and you need that year to take that first shot in the gut with those memories, to absorb the body blow and then, eventually, pick yourself up and figure out how to do those old things in new ways. So we move through the seasons, the holidays, a year at work and year at play, reliving the past while trying to figure out how to live without that loved one in the future. It is simultaneously a reliving and a re-inventing, so that at the end of that year we can go on to the next, bolstered by the deep memories of the past and having made a first step toward finding a new way to live in the future.

So, it was a year ago today that Digger died. It was a year without my best buddy, my constant companion. It was a year of fewer hikes and walks in the woods, a year of fewer walks in the snow and the rain, a year of quiet and sure, loneliness in my office, a year of stepping over a dog that wasn't at the foot of the bed or next to the desk, a year of looking back in the car for a big old golden retriever that wasn't there. A year of walking into quieter apartments and homes, a year of moving through New York City, unseen by other dog owners who used to see me, a year of not being Digger's Dad. It was a weird year.

To mark the close of this year, I wanted to finish a longish profile of Digger.

Buddy - I miss ya.

On Saturday, August 28, 2004, Digger died. He was ten years old. He left myself, Ellen, and our son Alex, and our families, and extended families, and all of you who loved and knew him, many of you who saw him almost everyday at work and play.

He and I were on our way down from the summit of Santa Fe Baldy, at about 12,500 ft, the highest peak outside Santa Fe, when he started to falter badly. Just minutes before, I had looked back to see him in one of his beautiful hiking poses that I had always loved, his sweet, soulful eyes and wide smile framed by the peaks and clouds, with the wind ruffling his dark golden mane. I rushed him off the trail to the veterinary ER where it was discovered that he had extensive bleeding in his stomach. Surgery revealed that his liver and spleen were shot through with cancer. The vet was astounded that he had been able to make it up the trail with me. He spent his last day doing what he loved best and he died soon thereafter, in my arms.

Digger - or Dig-Dig or Diglet or Goofus or Rufus-Goofus-Magoo, or just Magoo or Muddly or Muddly-Moo or Mud-Bud or Nutley - or Da Boy (that was Peter Kostelec's nickname for him)- or Doggo (that was Dad's name for him) was born on July 15, in Ascutney, Vermont, on a small farm to a small family. I had always wanted a dog, and in particular, wanted a Golden. I loved their soft flowing fur and their wonderful smiles (yes, dogs *do* smile!) and somehow, in the fall of 1994 it was the right time. I looked in the local paper, and figured that the only thing I wanted was that I see the parents. I'm a believer in the idea that "the apple doesn't fall that far from the tree" and I wanted to see the stock. I saw the ad in the local paper - "parents on premises" it said and I was off.

Anyone will tell you that you can't go to see a litter of puppies just to look. You always come home with one. It was a beautiful day in early September when I drove down 91 South from Hanover to Exit 8 and Ascutney, Vermont. I drove onto the property and the owners/breeders escorted me to the makeshift barn where the dogs were in a pen that looked a bit like a manger. There they were, eleven golden bundles of fur, six girls and five boys if I remember correctly. I watched them mix it up, competing for dining space beneath their Mom, while Dad looked on proudly. I can't remember his Mom's name, but his Dad's name was Trooper - a fine, tall, and regal Golden Retriever. Of a size and build that looked as if someone had crossed a Golden with a Great Dane, but they hadn't. The parents and thus, the puppies, were all AKC registered, so could trace his lineage back to that first great Golden of yore. I remember that Trooper kept nuzzling my arm to pet him as I looked at the pups - Digger learned at least one thing from his old man. I watched the puppies and then climbed into the pen to pick up a few and play with them. If there is a heaven, in one corner of it is a tall tree and underneath it, puppies frolicking and available for holding.

I was overwhelmed with the commotion and fun and had to have one. Now I had to make a choice. One very active pup had kept making its way to me, and I chose it. I think it was "M-3" meaning "Male-3." I put my deposit down and drove home, nervous and excited.

