

THE 333 RULE

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Some of you know I volunteer for an English setter rescue. The role I play is doing what they call home visits which I do virtually. The main purpose of the home visit is to meet the potential adopters and see their home and property to determine if it's a safe environment for a dog. I also determine how much experience they have had with adopting rescue dogs as well as with English setters specifically. Setters are hunting dogs and are very influenced by their environment. They have a strong prey drive. In fact, many setters are in rescue because they were acquired to hunt. Many don't work out to hunt. They may be gun shy or just don't have that strong prey drive. Unfortunately, a lot of people who adopt setters to hunt take them to local shelters if they don't work out. Needless to say, most dogs in general that are in shelters have had some trauma in their lives. It could be abandonment, their owner passing away, abuse or neglect, or frankly just being thrown out on the street. Until a little over two weeks ago, we had two rescue English Setters. Blue, our oldest, crossed the rainbow bridge. He came from a hoarding situation and was used solely for breeding. He was found in a kennel where there were several dogs. From what we were told he spent his life in a kennel and was never in a home. He had no clue how to navigate stairs and was afraid of them. We were told he would urinate all over our house and needed to wear diapers. He never wagged his tail and shied away from being petted or cuddled. A little over two years later he was fully confident using the stairs of the deck, wagged his tail when he saw us and was a huge cuddler. He never had an accident in the house and learned the doggy door instantly.

Our current dog, Petrina, is about nine and came from the streets of Greece. She was pregnant when they rescued her and had heartworm. She lived with a foster mom who helped her birth 8 babies and went through heartworm treatment, which is a long process. I fell in love with her just seeing her online. She seemed unphased by her past and is the happiest, sweetest girl. She is very food motivated and will eat anything that is edible. We credit that with having to scavenge on the streets of Greece. Most of these dogs come into rescue with some sort of issue. My greatest joy is watching these pups come out of their shell and learn what love is all about. What amazes me is how they can even trust humans at all knowing what they may have gone through.

When I am doing the home visit one of the things I discuss is the 333 rule. If you've ever been involved with dog rescue you may have heard of this. The 333 refers to 3 days, 3 weeks and 3 months.

The 3-3-3 rule explained

- **First 3 days (Decompression):** A new dog may feel overwhelmed, nervous, or hesitant. They might hide, have a poor appetite, or act cautiously. During this time, the focus should be on providing a quiet space, minimizing new stressors, and being patient.

- **First 3 weeks (Training and Bonding):** With a routine established, the dog begins to decompress further. This is the time to work on basic training, set boundaries, and build trust through consistent, positive interactions.
- **First 3 months (Settling in):** The dog starts to feel more comfortable and confident in their new home. Their true personality emerges, and the bond with their new family strengthens. This is when you can begin more adventures and deeper training.

Now I know most of you won't be using these techniques for dogs, but I've been thinking a lot about this rule when it comes to relationships with fellow humans. With rescue dogs most of the time we really don't know what they have gone through. It got me thinking about something I learned years ago when I was working as a telephone operator. In our training not only did we learn how to use the equipment but interacting with our customers was very important. Back then customer service was a priority, and we actually got graded on how we did. Unfortunately I'm not sure that is the case anymore. Anyway, getting a cranky or rude customer was common, and we weren't allowed to be angry or snap back. We were taught to think just why this person might be rude or short with us. What were they going through, what had their day been like, had they just lost someone they loved, had trouble with their teenage child, got divorced, got a traffic ticket, financially strapped, on and on and on. Our job was to temper the situation and possibly make them feel better and calm them. It was amazing how many people would end up apologizing when they felt heard and respected.

