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Rehabilitation with Cooper

*Deep in the mountains, a twice-homeless dog
lopes straight to the heart of human contact*

Elissa Ely



When I adopted my dog, Cooper, I doubted he would last. He was chaotic, agitated, full of anxious discharge without focus. According to records, his first owner was an elderly woman—I picture a crocheted blanket in a basket where he slept—who died when he was a puppy. The next was a young family. Here I picture a chain and a grassless yard, with no evil intentions, but with too many children to remember the dog. After about a year, they turned him over to the rescue league, with an advising note one child had written: “Cooper is a good dog,” (in block letters), “but with Cooper, you must be very, very FRIM.”

I walked him miles and miles for months because he couldn’t be calmed. It was like rocking a baby with colic, trying to bring relief to mysterious pain. His only certainty was an unstable past. All the time we were walking, I dreaded the likelihood that he would need another placement; it would break him. Strangers passing us on the street nodded without hostility, interest, or warmth. That’s a city for you. But slowly, it began to dawn on him that the house he continued to return to was home. What he couldn’t know was what I’d decided. Our family would not be FRIM.

Then I took him to the mountains. As it happens, he is not a natural mountain-lover—but by then, in his loyalty, he would have followed me to the death.

When we climb together, he’s like a talisman. With children we meet, the reaction is simple. He magnetizes them. They attach themselves to Cooper like those experimental baby geese, whose first sight after opening their eyes, whether goose or scientist, becomes their mother. Hiking the Firescrew Trail up Mount Cardigan once, we passed three boys, miserably straggling along, dragging open bags of trail mix. They looked surly and disinterested. They only wanted down—but the instant they saw muddy-footed Cooper lope by, they snapped to and followed him. They weren’t climbing a mountain; they were climbing a dog. He was their summit. On the top, I took photos of them fighting each other to throw their arms around him, all four climbers grinning and loopy with love.

Sometimes, the reaction has not been simple. Heading up Osceola on a gray day, we met a woman heading down who stopped—as almost everyone does—when she saw him. Cooper bounded up to her in his social way, backed onto her boots and sat, exposing maximal surface area for attention. She stroked his flank but said nothing, and I understood from the way

Cooper, who climbs for the love of his owner, on Mount Moosilauke. ELISSA ELY

her hands lingered that this was not a casual contact, but a grieving one. I stroked him, too, and somehow, because we were on a mountain together, petting the same dog, I knew I could ask about her loss, and she would tell about her grief. We never met again, but as rain fell on rocks, I heard everything about the dog who had recently died and whom she had loved incomparably. Probably Cooper had already known. He's an empath as well as a golden retriever.

Before I adopted my dog, strangers passing on trails socialized in a brisk and logistical way. But hiking with Cooper has been like strolling with a baby. Everyone tarries and visits, leaning into the carriage to admire. They ask about his age and fitness, which is just a prelude to deeper conversation. We talk about where we will go next, who is waiting for us at home and, in a veiled way, why we have come to mountains. I don't have Cooper's bounding charisma and never will, but I take on some shine by association, and pleasure with each encounter. In my heart of hearts, I was lonely before.

Sometimes, when we are hiking together, I wonder whether Cooper can remember his sordid past. We're very different. I climb for the love of the view; Cooper climbs for the love of me. Yet when we are in the mountains now, in the belly of nowhere and miles from yesterday, he leads us straight into the heart of human contact. This is what we share: he has ended my solitude, I have ended his, and neither of us knew the joys of that ending before.

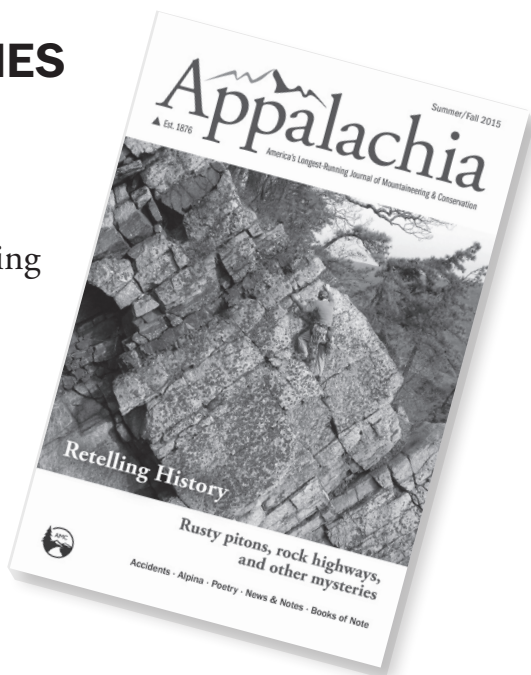
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