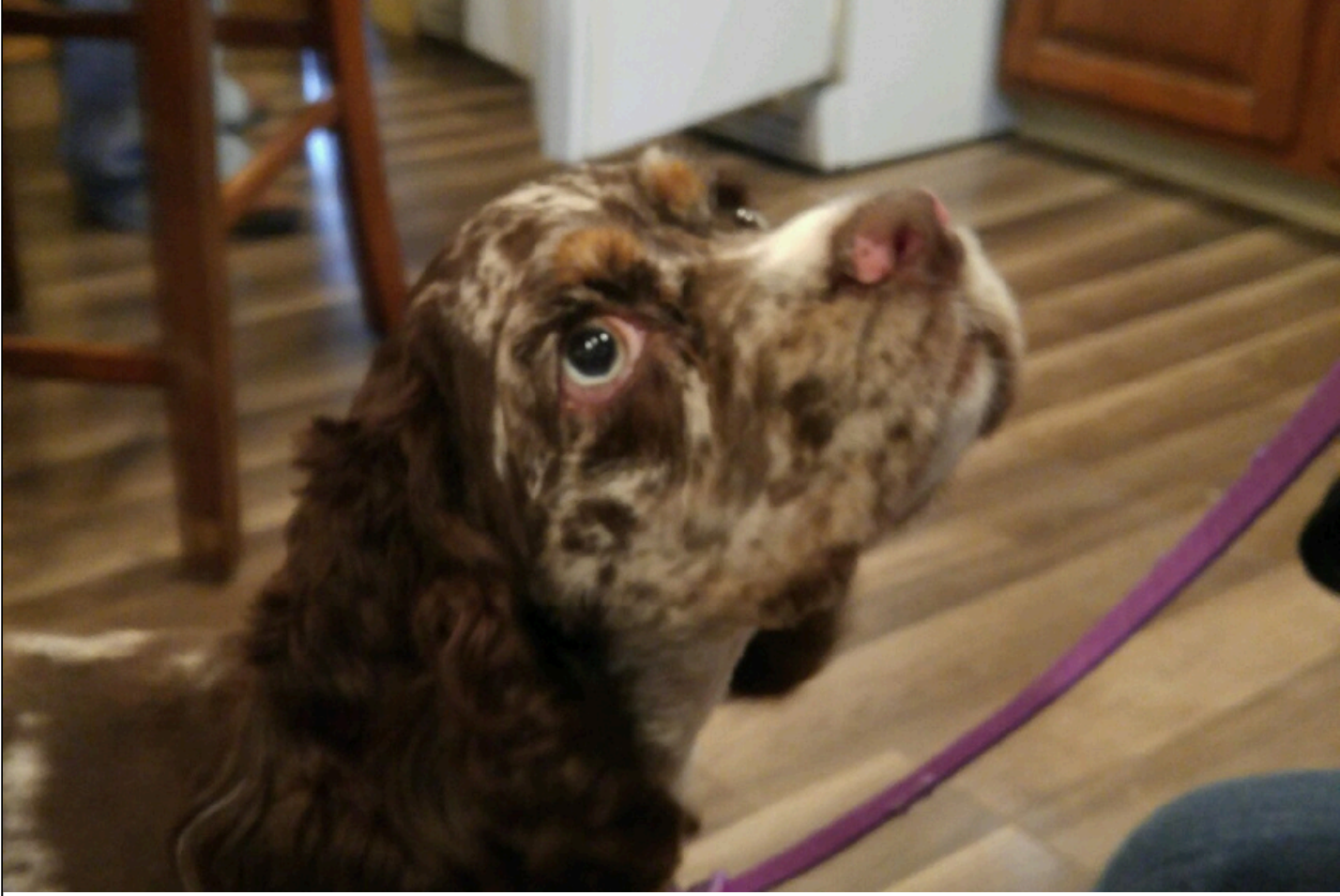


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A DOG'S PATH TO  
*Spirituality*

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# May We Meet in Perfect Love & Perfect Trust

Meditation was a game-changer for me. It helped me come to know myself, to begin my process of self-acceptance.

It was hard, really hard, directly proportionate to how much I wanted things to be different...to how much I wanted to be different.