When I see a homeless person sometimes I just want to hear their story. How did they get where they are, do they have a family, what is their background, do they have dreams, aspirations or hope. When our meeting was involved in Family Promise I learned many things from the families we hosted in our building. Hearing their stories and sharing their experiences took away my judgements I once made when I see an unhoused person now. Many came with bad attitudes, unruly children and disrespect for our property and building. Others were just the opposite. Very courteous, helpful and grateful. It all depends on your choices and determination to succeed. Lots of people that we deal with in our lives have lost self-love, hope and faith. I believe listening to others' stories and not criticizing or judging is a start. It's not easy but how many times do I find myself prejudging someone or making assumptions about them.

Applying the **3-3-3 rule**—traditionally a guide for how a rescue pet settles into a new home—to human relationships means pacing yourself through **3 days of decompression, 3 weeks of building routine, and 3 months of true integration**. This mindset helps you practice patience, lower early anxieties, and let authentic connections grow naturally without rushing.

First 3 Days: Decompression and Overwhelm

In the first three days of a new relationship, neighbor, church attendee, job, or major life dynamic, everyone could be flooded with new stimuli and high stress

- **Give space:** Expect high adrenaline, shyness, or guarded behavior. Do not force deep vulnerability right away.
- **Keep things quiet:** Limit heavy emotional demands, intense hangouts, or dramatic talks.
- **Focus on safety:** Let the other person (and yourself) just breathe and observe the new environment without pressure.

First 3 Weeks: Routine and Testing Boundaries

By three weeks, the initial shock fades, a predictable pattern emerges, and true habits start to form.

- **Establish consistency:** Regular communication, reliable plans, and predictable responses build emotional safety.
- **Watch for boundary testing:** People start feeling comfortable enough to test limits or show quirks once the polite "mask" slips.
- **Communicate clearly:** Use gentle, direct feedback and positive reinforcement to reward healthy interaction styles.

First 3 Months: Deep Trust and True Personality

At the three-month mark, security sets in, and you begin seeing the full, unmasked reality of the connection.

- **Feel at home:** A genuine sense of belonging and mutual rhythm takes root.
- **Deepen the bond:** Deeper conflicts or real-world challenges can now be handled safely because a foundation of trust exists.
- **Assess long-term fit:** You can realistically evaluate if the connection is healthy, sustainable, and mutually fulfilling.

In my view it all comes down to the fruits of the spirit found in Galatians 5:22-23.

- **Love:** Caring deeply for others without any conditions.
- **Joy:** A deep and steady happiness that comes from God.
- **Peace:** A quiet heart that stays calm during hard times.
- **Patience (Forbearance):** Waiting without anger or frustration.
- **Kindness:** Showing a sweet and helpful attitude to people.
- **Goodness:** Living a clean and honest life through good deeds.
- **Faithfulness:** Being loyal and trustworthy to God and others.
- **Gentleness:** Treating others with a soft and humble spirit.
- **Self-control:** Managing your own thoughts and actions

A familiar Quote by Paul Dunn captures a universal feeling of wanting to live up to the unconditional love and pure faith our pets place in us.

HELP ME BE THE KIND OF PERSON MY DOG THINKS I AM

Why would We Feel This Way. It's because dogs give us:

- **Unconditional Love:** Dogs do not care about your flaws, mistakes, or bad days; they offer pure acceptance.
- **Instant Forgiveness:** They move past minor frustrations immediately, reminding us how to let go of grudges.
- **Present Moment:** Dogs are entirely content with simple comforts, like a walk, a meal, or a patch of sunlight.

How to Bridge the Gap

- **Practice Patience:** Try to respond to minor annoyances with the same gentle grace your dog shows you.
- **Show Up:** Be fully present and enthusiastic for the people you love, just like your dog waiting by the door.
- **Extend Grace:** Forgive yourself for your shortcomings, knowing your dog already does.

The following is a writing I found that a lady wrote who has rescued several dogs and has experienced that special love. It goes like this:

I have loved enough dogs to know this: they understand something about love that many people spend a lifetime trying to learn.

A dog does not care about your bank account, your weight, your accomplishments, your mistakes, or whether your life turned out the way you imagined. They do not love you more when you are thriving or less when you are falling apart. They do not keep score, save up your failures, or hold yesterday over your head. They do not make you wonder where you stand with them.

