



## How My Old Dog Is Teaching Me to Age Gracefully

Goldie's given me 4 important lessons that I need to obey

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My best friend and teacher, Goldie  
Photo by John Stark

Everyone knows that dogs are the most loyal companions. They act as if you'd been away on a three-month trip when you get home from work or the store. They don't let a bad day stop them from taking time out to play and are grateful for every bite of food. They wake up wagging their tails.

But when they become old dogs, they bring another gift to your life. They turn into wise mentors. Mine, with her gray muzzle and drooping eyes, is teaching me how to age gracefully.

She's a tall Doberman-hound mix that I adopted from a shelter six years ago. She came with the name Goldie, which describes

the color of her coat. For a 12-year-old dog that weighs 75 pounds, she's in surprisingly good health. Like me, though, she has arthritis and stiff joints. I have to lift her in and out of the car.

But unlike me, Goldie has never complained about the limitations that come with an older body. She simply makes adjustments.

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**Lesson 1: Savor the experience.** Goldie can no longer run like the wind or spend a day hiking with me in the hills. She doesn't have that kind of stamina anymore. So instead, she's turned her daily walks into Discovery Channel adventures. Speed and distance no longer matter. "Stop, sniff and linger" is her new mantra.

I sometimes take Goldie to a nearby river on hot summer days for a swim. When she was younger she'd paddle out over her head to scare the ducks that were floating by. Or fetch sticks and tennis balls that people would throw in the water. But she wants nothing to do with those games anymore. Now when Goldie goes to the river, she cautiously wades in until the water covers her body up to her neck. Then she goes into a Zen-like trance as the cool current caresses her. If I call her name, she ignores me.

Taking my cue from her, I've given up boot camp classes at the health club. Now I walk on the treadmill while listening to music and I do yoga. No more injuries.

**Lesson 2: Sing your own song.** Goldie has always liked to howl. It's the hound in her. I call it singing. Several times a day, usually while lying on the grass in the backyard, she'll throw her head back and let loose, as if she were Maria Callas. She recently lost her top notes. Yet that hasn't silenced her. She's howling now more than ever, even though her voice keeps cracking.

I've tried quieting her. I was afraid her croaking scared the neighbors. But more and more I've come to appreciate the shrill sounds she's broadcasting. Her impromptu concerts inspire me. So what if she can't howl like she used to. It still makes her happy. I love that she does it with such gusto.

**Lesson 3: What's the rush?** The older I get, the less patience I seem to have. But Goldie is teaching me to chill.

In her younger days, she would pester me if I had to postpone taking her to the dog park or on a car ride. Sometimes an urgent business matter would demand precedence as we were heading out the front door.

"Later, girl," I'd tell her, dropping her leash.

If I had to take a phone call, she'd bark and whine until I hung up. If I had to send an e-mail, she'd use her long nose to nudge my hands off the computer keyboard. "Hurry up! Hurry up!" she was telling me. But now when there's a delay in our plans Goldie takes it in stride. She proceeds to her bed and curls up, figuring now's a good time for a quick nap. In no time, I can hear her soothing snores. She's content to stay put until I proclaim: "OK, I'm done now. We can go." Then she's up.

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**Lesson 4: Just be yourself.** The most important lesson Goldie is teaching me is to how to be comfortable with age. She doesn't make a big deal about it and neither should I.

Goldie gets more attention at the dog park and from strangers we meet on our outings than she ever did in her so-called prime. No rambunctious pup has anything on her. Over the years she has acquired a mature self-assuredness that attracts people to her. They get on their knees to hug her. "What a sweet dog," they're always saying. There's such wisdom in her eyes and so much kindness.

At her age, Goldie has nothing to prove.

"Nor do you," she seems to be telling me.

Old dogs can become our masters, if we listen to them.

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