

# Lessons From Riley

Writers take our stories - and our lessons -- where we can get them. We're the greatest recyclers around. Everything we do, see, think, hear, feel, touch, and smell can be reused and revitalized. I read and listen to interviews with leaders in the arts, business, and politics, weighing what's worked for them against what might work for a writer. You might have caught some of the reviews of business books I've been reading, too. But recently I realized that the source of many of my best lessons for life and career is Riley.

And it doesn't matter that Riley's a dog.  
So, what have I learned?

~ What you sniff along the way is more important than where you go.

~ The more treats you ask for, the more you get. It doesn't hurt to look adorable and absolutely confident that the treat will be forthcoming.

~ Everything is worthy of a treat. Action, nonaction— it's all good.

~ When offered a treat, do not ever, ever demur. Instead, accept with gusto because clearly you deserve it.

~ Everyone loves you. Anyone who does not recognize immediately that he loves you simply needs more intimate acquaintance to realize he loves you. For those few who still don't get it, growl. You don't want them anywhere near you. Clearly, they're too stupid to ever be trusted.



The lessons started when I adopted Riley from a collie rescue group. I wasn't going to. I already had an airline ticket to fly to Illinois for the holidays and it was well into November, and how could I leave a newly

adopted four-month-old puppy at the kennel for 10 days? But I agreed to look at him—just to look at him. Just to look.

Yes, you're right. Stupid to even think he wasn't coming home with me that day. So the first lesson was:

**~ When you find yourself doing what your head says you shouldn't do, it's often because you really want to do it. Don't fight it. You just get more bruises if you do. Instead, go with it.**

And, of course I didn't leave the newly adopted four-month-old puppy at the kennel for 10 days. I bought him a plane ticket that cost more than mine and took him with me.

Within minutes of our arrival, Riley was being disciplined by being made to sit and not budge because he hadn't listened. The humans were a couple of yards away, looking at him. He looked back with complete aplomb. My father observed, "That dog has no shame."

He was absolutely right. More than 11 years later, and I can say that never once has Riley wavered from the lesson:

**~ Embarrassment is a waste of time.**

Dad went on to say how lucky Riley was to have been adopted by me, to have found a good home and someone to love him. Ten days later, as Dad and I watched the baggage handler at O'Hare Airport roll away Riley in his carrier for our return flight, Dad said, "That's a great dog. You are so lucky to have gotten that dog."

**~ The balance of power can shift when you're not looking. And it can happen very quickly. It doesn't necessarily mean you're at fault. It just happens. So don't angst over it.**

Riley became the role model for a canine character in a series of books. "Sin" (supposedly short for "Sincere, but I knew better) had many of Riley's habits, including leaving no door unopened if he can help it and seeing-into-the-future skills.

I quickly figured out the source of Riley's agitation when I picked up my keys—it meant I'd be leaving the house, and (in contrast to the leash, which was always good news) most likely without him. It took me a bit longer to put together why he barked whenever I put on shoes. Apparently he'd recognized that I didn't wear shoes much in the house and he associates my putting on shoes with my leaving the house. As he grew older, he started getting agitated when I opened the sock drawer.

And now his reaction varies depending on if I take out sport socks (not as reliable as the leash, but still has the potential for good news) or the dress socks (dum-da-dum-dum Dummmm!).

The lesson here?

**~ In trying to foretell an event, don't be satisfied to check only the action immediately preceding the event. Keep looking farther back in the sequence to give yourself the greatest advance warning.**

Riley's collie bloodlines show a lot in his herding abilities. If a thunderstorm was threatening, he was quite adept at gathering neighborhood kids and starting them toward my house. (That doesn't work as well now that they're older and know his tricks.) I've also spotted him trying to herd moths attracted by a light at night— an entirely unrewarding enterprise, which for some reason reminded me forcibly of writing.

**~ Instinct is strong, but not infallible.**

When he was 10 years old, Riley was diagnosed with degenerative myelopathy. His spinal cord is degenerating, starting from the back and moving forward. Eventually it will attack the brain stem. He's in no pain—the nerves aren't working, so there's nothing to signal pain. Right now, the effects include that he wags his tail less. (He still makes his feelings quite clear.) And he has a lot of trouble with his back legs. So he gets up stairs largely by pulling himself up with his front legs, letting the back ones tag along. Sometimes one or the other of his back paws turns under (called "knuckling") and he drags it.

To his chagrin, our walks have been cut from daily to every other day so he can recover. We walk more on grass than concrete so if he drags a paw it won't bleed. Sometimes he stumbles. Other times his legs just give out and he ends up sitting suddenly. He doesn't let any of that stop him. In fact, usually when he takes a sudden seat, he finds the pause a good time to point his nose at the pocket with the treats and give me that "of course I deserve one" expression.

**~ Just like embarrassment, whining about "I can't do what I used to be able to do" is a waste of time. All that matters is doing things now.**

For some dogs this disease progresses very rapidly. I've been fortunate that Riley's has not. Fortunate because he makes me laugh every single day, and that's always good. Fortunate also because in this, he has taught me perhaps the most important lesson of all.

**~ If you stumble, get up and keep going.**

~~~

**Note:** This was first published as a President's Column in NINK, the official newsletter of Novelists, Inc., in June 2007.

Riley and I moved in July (see What's New? at

www.PatriciaMcLinn.com) and he enjoyed his new home for several months. Including teaching me some additional lessons:

~ Whenever workmen show up, no matter how late they are, be happy to see them.



~ Wherever your bed lands at any given moment—back of a car, stairway landing, middle of a garage floor, partway in a closet—is a good place to get some rest.

In late March, Riley took a very bad turn. He fought hard, as always. But in just over three weeks he went from taking a mile-long walk to barely being able to lift his head. I held him as he died peacefully on April 14, 2008.

I miss him every day, though I'm working hard to follow his greatest lesson:

**~ Live with joy.**