A few weeks later I drove back to see M-3 again - still un-named beyond his tag. In the car with me was my buddy Tim Olson. Tim and I taugt together and had quickly become good friends. Tim was driving down with me "just to look at the puppies" while I picked up mine. We drove in and jumped out of the car and went over to the puppy pen. I looked at the puppies playing and noticed off in the corner one very pudgy fur ball, not mixing it up so much with the others. I reached over and picked him up - he was a beautiful light golden brown, with darkish ears - they grow into the color of their ears - largish, but not huge paws, and he started climbing up my chest, licking me and nibbling at me with those pointy puppy teeth. This was M-5 and I was in love. I asked the breeder if M-5 was spoken for - and he wasn't - and so I switched. Ten minutes later he was mine. Meanwhile, Tim had (of course) gone from just looking to just buying - and he had chosen M-3 as his own. We drove home giddy at the thought of our two new brother pups.

A few weeks later we drove down to pick up "the boys." I can remember Digger - although not yet named Digger - in the front seat, squirming to get out of the box I had brought to carry him home. He was just a little boy - a refrain I would often sing to him - barely as long as my forearm - and I can see him rising up on his hind legs, his paws on the window, looking out at the world as we drove up the highway. I smiled, and smiled, and smiled.

Raising Digger

When someone met Digger I'd invariably get the question, "So, did he earn that name?" I'd smile and say, no, not really - just liked the way it sounded, "Digger-dog," a good dog name. My main criteria in finding a name for cuddly M-5 were that it wasn't human name (since I wanted to save those for a -hoped-for - son one day) and that it not sound stupid when I found myself shouting for him in public. My best buddy Ron Turker ("Turk") had a dog named Darwin, and Ron would often call him "Darwin-Digger-Dog," So, with apologies for intellectual theft, I decided to name him "Digger."

Naming Digger was the easy part - I now had to "train" him, and I had no experience in this. Growing up, my brother Adam and I didn't have any pets. We wanted some, but beyond the odd goldfish from the country fair or salamander or newt that inevitably found its way from the terrarium to my parents dresser, only to be discovered one day during cleaning, dessicated, there was not much wildlife in our house. We were away every summer, Adam and I were in camp, while my parents traveled, and they didn't want to kennel a dog for a summer. Adam likes to count as one of the great childhood traumas the time that he won a puppy at the Purim Carnival at Neve Shalom. We ran home and excitedly brought the news to the house, only to be told that we couldn't keep him. We always wanted a dog - and now I had one and we were both going to have to learn from each other.

Like many a dog owner these days I "crate-trained" Digger to housebreak him. This means that when I'm out of the house he stays in his "crate" - a home kennel - the theory being that he naturally won't dirty his own little area. Then when I get home, I immediately take him outside where he goes to the bathroom. At night he was also to sleep in his crate, and first thing in the morning, I take him out, etc.

All the books claim that dogs "love" their crates. They "feel safe" there they say, or the crate speaks to the dog's natural "cave-dwelling instinct," yadda-yadda. Well, Digger never really did like that crate. At night he would whimper and whimper in there - sounding so lonely - and I couldn't take it. I would go downstairs to the living room, and sleep on the floor near the crate - that seemed to comfort him - and finally I brought the whole contraption upstairs to the bedroom. He never liked being alone, and he rarely was.

Digger at work

Almost from the beginning, Digger would come to the office w/me every day. At first it was sheer pandemonium - there were two puppies in the hallway, Digger and his brother

Charlie (as named by Tim). They would wrestle with each other, run to the end of the hall to greet anyone who turned the corner, and generally do what puppies do. Including go the bathroom where they weren't supposed to go. We kept a supply of odor and stain remover on hand and did our best to keep the place clean. Peter Kostelec likes to tell the story of a time when both Tim and I were away and Peter had agreed to watch the boys in the office. At some moment, it was clear that they both had to go, so Peter tossed them both in a box and ran as fast as he could out of the building to avoid an accident. Luckily, Dick Lower, the custodian in the building was a big fan of the boys - as was just about everyone - and he would help us keep the place clean.

While on the subject of the office, it's worth recounting another story, this one, about Deb Minichiello who was the senior Administrative Aide in the Computer Science department. I got Digger just about the time that we were moving into our new building and the chair of CS, Donald Johnson, was considering banning dogs from the building. Deb, who was the real power behind the department, told Donald in no uncertain terms, that the dogs had to be allowed in. That was that.

