

Eli

In Greek the meaning of the name Eli is, "Defender of man." The Eli I knew was the great protector of his companion Nancy.

Eli was a gift from Nancy's son Chris, who is wise beyond his years. Chris has been through some things, including an accident which left him in a wheelchair, and without normal use of his legs. What the Prince of Lies meant for evil, Chris used for good. Just last month, Chris saw signed into law by the Colorado Governor a bill that he authored, protecting civil rights of those living with physical disabilities.

Nancy knows dogs, and has cared for many of them in her home, many for a few hours or days, some for weeks or months, and a select few for a lifetime. Nancy isn't one of those humaniac crazies who can't seem to hear the voice of reason when it is spoken. She is a level headed woman who appreciates dogs for who they are and has a knack for finding the right human to do the same on a long term basis. Nancy visits our local shelter regularly, trolling for dogs that she might get out alive to a breed rescue, or a working dog situation, or on a transport to another part of the country where they aren't as obscenely plentiful as they are here in East Texas. She knows she can't help them all, but she can help a few. And help, she does, on a regular basis for decades now. She's taken a short break from time to time as needed, but when she comes back, she is good news walking. She can't help it -- it's just who she is. It just feels right.

I met Eli for the first time when he was just a young guy -- a year or two old. A few days before, he just laid down while they were shopping at Lowe's and wouldn't get up. And he would look at Nancy over his shoulder, as if he couldn't remember who she was. Never mind that dogs are not permitted at Lowe's -- Eli frequented places that dogs were not allowed, and no one ever seemed to raise an objection. He was well known at Tractor Supply, the PetSense pet supply store, the local shelter, and of course Eastex Veterinary Clinic. Time and time again, Eli would wag his tail gently and approach the mannequin at Tractor Supply, politely asking for a pet. He never could figure out why he could never make friends with that guy, but he never quit trying. Eli was a stunning dog, a big white hundred plus pound ball of fur, who was as solid as they come. For him, excited was a fast lope across the yard to find a better place to lie down. I don't think he especially liked hugs, but he tolerated them, even from people he did not know, because he knew they made people happy, to grab that big lung and bury one's face deep that that endless fur.

I was the third vet to take a look at him, and the second vet asked me to do it. Each of us thought he looked just fine, his basic bloodwork was normal, and x-rays and ultrasound showed nothing was amiss. But Nancy was sure something was very wrong. I had just met her, so at that point I didn't know whether she was a loon, or whether Eli was sick, and we just weren't smart enough to figure it out. So we talked some more, and decided that symptoms might be consistent with low thyroid function. When we checked the thyroid panel, it confirmed that Eli's thyroid was definitely comatose. After giving him some blue pills for several weeks, Nancy had her Eli back. So Nancy wasn't a nut case after all :). And God was smiling on me when the Holy Spirit whispered in my ear to attend carefully to what Nancy was saying.

Over the years, I met Nancy's other dogs -- Pearl and Maya and Holly Berry and Rainey and Carmen. Maya passed on years ago, after an adenocarcinoma commandeered her body. When I started doing spay-neuter surgery at our local shelter a few years ago, I got to know Nancy, and at some point started counting her among my friends. We eventually moved the surgery operation out of the shelter and into a wonderful house built in 1912, that we call O'Malley House. As Nancy found her niche doing laundry and performing postmistress duties at our new clinic, Eli came along as back-up. You see, Nancy is a night owl, and works the 3-11pm shift. She and Eli would come to O'Malley House before and/or after work, usually when no one else was there. We gave them their own key and alarm pass code so they could come and go as they pleased. I think you could trust them with the Hope Diamond. Nancy would tend to the mountains of dirty towels used for packing material in the surgery recovery cages, she would mail out records and invoices, and Eli would walk the perimeter and keep her safe, generally enjoying their one-on-one time. There was the time he almost went on strike when she set off the alarm by mistake -- the loud noises were disconcerting, and not in his job description. When the city policeman came by to check on the front door breach, he knew Nancy's presence was legit, as Eli was there with her -- he had seen him at the shelter where his wife worked, more often than he could count. He didn't even ask Nancy for the secret code word the alarm company had provided him.

Nancy had a health scare with Eli about five years ago. He had a large tumor in his mouth, and mouth tumors are usually not the good kind. After determining that the tumor had not yet shown evidence of spreading and hoping for the best, Dr. Richards took Eli to surgery. He painstakingly removed several teeth and all the abnormal tissue he could find, taking bite after bite with the Rongeurs, until he got down to normal bone. We sent the removed tissue off to the lab, and they confirmed that Eli had an acanthomatous epulis. While the benign tumor was not likely to spread to other parts of the body, it was not unusual for these tumors to eventually come back right there in the mouth, often resulting in the ultimate death of the patient. Dr. Richards must be some kind of a Rock Star surgeon, because Eli's mouth tumor never came back. Each time he came in for whatever, Nancy would quietly tell him, "Eli, Open the Cave" and he would dutifully open his mouth for us to once again inspect Dr. Richards' handiwork. Nancy always spoke to Eli in a quiet voice, yet he always heard her loud and clear.

As Eli got on in years, he came in more frequently for the usual aches and pains and maladies that come with age. Getting old is not for sissies. About a month ago, Eli came in again. He wasn't feeling well, and Nancy said, "It's different this time." She swore he was losing weight, but the scale said he was within 2 pounds of what he had been for the past 2 years. She said he was getting bony. With a body condition score of 7/9, Eli had never been bony in his life, and still wasn't even close to bony on the fat-o-meter. His muscle tone wasn't the same, his haircoat was rough, and he was a bit more pot bellied than before. Bloodwork was unexciting, and for various good reasons, Nancy declined to take a closer look with x-rays or ultrasound. Eli had suffered from several urinary tract infections in recent history, so we treated him with a round of antibiotics. He responded very well, and we hoped he was on the road to recovery. A few visits later, it was apparent that Eli had a rather large mass in the right side of his abdomen. We uttered the word "nonresectable."

Nancy struggled with goodbye for days. She wanted Eli to stop hurting, but she didn't want to face the next day without him. She wanted Eli to go wherever it is that dogs go after they die, and "Open the Cave" for the angels. But she did not want to try to fall asleep without the "white noise" of Eli snoring that she had become accustomed to. Rather than taking every step with her as he had for years, he had spent the past 2 days seeking out corners just to stare into them. She didn't want him to feel like crap any more. But she couldn't bear the thought of running the roads without Eli riding shotgun. She didn't want to, but she did, because she knew it was best for her dog. Eli was no sissy, but it was clear he'd had enough. His head lay in Nancy's lap as he took his last breath. For the first time in 22 years, a client handed ME the Kleenex box, and we shared it for a little while.

Rest in Peace, Eli. Nancy knows she will be OK, but it sure doesn't feel like it tonight. Prayers for my friend Nancy, please.