

*Lessons from my dogs,
Hunting and gathering*

Each morning as the sun rises and the bunnies and berries are plentiful this time of year, I rig up my little berry pouch and the dogs and I go out together hunting and gathering. We cross the fields, eager if alert, in imitation of what our ancestors would have done so many years ago.

After a hot, humid stretch of near 100-degree days, both humidity and temperature dropped and as we walked to our magical field I remember summers out west or in New England. Each tree on the surrounding mountains is clearly delineated and the grayish white sky typical of July in Virginia is traded in for clear blue layered with white clouds. A gentle breeze is for me a better gift than a shiny new car and, as I watch the trees swaying and dancing I think how, in their stationary lives, they must love the breeze as much as I.

As I pick the first black raspberries of the season I am brought back to a simpler way of life. Next come the wine berries and red raspberries, and last the blackberries. And as each berry comes into season I am reminded that the earth has always provided for us. Likewise, as Chance and Sasha feather on the scent of young rabbits they are fulfilling their simple purposes as hounds.

I let them loose to work a covert when I've time to observe, but often they remain on leashes in a facsimile of what their lives once were as wild dogs. And yet it's a trade off, I tell them. In return for their captivity, they get fresh cooked meals twice daily, abundant treats in between, lots of loving, a soft bed in which to sleep...and I like to think they'd have it no other way.

Yet when sweet Sasha began scrambling over our back fence when the scent of rabbits enticed temptation, I was faced with realization of her true nature. They are, of course, hounds at heart.

So I let them loose to hunt even though there are miles and miles to roam. I lose track of them for periods of a time as I pick my berries and when I panic and can't find them right away, I swear to myself I'll never let them loose again. And yet this has happened countless times and each time, I find myself once again unclipping confining leashes. How many time have I found myself wishing I could (or would) let them completely loose, opening the door of our home, letting them hunt through fields and forests for hours or days at a time? I know how much they love it, and I wish my love were big enough to allow it. My love for them is huge, yet coexisting with love is also great attachment. As the fox so eloquently says in *Le Petit Prince*, "You become responsible forever for the one you have tamed. And one also runs the risk of weeping a little if one lets himself be tamed." I think it is our animals who tame us, not vice versus, and therein lies the attachment. Little do we ever realize at first how greatly they will come to tame us.

Sometimes when I let them loose there is the fear that they will kill and eat the rabbits. While, to my knowledge, Chance has never caught a rabbit, Sasha has caught and eaten two baby bunnies. This breaks my heart and I cry at the loss of new and tender life. But then I realize that this means of subsistence is more natural than the food I offer them each day (also made from rabbit, duck, chicken or cow.) Unless labeled free-range or

from a local farm, this processed food is most likely supporting factory farming, while the rabbits in the wild run free for all their lives until that one searing moment. I think we who care so ardently for our own “tamed” animals ought be aware of the foods (so often based on the suffering of other animals) we feed them. Dog food such as *Orijen* uses all free-range, organic and “cruelty-free” meat and, surely from an energetic viewpoint, this is better all the way around.

While I know these little hounds and are born to hunt, I also know that they are not their ancestral wolves; they are house dogs. If they can come inside for a meal and sleep with happy, full bellies without catching that elusive rabbit, so too can I slip into Whole Foods and supplement my handful of berries from the morning’s ‘catch.’ And in the evenings when I sit before my computer to e-mail, I’ll see the rabbits happily hopping around our yard and by my window, and that is how I prefer to let things stay.

*Kay Pfaltz is a writer and animal activist. When you purchase her book **Lauren’s Story: An American Dog in Paris** you are supporting the animals. 100 % of profits are donated to animal organizations. For more information visit: www.kaypfaltz.com.*