They simply know that you are theirs.

They recognize the sound of your car before it reaches the driveway. They know your footsteps, your routines, the chair you sit in, the time you usually come home, and the difference between your happy voice and the one you use when you are trying very hard not to cry. They know when you are pretending to be okay. They know when something is wrong before you have said a word. And when you are late, they wait.

There is something about that kind of love that reaches a place in me words cannot quite touch, because people can make love so complicated. We turn it into conditions and expectations, old wounds, misunderstandings, pride, and keeping

track of who hurt whom first. Somewhere along the way, many of us learn that love is something we have to earn. We try to be prettier, thinner, stronger, easier, more successful, less needy, less emotional, less ourselves. We spend years trying to become lovable enough that someone will choose us and stay.

A dog never asks you to perform for their love.

You can be tired, messy, broke, grieving, frightened, angry, sick of the world, or disappointed in yourself, and they will still come find you. They do not need an explanation. They do not need you to pull yourself together first. They do not tell you what you should have done differently. They just move closer. A head in your lap. A paw against your leg. A warm body pressed beside you. Sometimes they do nothing more than sit there and breathe, and somehow that quiet little body beside you says everything you needed to hear.

I'm here.

I have spent much of my life helping animals, especially trying to reunite lost ones with the people who love them. I have seen what happens when someone gets that phone call saying, "We found your dog." I have watched relief, gratitude, tears, and pure joy pour out of people because a piece of their family was coming home. For a long time I thought rescue was something we did for animals. We found them, fed them, opened our homes, kept them safe, and helped them find their way back.

But I know better now.

Dogs rescue people every single day, and most of the time nobody sees it happening. They rescue the lonely person who suddenly has someone waiting at the door. They rescue the grieving person who needs a reason to get out of bed. They rescue the child who needs something safe to hold. They rescue us in the middle of ordinary Tuesdays when the world feels too heavy and nobody else even knows we are struggling.

They find parts of us we keep hidden and love those parts too. They never ask how we got broken. They never ask us to become whole before they lie beside us.

And then comes the part none of us are ever ready for.

One day, if we have been lucky enough to love them for many years, the footsteps stop.

The house changes. The silence changes. For a while you still look toward the place where they used to sleep. You still expect them to meet you at the door. You find a hair

on a blanket, a worn collar, a favorite toy tucked somewhere you had forgotten about, and suddenly something so small can bring you to your knees.

Because you did not “just lose a dog.”

You lost someone who had memorized you.

Someone who witnessed thousands of ordinary moments nobody else saw. Someone who knew you laughing in the kitchen and crying behind a closed door. Someone who watched you age, change, struggle, heal, begin again, and somehow never once reconsidered whether you were worth loving.

Maybe that is why the grief can be so enormous.

Because the love was enormous.

And maybe that is what dogs leave us here to learn. Love people while they are here. Be happy when they walk through the door. Forgive more quickly. Sit beside them when you cannot fix what hurts. Stop keeping score. Say I love you while they can still hear you. Do not make the people you love wonder whether they are still loved just because they had a bad day or made a mistake.

Dogs never wait for a special occasion to love us.

They love us on the ordinary days. The boring days. The hard days. The days when we are at our best and the days when we cannot see anything worth loving in ourselves.

And maybe that is the greatest gift they give us.

They show us what it feels like to be loved without having to earn it.

Maybe we think we are the ones who give dogs a home.

But if we are very lucky, a dog comes into our life and quietly teaches us what home was supposed to feel like all along: to be known completely, wanted completely, forgiven quickly, missed when we are gone, celebrated when we return, and loved even on the days when we do not feel very lovable ourselves.

What a different world this would be if we could learn to love each other a little more like that. ❤️🐾

AGAIN HELP ME TO BE THE KIND OF PERSON MY DOG THINKS I AM.