



Sue Halpern and Pransky greet a nursing home friend.

TUESDAYS WITH PRANSKY

LIFE LESSONS FROM A THERAPY DOG

PRANSKY WAS SWEET AND SMART. She was calm, cute and people-oriented. But most of all, the 6-year-old Lab-poodle mix was bored.

Much of Pransky's days were spent watching her owner, writer Sue Halpern, type on the computer at their Ripton, Vt., home. "She'd pretend sleep, eyes closed, ears open, listening for any sound of an activity that might include her," Halpern writes. "I'd stand up from my desk and she'd jump up from wherever she was in the house and report, at the ready, by my side. Too bad we were only going downstairs to fold the laundry. It was pretty clear to me that she needed a job."

The search for the right job led to three months of daily training, a daunting certification test and eventually the halls of a local nursing home, where the duo has since dedicated Tuesday mornings to bringing comfort to residents. Halpern's *A Dog Walks Into a Nursing Home*, recently released in paperback, describes their experiences and the insights gleaned on a variety of topics: moral virtue and right living, the human-animal bond, old age and illness.

In this edited interview with senior editor Julie Falconer, Halpern explains how a "regular dog" can do remarkable good in the world.

How did you determine that therapy work was the right job for Pransky?

She's a really smart dog. I knew that she needed something that would be engaging for her, and she's also really social. I wanted to put her in the path of other people. It occurred to me that her particular set of skills and attributes would work really well in a therapy dog kind of setting if we could pass the test.

You were initially overwhelmed by the Therapy Dogs International test requirements and tried to volunteer without getting certified. What do you now tell people about that process?

I realized as soon as we were in the nursing home how crucial it was for us to have gone through that training. It seems like a fairly staid environment, but everyone is frail, and anything could happen. You want to be completely confident that you and your dog are in sync.

When did you realize you wanted to write about these experiences?

That took quite a long time. There's that book *Tuesdays With Morrie*. What was clear to me in our situation was that there was no Morrie character. There was no person who was dispensing wisdom left and right the way Morrie does in that book. And it took me a long time to realize that my Morrie, in a sense, was the dog. She wasn't dispensing verbal wisdom, but she was leading me to a much deeper understanding of human nature and quality of life and questions about how do you want to live your last days and what makes you happy.

You describe how many nursing home residents who struggle to remember their kids' or grandkids' names can still recall the names of former pets.

It was amazing. And they could tell you stories about their former dogs. A lot of us had dogs growing up, and they were really our first serious emotional connection with something "other," and I think that resonates forever. One of the things that happens when you get older and you end up in a hospital or in a hospice, you're disconnected from your familiar setting, and I think dogs bring comfort in part just because they're so loving and so accepting and so nonjudgmental. But I think it's also because they're so reminiscent of the warmth and closeness that we had when we were small.

What have been the most memorable reader reactions to your book?

I've pretty much gotten at least one letter a day from someone. Often they're just, "This

is what happened. My mom was in a nursing home and she was basically mute, but then this dog would come." These letters are so moving.

After the book came out, two things happened with the nursing home: People moved their family members into that nursing home because there were therapy dogs, and the nursing home got phone calls from people saying they wanted to get their dog certified to come in. There are more therapy dog teams working there now. That's really cool.

Are you and Pransky now role models for other therapy teams?

When people invite me to give a talk, they usually invite both of us. And I think that's really useful because people can see Pransky's a regular dog. She's probably just like your dog, but she's trained now, and she's got a really good sense of people. She does something so simple but also so remark-

able, and it has profound effects on people.

A lot of people write, "My dog Spot is a rambunctious 2-year-old. Do you think Spot will ever be able to be a therapy dog like Pransky?" I'm always completely enthusiastic about it and just tell people that if your 2-year-old is too energetic, wait until your dog is 4 or 5. If you think your dog has the right temperament, you'll know.

The other thing I make sure I always tell people is that the hour or two or three that you spend doing this work a week has a way bigger impact on other people's lives than the time it's taking out of your week. Measure for measure, you're not actually doing a whole lot, but these folks are getting a whole lot out of it.



Reflections on moral living are a guiding theme throughout the book, and you also raise questions about animal morality.

I'm writing about human morality when I'm writing about human virtues, so the question was in my mind, "What about my dog? Does my dog know right from wrong?" I think she does, but what do the experts say? This dog is so intuitive and sweet and just a really kind animal. Without sounding like a crazy person, I think that she intends to be a kind animal, and I think that's partly maybe something she's learned in her work. When people are dying, she knows that they're dying and she knows what to do. And where does that come from?

How is Pransky handling her newfound celebrity?

It has only gone to her tail. She really doesn't have a big ego.



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