The only way out of the pain I was feeling was to go through it. I had to carve my path, step by step. Slowly, ever so slowly, I learned to accept how I felt.

I learned to accept myself.

When I was grieving the loss of two of my animal companions, an exuberant and willful puppy entered my life. I dreamed I'd meet her. And, I've never been one to ignore my dreams.

As she and I were learning to live together, I was humbled to realize that I was learning so much about myself through her. It is still incredible to me that one of my greatest teachers has been a blue-eyed cocker spaniel.

We are always being given opportunities to learn and grow. Take your teachers where you find them. See how divinity resides in everything, everywhere, all the time.

Shine on,

*Rev. Jennifer Grace, PhD*

This paper was written as part of my metaphysics studies.

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# Learning to *Love* Myself



As a One on the Enneagram, I've been preoccupied with perfection my entire life—a desire to be good enough so that I can deserve to be here. I was brought up with a fundamentalist religion and I internalized those interpretations of a punishing and vengeful God.

As much as I tried, I couldn't reconcile that idea of God, even though I played the part of a good Christian girl. As someone who was also attracted to women, I was doubly terrified that someone would find out my secret sins. I thought I was born wrong and had to make it right.

I didn't know what to do with all of those feelings and did not feel safe enough to seek counsel—the people around me seemed to have some magic way of not punishing themselves or fearing themselves deeply unworthy. I thought they were better Christians and if I admitted my failures, I'd be rejected. Instead, I spent over 25 years punishing my body with deprivation and compulsive exercising—all of that anxiety and dread had to go somewhere. I finally ceded the battle when I had what felt like a nervous breakdown. Anxiety and panic attacks plagued me, and they would cycle for hours at a time. I thought I was dying.

Hospitalization and extensive medical testing yielded no conclusive results. I feared that I had finally broken my body and could not win or be perfect enough no matter how hard I tried. I was starting to suspect that my obsessive thought patterns and self-hatred had done this, but I didn't know what to do with any of it. While therapy yielded some insights, I felt worse each time I went. I didn't believe in God, and I hadn't let myself get close enough to a partner to lean on her support. My mother has always been a source of unconditional love, but I feared it wasn't really about me—only me as her child. I couldn't take it in that I might be worth it, so I rationalized that if she knew everything about me, she'd finally walk away.



# Learning to *Love* Myself



I had a dog and a cat, both of which were deeply important to me as sources of love that I let myself accept (they did not care if I was imperfect). I funneled all of my energies into taking care of them, and they were the center of my world.

They passed in the same year and I was rendered adrift. For the first time, I understood depression. Dieting and over-exercising were no longer viable channels for me (I finally got the message that it was a way of killing myself).

I hadn't let myself fully experience spirituality because it was tangled up with religion in my mind, so I didn't have an outside source of comfort to turn to. I didn't trust myself to find my inner nature or divinity. I felt deeply alone.

Years ago, I had experimented with meditation. I found that I could reach an altered state but did not see the benefit of it. I had no desire to connect with my true nature because I thought it would destroy me—that it was an abyss that would swallow me whole. When therapy and all of my other coping mechanisms didn't help the anxiety and panic, I was desperate enough to try it again. Abyss or no, I knew that I couldn't go on much longer.

I still didn't know about God and I still didn't like myself, but I found that when I sat—even for 5 minutes, I had glimpses of true peace. It didn't happen each time, but it was enough that I kept going back. I was learning that there wasn't an abyss and that there was a part of me that is connected to everything. For tiny, tiny moments, I felt like I had come home.

While I was beginning to glimpse my true spiritual nature, my physical home was empty and I couldn't stand it any longer. I didn't want to betray the memory of my girls by rushing out to get another animal, but being alone with my thoughts was too much to ask at that time.



# Learning to *Love* Myself



Five weeks after my dog passed, I had a dream that I got a puppy. Even though I had cut myself off from spirituality for so long, my dreams were something that I had always heeded.

I began looking and was drawn to a very unusual-looking cocker spaniel—a tri-color parti merle with blue eyes that looked as if someone had doodled all over her. I'd never seen anything like her, and even though her markings made her look grumpy in the breeder's puppy pictures, I kept returning to her. There was something about her that drew me.