Digger was a source of calm to pretty much everyone in the CS building. Of course he was usually under my desk, but he had many places where he would curl up and snooze - with Peter, with Tim, Geoff Davis, Tom Cormen - those were some of his favorites. He also loved the front office - first Deb and Phyllis Bellmore, later Sammie Travis and Mary Wood when she brought her office over. All these folks were great to him. Kept biscuits for him, talked to him, sometimes would even take him for a walk if he happened to be there and they had to leave. Sammie would always give Digger three biscuits and he knew he was meant to get three. Any fewer and he'd stay there until he received his usual. He was a true mathematician's dog.

I've often been asked if I brought Digger to class. The answer is, generally, no - since I have a basic rule: "never bring anything more interesting than your own lecture." But, I would bring him to review sessions and exams. All in the name of trying to keep the tension down.

Digger found a place in many different offices. He was a regular at the Santa Fe Institute and I managed to sneak him at the Institute for Advanced Study. Actually, the secretaries knew, but no one seemed to mind.

Walks

We had lots of routines - that's a big part of owning a dog, or at least my owning a dog. Four walks a day - a long walk in the morning, short walk mid-day, long walk in the afternoon, and a short walk before calling it a night. In Hanover, our favorite walk was in Pine Park down below the golf course, which always included a walk around Occum Pond, and we also loved to do the hike up the AT to the Velvet Rocks Shelter. In Metuchen, we had our walk downtown in the morning where I would grab a latte and then we'd turn around and walk home. In Cambridge it was the walk around Fresh Pond. In New York City it was the walk from the East 64th street entrance in Central Park up to

and around The Great Lawn and back. Usually, we'd stop off at Café Bacio for a coffee first. In Princeton it was a walk in the Institute woods (if he was lucky there would be some deer to chase). In Boulder it was a daily walk up Mount Sanitas. In Santa Fe, it was the walks up near St. Johns. Lots of walks. Lots of time to think, lots of reasons to grab a friend and walk and talk. Lots of walks with Tim and Charlie. Lots of walks with Peter and Digger. Later, lots of walks with Ellen, and then with Ellen and Alex. Lots of time to work stuff out.

In the winter when in Hanover, we'd get up really early and walk to the golf course in the subzero weather and in the snow. Sometimes after a new snow we'd be on the golf course as the maintenance crew was there making tracks for the cross-country skiers. Or the ski team might be out early using headlamps. It was a totally mystical, magical event to be there in the bitter cold, with the stars still bright. Sometimes in the dark I'd lose sight of Digger but I would hear him thundering over the frozen snow or breaking through the crust as he galloped toward me. He loved the cold and he loved the wet. He hated thunder - unless he was outside and then he could tolerate it.

We had lots of hikes, some that were pretty tough. We hiked a handful of the 14ers in Colorado and many of the big peaks in New Mexico (including Santa Fe Baldy and Wheeler on several occasions). Many hikes up Mount Cardigan where he would run across the rocks.

As you can see, Digger traveled quite a bit with me. At first by plane and he made several flights to Denver airport. The last time he made such a fuss getting into the crate (all paws out in Logan airport, surrounded by at least 10 people going "how cute.") and then got out in Denver barking and howling. After that one, there were no more and together he and I drove out to Santa Fe - three days, first night in Cinncinnati With the Kahns and the next night in Tulsa and by the last night in Santa Fe. Stopping for periodic walks, eating Subway subs - not too bad at all.

The routines of walks around Occum Pond and along the golf course and by the river. Taking Digger and Charlie fishing on the Black River in Vermont out by Royalton.

People who cared for him

Digger had lots of friends and when I traveled he was either with them or with me - never boarded. Peter took care of him the most. My Mom's friend Helene Dougan was a big favorite. A few of the undergrads who worked in the CS department also helped out for big chunks of time. Two come to mind, Jane and Frank - can't remember their last names.

Senthil Periaswamy was a grad student in computer science who took great care of Digger - loved Digger. A funny story about Senthil is that one year as summer was approaching he came in to my office to tell me that he was going home to India that summer to get married. He didn't yet know to whom, but he knew that (as was the custom) his parents had formed a list of potential brides and that he would choose one and return a married man. At the end of the summer, Senthil returns and tells me that it went well -

the first woman on the list was quite nice, but she didn't like dogs and since Senthil loved Digger, he could not marry this woman. Luckily, the next woman on the list was also lovely AND loved dogs - so Senthil married her. Indeed, Sangeetha also loved Digger and indeed, they would encourage me to go away so that I would leave Digger with them.

