



December, 2009 – Leila Raises a Puppy A Story for All Ages

The holiday season can be a very good time to focus on intangible gifts—the kind that come from the heart. In this story from Wonderful Welcome, a Tapestry of Faith K/1 curriculum, a young girl loves and raises a puppy so it can be trained as a service dog and, ultimately, belong to someone else.

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Leila Raises a Puppy

Leila was staring out the car window noticing the sun shining through the leaves as she thought about the children’s worship service she heard that day. It was about the Unitarian Universalist idea of the web of life. Leila remembered this idea by calling it “the spider web of life.” The lines of the web connect everything that is alive—people all over the world, and plants, and all the animals.

Leila knew how pollution and litter hurt all the life that shared the web. She never threw garbage on the ground. She knew to turn off the lights when she left a room, to save energy. Leila was thinking she could do something more to help the web of life. But, she did not know what.

Instead of going right home, her mom parked in front of the local ice cream shop. “Hey, are we having ice cream for lunch?” asked Leila, coming out of her thoughts.

“We are! I feel like having an ice cream for lunch today,” said her mom, Sophie.

In the ice cream shop, Leila noticed a dog with a bright yellow jacket on it and a stiff, rectangular leash. She loved dogs and wanted to run over and pet this one, but its jacket had some writing on it. “Mom, what does that sign say?” Leila asked.

“Dog in training. Please do not pet,” read her mom.

Leila asked, “What is that dog training for?”

Sophie explained that the dog was being trained to be a guide dog for people who cannot see, people who are blind. Leila looked at the person holding the leash and said, “She looks like she can see.”

“That’s right,” her mom replied. “The person holding the leash is a trainer. A guide dog has to be trained for a long time before it can help a person who can’t see.”

Licking on her cone in the back seat of the car, Leila thought about how a person could help a dog to be another person's helper. That was a great example of how the spider web of life worked. When they got home, Leila asked, "Mom, could we get a puppy and train it to be a guide dog?"

"That's a lot of work, Leila," said Sophie.

"But we would be part of the web," Leila said. "We can help a dog that grows up to help a person!"

"We'll see," said her mom.

That night, Leila's parents talked about it. "Does Leila understand that the puppy would only live with us for a short time?" asked her father, Claudio. "What if she loves the puppy so much, she can't say goodbye when she needs to?"

"I thought about that, too," said her mom. "But, I love that she wants to do something so generous. I think Leila understands how helping the dog get ready to help someone else is a good way to be part of the interdependent web of life."

So Leila and her family signed up to be "Puppy Raisers" for a guide dog training school. The guide dog staff interviewed Leila and her parents and visited their home, to make sure the puppy would be safe and well cared for. The puppy would live with them until it was about one year old. Leila was very excited to have a pet of her very own, one that would grow up to have an important job. Now they just had to wait for the right puppy to be born.

One morning a few months later, Leila opened her eyes and stretched with her arms way over her head. She put her arms down and yelled, "MOM! Is today the day? Are we getting the puppy we are going to train TODAY?!"

Leila and her family went to the guide dog school. They met a woman named Nadia, who introduced them to Chester, an adorable, tiny puppy. He was so cute! Leila loved him right away.

"Of course, you will feed Chester and take him for walks, and it is fine to love him and play with him," Nadia said, "But, you also have to get him ready to be a working dog. Take him everywhere you go. He needs to get used to lots of people, loud noises, and traffic."

The whole year Leila was in first grade, she played with Chester every day and took him for walks. She learned how to read the words on the sign he wore: "Dog in training. Please do not pet." Leila knew some day she would have to say goodbye to Chester, but for now, she cherished her time with him. When first grade was finished for Leila, it was time for Chester's school to begin. Leila and her family returned Chester to the guide dog school which would be his next home. Nadia told Leila and her family they could come see Chester graduate from guide dog school when he was ready to go live with a person who needed him. Leila was sad to say goodbye, but she knew Chester would learn to do a very important job.

On a beautiful day when Leila was in second grade, she and her parents were invited to the guide dog graduation. Nadia brought them to see Chester. He had grown a lot bigger. As soon as Leila saw Chester, she shouted and ran up to him. Chester whimpered with joy when he saw Leila, but he stayed where he had been told to stay—next to Miranda, the 17-year-old high school girl who would be taking

him home. Chester had been trained very well. Leila realized with a little tug at her heart that Chester was no longer her pet.

Leila looked shyly at Miranda, and Nadia introduced them to each other. "Miranda has been blind since birth," Nadia said. "This is the first time she will have a guide dog, so she has been in school with Chester, too. Now they know how to work together. Chester can help Miranda do things she could not do on her own."

"Hi, Miranda," said Leila.

"It's very nice to meet you, Leila. Thank you for taking care of Chester when he was a puppy. I can tell you and your parents have done a great job! Chester is friendly and he is very focused. We have been walking around my neighborhood all by ourselves!" said Miranda.

"Please take very good care of Chester," said Leila. "He likes lots of hugs."

"I will take very good care of him. I promise," said Miranda. "And he will take care of me."

After the ceremony, Leila and her parents went home. Even though Leila would always miss Chester, she felt very good about helping Miranda. She felt so good that she asked her parents, "When can we adopt another puppy to become a guide dog?"

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