When I met her, she was vivacious and inquisitive and so much fun. I gave her a name to match her distinctive markings and personality—Charleston. My mother had accompanied me and held Charleston on the drive home. They bonded instantly. Charleston whimpered when she needed us to stop so she could go to the bathroom and those first two days were wonderful. I thought that I had finally hit the jackpot—that I was being rewarded (Enneagram One trap, I now realize) for all of my years of being a vegetarian, animal supporter, and the best mom I could be to my girls.

Something shifted, though. As Charleston acclimated to my home, I experienced a nightmare of a puppyhood with her that lasted nearly 2 years. Her energy was unflagging, her remarkable intelligence meant that she was difficult to train unless she decided it was worth it, she had an uncanny ability to make multiple messes in an unbelievably short period of time, and she was rough in her playing—I had holes in my clothes and scratches on my hands and arms. For the 30 minutes or so that she would nap each day (that was my reprieve), she didn't do it next to me. After an exhausting day, I didn't have the reward of being close to her.

I thought I was being punished. I trained with her intensively (including sessions with a personal trainer to address her aggression) and did my best, yet she would bite me if I corrected her. She refused to submit and we were locked in a battle of wills that often ended in my tears.



# Learning to *Love* Myself



I deeply love animals and I hated that I was fantasizing about getting rid of her. I felt like a failure. I knew that if I yielded her to a shelter, she would be adopted quickly because she was beautiful, but she would also be returned because she was likely to bite someone. I equated my giving up with her death sentence. I wanted to (quite often) but my sense of obligation was stronger.

After following the experts' advice and trying everything but standing on my head, I finally gave up (it was like the anxiety and panic attacks all over again—nothing I had been trying was working). I realized that I was waiting for her to change before I would love her. As tuned in as she is to me, I'm sure she felt it and fought against it. I started looking for the good things in her and treating her with compassion instead of frustration. I began to be softer in my expectations of her. I didn't realize it at the time, but I was bringing my meditation practice to the way I handled my dog.

The lesson culminated in one of Charleston's anxiety attacks. My mother was over for a visit and Charleston, who absolutely adores my mother, would not calm down. She was running around the living room, ping-ponging off of furniture and unable to settle. Her excitement had moved into a frenetic mania that was emanating from her in waves. I knew that giving her a command or yelling for her to stop would do absolutely no good and would likely add to her distress. What I did sticks out for me because I wasn't following someone else's rules about how to handle an over-excited dog. I followed my intuition.

In the midst of Charleston's cycling around the room (a physical representation of monkey mind), I sat on the floor in easy pose and began a meditation. Charleston had always liked to have a few minutes in my lap after our morning training sessions during her puppyhood and I hoped that would call her back to a calmer state.



# Learning to *Love* Myself



Without my saying a word, she stopped running around and came onto my lap. I continued to follow my meditative breathing pattern and withheld all judgement about how she had been acting or how I thought she should be. I was fully present with her and allowed her to be as she was. I did my best to feel and express love. She responded beautifully.

She's nearly three years old now, and while she still has a lot of sass in her, our relationship has changed remarkably. When I was able to stop fighting her, to extend love regardless of whether she had "earned it," and to be fully present, we bonded. She is cuddly and affectionate and a wonderful companion. Her essential nature is the same—she's prone to anxiety (breeding issues from her mother), and I can't just expect her to obey me. I have to remain calm and remember that if I am angry, she will immediately be defensive and there will be a fight.

But, instead of wishing that away, I see her now as a way back to the disowned part of my shadow. She may not be perfect, and that's okay. She is worthy of love no matter what.

I still don't know about God. I do, though, know that when I meditate, I connect to something deep and essential in my nature. I feel like I am home and at one with the Universe. I know that when I judge myself (or my dog), I create disharmony and tension. To me, my spiritual path has been that homecoming: to learn to love myself regardless of whether I have earned it, to extend compassion toward myself and others, and to not rush the process. To let it be.

When talking about how everyone has a different edge in yoga and it is fruitless to compare yours to someone else's, Bryan Kest said, "Be where you're at because you're already there." No matter where my path takes me, I'm here now and choosing to experience it. Charleston is coming along for the ride.