He spent a night here and there with the Doyles and that meant he could hang out with his buddy Forbes (although to be honest, Digger was always more of a people's dog than a dog's dog). He also spent a few notes with Larry, Jody, and Anna Diamond-Polansky. One funny story there is once after picking him up following some trip that Ellen and I took, he was whimpering all night. Thinking he was sick, we kept letting him out, but once outside, all he would do is stare out into the sky and smell the air. He was either lovesick for Lily or, as we found out, pining for more of the MacDonald's hamburgers and salami that Larry had given Digger in honor of Lily's birthday.

Digger at home

On those rare occasions where I had to leave him at home for a bit - an event that was always met with a mournful look - when I returned, I could be sure to get whale noises, in direct proportion to the time that I was away. These were the high pitched song of the whales that you can hear on National Geographic specials. He'd sing, and move between my legs, put his paws up on my chest, lick me, and generally go nuts. I wish I had recorded that. Those were great moments.

Sometimes I would wake him up when I walked in and he would come to the top of the steps (this is at 28 East Wheelock Street) with what I would call his "Chinese eyes" - all sleepy and unbelievably cute, often holding some kind of stuffed animal in his mouth or a shoe (which he never damaged!). He would often fall asleep with all paws up the air, totally slayed out - clearly a boy and proud of it! Yes, he was on all the furniture - Digger was everywhere.

He never begged for food, never took food off the table - always waited his turn. Impeccable manners. He loved cheese, meat, and fish. No vegetables for this guy,

Although he liked the water, he didn't particularly like getting a bath. He'd tolerate it - that's all. Although one time Digger asked for a bath: we were out walking very late at night in Hanover. It was our end-of-the-day around the block quickie. As we approached the house Digger saw some sort of animal. Ran up to see what it was, and lo and behold we had run into a skunk! Digger was curious - too curious - and the skunk turned around and gave Digger a snootful of spray. Poor boy - I was all set to corral him for a shower, but when I opened the door, Digger simply walked right into the bathroom, climbed into the tub (that he hated because of the way the porcelain feels on his paws) and sat there facing the showerhead, ready for a bath.

We hiked the local AT quite a bit, sometimes with Forbes and sometimes with Champ and Sarge, Pat O'Leary's chocolate labs. I still remember the time when a little Jack Russell was harassing Sarge (who Digger used to harass all the time) while we were

coming down the AT. Digger picked the Jack Russell up in his mouth and shook him like a rag doll - luckily he didn't kill him. He did something like one other time when he cornered a beaver or woodchuck in the IAS woods and picked him up and tossed him in the air. The little guy was only confused and ran off after regaining his balance.

The first time I went in the water with Digger was in the CT River on a walk in Pine Park. Digger became completely freaked out as I disappeared in the water.

Digger the New York Dog

Playing w/Luna in the sprinkler - when we moved to NYC in the fall of 2001 I was kind of worried about how Digger would do. Or maybe I was worried about how I would do. As it turns out, Central Park, before 9AM is dog heaven. Dogs are allowed to run free and they do, mixing it up, playing, fighting, while their owners walk and talk. One of the first mornings we were there, Digger fell in love with a German Shepherd named Luna. Well, with a GS in heat named Luna. Luna did this amazing thing where she would walk up to a sprinkler nozzle and drink from it and box with it. At the same time all that Digger wanted to do was sniff her rear-end in the hopes of "getting some." So, as Luna ran around after the rotating sprinkler, Digger ran after her - this went on for half-an-hour. Welcome to New York.

Pretty soon we fell in with several people in a regular morning crowd. Ed and his Chesapeake Morgan, Stacey and her Yellow Lab Maggie, Debbie and black Lab Molly, Jerry and Golden Retriever Belle, Karen and her mutt Seamus. That was Digger's main crew. There were some others - his buddy Magnum (Catherine's Jack Russell), Gay's Shepherd Cora, and of course Luna. He had a different bunch of afternoon friends who, in good weather, would congregate up on "dog hill" which was the little hill near the Met on East 79th Street. That's where we met George Goldner and his big Tibetan mastiff Moose.

