

9/11 Memories

by Daniel D'Arezzo

Through circumstances too complicated to relate here, my dog, Shep, happened to be mayor of New York City on September 11, 2001. As soon as she learned that the first plane had struck one of the towers, she ordered the other tower to be evacuated. There was some resistance, but she insisted. Then we went down to the site. Moments after we arrived, the second plane struck the second tower. Terrified people were running away from the burning towers, but Shep stood her ground. Her calm presence helped to calm others, and the evacuation of the downtown proceeded in an orderly fashion. She called on engineers to tell her what they thought would happen next. One expert said, "It's impossible to put out the flames; those towers are coming down." Shep immediately directed the police and firefighters to leave the buildings and clear the site. No one could say for sure how the buildings would come down, so Shep focused on getting all the buildings in the neighborhood cleared of people. When that was done, we all stood back and held our breath. We watched the first tower collapse, the upper stories pancaking on those below, raising a huge cloud of toxic particles. When, twenty-nine minutes later, the other tower collapsed in the same way, Shep permitted herself to feel relieved that the destruction had been confined somewhat. At the same time, she was anguished over the loss of life, which, thanks to her foresight, was not as bad as it might have been if the rescuers had also been killed and the second tower not evacuated.

In the days following the attack, Shep was tireless in her efforts to bring calm and self-confidence back to her stricken city. In a leaderless nation, with the president in an undisclosed location and the vice-president hiding in the basement of the White House, it was only natural that the media would focus on Shep's efforts at recovery. Her compassion was both extraordinary, coming from a government official, and telegenic, coming from a dog. The kin of those who died in the attack lined up to pet and hug her, and Shep

never tired of licking each one. It was clearly comforting to them. More than one said afterwards, "I really know she cares," or words to that effect. In addition to compassion, Shep personified action, personally leading a K-9 unit of valiant sniffer dogs onto the still-smoldering pile of rubble to which the towers had been reduced. Amazingly, they found people still alive in the wreckage and effected their rescue. My favorite photo of that terrible time shows Shep with her fellow dogs and a woman, whom they have just saved, being borne away on a stretcher. They are so happy and proud, it makes me tear up.

We all have indelible memories of that time and the smoking ruin it produced, and in most of those memories we see the gaping hole, vast and inconceivable, but we also see that small black dog patrolling its rim or down in its depths, overseeing the painful task of finding human remains or talking with the press or with family members. She is always compassionate and hopeful, with her ears pricked up, her eyes bright, her pink tongue lolling. Looking back I find it incredible that this small, fragile, unutterably brave embodiment of life could absorb and nullify the horror we felt. I could never have imagined that my dog would become the potent symbol for a shocked and grieving nation.

In New York, as in so many cities, we have term limits for mayors. After all, eight years is nearly a lifetime for a dog. Such was the emotion Shep evoked that there were cries to revoke the law and have Shep serve a third term. But she knew it was time to leave and quietly demurred. Later, when the public went to the polls and elected a cat, Shep nearly died laughing. Since 1990, when the Supreme Court ruled that animals could hold public office, the people had chosen for mayor a Derby winner, then Shep, and next a cat. "Well," she said, "that's politics."

Shep died from an inoperable heart tumor on May 10, 2004. She was standing up and could not lie down, because her heart could not bear the weight of her body. Gravity was killing her. I held her head in my hands while the veterinarian injected her with the drugs that

eased her pain forever. I wept copiously, but there was nothing I could do.

Some grateful citizens of New York insisted on a monument, as I had known they would. Instead of flowers, I asked for donations to the animal shelter where I had got her. A private committee wanted to commission a colossal statue of her for the new Freedom Tower, but that didn't seem right, and the families of the victims opposed it. I think the committee wanted to signify through the size of the statue the greatness of Shep's soul, but it didn't seem right to me. She was just a small dog with a big heart.

In the end we compromised on a less controversial life-size statue of Shep, lying down contentedly, placed at the side of the statue of Balto in Central Park, where Shep and I used to walk. More than 80 years ago, Balto was one of the sled dogs that brought medicine to Nome, Alaska, during an outbreak of diphtheria. Hardly anyone today can tell you who Balto was, and in 80 years no one will know who Shep was. Strollers in the park will just think it nice or funny or foolish that there are statues of two dogs in the park. Just over a century later, who remembers the sinking of the *General Slocum* in New York Harbor and the loss of a thousand lives, most of them women and children, and a century from now who will know what the twin towers were?

I don't condone our collective amnesia. I think we would be better off if we understood our history and actually learned something from it. But statues, memorials, don't really tell you very much. History is a complicated business. I'm sure it will seem strange in the not-too-distant future that Shep left office under a cloud. One casual remark, and the media turned on her as quickly as it had embraced her. Her offending words were "I grieve for the boys who flew the planes into the towers." What an uproar! Forget that this was said in the context of her meditations on the state of the world and of the unrest in the Muslim world and the need for all of us to see that our country is just and promotes opportunity for all. Her words were twisted to make it seem that she cared more about terrorists than about innocent people doing their jobs. Felix's campaign exploited

this media “gaff” to defeat his opponent, Jason, a popular golden retriever who was the son of one of Shep's K-9 buddies. Jason was put in the impossible position of repudiating Shep, his hero, or “supporting terrorism.” His campaign collapsed.

Of course, as everyone knows, Felix's administration was so corrupt and incompetent that he was impeached and New York's constitution was amended to prevent another nonhuman from being elected to any office in the state. One result is that Shep's administration has been tarred by association, although it was far from corrupt, and I have to hope that future historians will correct that false impression. Do dog mayors make mistakes? Sure they do. Do human mayors? Do you have to ask?

I am not advocating a return to canine mayors. I don't, as Bill Clinton liked to say, have a dog in that fight. But is it too much to ask that human politicians have a few canine virtues, such as vigilance, loyalty and love? I don't care if Shep is remembered by schoolchildren; my hope is that she will be emulated by our leaders.

