

When we adopt an animal, we have to be comfortable with the idea of change and added responsibility. We think of all the things needed to prepare the house, prepare for training, and to prepare other members of the family. But rarely do we think about what the animal will teach us.

I had always lived a controlled life. Several childhood traumas left me with a fear of sudden change. For much of my life, I'd spent a great deal of energy and time creating the version of my life and future that resided in my head. Once an image settled into my thoughts, once I was comfortable with it, there was no deviation without distress.

A dog had always been part of my plans. I'd grown up with dogs, but school and living situations hadn't allowed for pets. Suffering from depression from a stagnant job and a bad break-up, however, I knew it was time to focus my love on a new companion who needed a home.

When I saw the beautiful year-old Great Pyrenees mix up for adoption, the image of our new life together dug itself into my consciousness. I drove to the shelter only to find out he had been adopted out over the holiday weekend. Heartbroken, I readied myself to leave, but my sister encouraged me to look at other dogs.

I had seen Aki's picture before. One of his ears slightly bent, intense bronze eyes, deep sable coat—he was beautiful and he'd caught my eye, but as an Akita mix, I wasn't sure that was a training responsibility I wanted. And, honestly I was still caught up on the idea of the other dog. I wasn't able to see how special he was. But this dog needed a home, and it would be with me.

I felt the world spiraling in on me on the drive home. I'd made a mistake. I hadn't planned for this dog. I'd made the decision too quickly. What had I gotten myself into? And when the vomiting and horrible hacking of kennel cough started that evening, I was panicking and in tears about my spur-of-the-moment decision.

There were many more trips to the vet over the next year. I expended much energy and patience learning how to teach manners to a stubborn husky-Akita mix I had named Aki who had little-to-no prior training. I spent many nights awake taking care of him as he threw up his meals—it took me a year to finally figure out he had a wheat allergy.

It happened slowly and quietly, but I slowly realized how close we had become. Aki learned to read my moods, glued himself to my side during my darker moments, slept on the bed when I was feeling lonely. His goofy antics and huge grin kept me laughing. He became my baby boy, my running buddy, and my goof. My future might have become different than the one I had imagined, but it was one that was even better.

I cannot recall why the change, what brought on that lightning strike that brought perfect clarity. I realized that, with Aki, I'd faced surprise, uncertainty, and change. As stressful and even painful as those moments had been, I'd not only come out the other side, but everything had turned out for the better.

It turned out that Aki was the leading edge I needed to see the disguised gifts that came to me over the next two years, including my now-husband, for one. He was the kind of man I loved as a friend but usually dismissed as a potential romantic partner. Because of Aki, I saw past my preconceived notions and the ideals in my head. I realized I was standing in front of the type of man with whom I wanted to build a life. This new-found

courage to face the unknown even pushed me to face my fears, quit my job, and embark upon my dream of becoming a writer, something I have not once regretted.

Bringing an animal into your life, your home, and your heart begins a chain of love and companionship unlike any other. But for me, inviting a rescued husky-Akita mix into my life brought so much more—not only acceptance of the unknown, but also the many gifts that come when you open yourself up to the crazy unpredictability of life.