These were his buddies, but he also had his nemeses and I have to admit that I pulled him out of a fair number of fights. He would mix it up - always gave me a warning - his tail was his barometer, the excited clockwise whirl of happiness, or the back and forth, parallel to the ground - that was love - and the ramrod, straight-up-in-the-air-I'm-about-to-kick-your-ass position that I would have to watch for when walking in the AM in Central Park. Yup, Digger did like to mix it up every once in the while with the other dogs, especially with young retrievers. There was Mozart a yellow lab that would roll over every time he saw Digger - after Digger had pinned him one day and then of course there was Jason's golden Reg. Those two had to be kept on opposite sides of the walk.

In the building on East 64th Street (the Royale on 64th and 3rd) all the doormen loved him - esp. Zoltan one of the maintenance guys, The short of it is that having Digger in the city was great for both of us. He loved all the excitement, loved the people, loved going to the park - and I loved the feeling of walking the streets with him.

Family and Kids

That year in the city was a big one - Lucy was born, I (re-)met Ellen - so lots of new important people in my life and his life and he loved 'em all - immediately. Lucy would call Digger "ra-ra." I can remember Lucy climbing to her feet by pulling herself up by Digger's fur and ears or crawling over him like he was a speed bump. Ellen's nephew Adam doing much of the same. When Adam found out Ellen was pregnant, when asked what will the baby's name be " he replied "Digger" - he is also the author of one of my favorite quotes about Digger: "he is a good dog and a good friend." Then of course there are the memories of Digger at our wedding - running around in his bowtie, trailed by all the little kids, coming up to the mike to calm me as I made my toast, best dog - bar none!

One day Alex was born and then Digger was a brother. Alex never really knew him, but I'd like to think that some of Digger rubbed off on him. That this is the reason why he is so comfortable around dogs. I will never forget the feeling I had when we took our family walks. There we were - a little, lovely, family, Dan, Ellen, Alex, and striding alongside us, so regal, so noble, so beautiful, Digger. Quite a sight to see on the streets of NYC. It made me so proud, so happy, it was a dream come true. I still can't believe that Alex didn't grow up with him.

Kids totally loved him and he at least tolerated kids stoically. The most amazing thing that I ever saw was when Casey, the autistic son of our friends Ian and Rochelle curled up under the table with Digger and they both just lay there contentedly for quite some time (until Casey became tired of it).

My brother loved him immediately. He loved to dance w/Digger and insisted on teaching him a trick or two, even when I told him not to, because I was sure it was using up important neurons, better spent on learning to understand commands like "Stop!" My mother took to him slowly, but my Dad, fairly immediately - so much so, that once when I left Digger with them during a winter trip and Digger pulled my Dad down on the ice and broke his kneecap, he didn't even get angry! In fact, the story that my Dad tells is that Digger must have realized that he had hurt him and when he limped up the bedroom, Digger followed him and put his head on the bed and just sat there, forlorn -doing a sitting version of what we would call his "crocodile" pose, with snout flush on a surface and only eyes moving back and forth. My father really loved him. My favorite story in this regard is of the day that he called me to the window to watch Digger running around in circles in the ivy, which my father exclaimed was clear evidence of just how "remarkable" a dog Digger is, for he was clearly doing calisthenics, just trying to stay in shape! This was the remarkable Doggo that my father would sit outside with, fenced in the yard for, gave treats to, and generally turned his life a little bit upside down to care for. And Doggo loved him too.

Closing Thoughts

Caring for any living thing makes you a better person. I owe so much to Digger - he, more than anyone taught me how to love, how to put another's needs before your own. Any good dogowner will tell you - your dog is the first thing you think about when you awake, and the last thing you think about before you go to sleep. Whatever else is going on in your life, you have to walk the dog, no ifs, ands, or buts. Digger came to work with me just about every day. Outside of several trips, he was with me almost all day, almost every day, for ten years. Losing him is like losing a limb - My body means to go for a walk four times a day, even though he's no longer there to accompany me. I still walk gingerly when I wake in the middle of the night, so as not to step over him sleeping soundly at the side of the bed. They say that the measure of a love is the depth of its loss. I am bereft, but - I'll say it once again - thankful.

He had a great spirit and love of life and most especially, people. Many of you made room for him in your lives and even in your workspaces - He and I appreciate all the generosity that you offered us over the years, and I know that in his own way he showed his thanks - and love.

He was a wonderful dog and companion. He is missed, now and evermore.

With deep sadness,
Dan