

Introduction: How the Healing Journey Began

Several years ago I discovered something powerful about the dogs who share many of our lives. Though all dogs provide love, comfort, joy, and support, for some people, dogs actually have the ability to transform lives. Although I have been in clinical practice as a therapist for years, this isn't something I learned through professional training. The catalyst was a tiny furball named Umayya who came home with me on Christmas Eve. Here's how our journey began.

After a dozen years of working and attending graduate school, I finally moved into my own house in October 1992. My first priority was to get a dog; furniture could wait. As a child of divorce, I recalled that the most memorable, life-altering gift my father ever gave us was a black Labrador Retriever pup we named Tasha. As I grew up, she was my best friend and

confidante, especially while going through the trials and tribulations of adolescence. Tasha taught me how extraordinary the bond between a human and animal can be, and I always knew that once I had a home of my own I wanted to find another Tasha. However, I also knew if I adopted another black Lab, she might remind me too much of Tasha's absence, and eventually I fell in love with a breed with a similar disposition the beautiful dark Golden Retrievers.

When I started to look for my new dog, I discovered a breeder of Goldens less than 5 miles away from my home. At our first meeting, I was greeted by a boy aged about 17 years who lived with his family on the farm where they raised the dogs. As a child, he had suffered a serious accident when the combine he was riding went up in flames, and, although he had survived, he still bore the scars of his accident, despite numerous plastic surgeries and skin grafts. As we walked out into the yard to meet the dogs, he told me how he started breeding dark Golden Retrievers after the accident, and he credited the dogs for giving him back his life. The dogs accepted him completely for who he was, not what he looked like. I was so touched by his story, and seeing how deeply the dogs loved him, I knew I'd find my pup here. The next litter was due October 30th. I could hardly wait.

When the day finally came for me to meet the litter, the first pup I picked up curled happily into my lap. But after a few moments she got frisky, and when I put her down she immediately peed. I knew at that moment she was the one because she wouldn't pee on me! We painted her toenails purple so we would know she was mine, and I named her Umaya, which

means stability. Then, a few weeks after Umayya entered my life, I received her AKC papers to discover that her dam's name was Tasha!

I brought my darling pup home on Christmas Eve, and, once I let her out of my arms, Umayya scampered about the house, sniffing here and there with her mouth full of toys, investigating everything but with her eyes glued always on me. She slept with me from the first day, cuddled with me, and taught me how to play. From the start it seemed as though we communicated even without words—she seemed to know what I was thinking and feeling—and my friends remarked that she seemed to embody one of my favorite sayings: “Every day is a gift.” Looking at that lively puppy, I could not have foreseen where this relationship would take us during the next 12 years, nor the enormous impact she would have on my work. Who could have guessed that she would not only change my life but that of my clients as well?

Umayya went everywhere with me, and my days happily revolved around her needs. Within a week of her homecoming, however, I spotted blood on her blanket. I immediately took her to the veterinarian, who diagnosed a urinary tract infection. Though the breeder offered to replace her, I wouldn't hear of it. Umayya and I had bonded. We'd get through her illness together, as we would the many other problems that we would share during the course of our loving and joyful relationship. When I was unable to attend my grandmother's funeral because of a blizzard, I listened to the service over the telephone. Umayya, still a puppy, crawled onto my lap and licked my tears away, and, when the service was over and I'd hung up, she brought

me a toy to play with. Umaya always knew what I needed and she never failed to bring a smile to my face.

But there were bigger troubles ahead. When Umaya was 5, I discovered a lump one day on her left hip while I was giving her a massage. When I brought her to the vet, he diagnosed her with fibrosarcoma, a skin cancer not commonly seen in dogs, and he recommended radiation treatment as a precaution to prevent the disease from spreading. Without treatment, her likelihood of survival was quite slim. Because the veterinary hospital was close to my office, during her 18 days of treatment I started to bring Umaya to work with me. From the first day, Umaya walked into the waiting room and began to make the rounds of clients, greeting each one with a mouth full of toys and her happy smile. Without ever making a complaint or a whine, she continued to find joy in every day, every little wonder to wag about.

Umaya successfully completed her treatment and seemed well on the path to recovery when, a few weeks later while she and I were taking a walk, two dogs flew out of a neighbor's garage and raced to attack her. Though Umaya turned away from them in an attempt to ward off the attack by appearing submissive, the dogs latched onto her side near her back left leg, close to where the tumor had been. There was blood everywhere.

Terrified, I brought Umaya home, and within half an hour she was in the hospital. Two hours of surgery followed. Fortunately, the attack had missed all of her major organs. The fact that she was on antibiotics to prevent infections during her radiation therapy gave Umaya an edge. Fearing that Umaya

would be overstressed if she spent yet another night in the hospital, her veterinarian sent her home with me, along with antibiotics and a list of signs to look for during the night. When Umaya awoke near me the next morning, after having survived the attack and ensuing surgery, I knew that she would live.

Following the attack, although Umaya displayed behaviors indicating that she may have been suffering from stress, she continued to go to work with me, hopping on three legs and bright with the glow of being alive. But from that period on, perhaps because of adhesions or the buildup of scar tissue, Umaya lost the ability to use her rear legs until she received acupuncture, which helped decrease the inflammation and gave her back the ability to ambulate. At the same time, I was recovering from surgery of my own after an exhaustive (and unfortunately unnecessary) operation years earlier to locate the source of internal bleeding. I struggled with chronic pain and I could not have been more sympathetic to Umaya's plight. She and I seemed to be leading somewhat parallel lives and both benefited from acupuncture treatments.

During all of this time, Umaya continued to accompany me to work, and for me the therapeutic process was transformed. She began to attend therapy sessions, lying in a corner of the room while the clients talked. She became a mirror image of my clients' feelings, helping them become more in tune with their own emotions. If they were sad, she'd walk over to them and look pouty; if they were angry she'd chew her rubber bones voraciously, or she'd bring her toy over in an attempt to diffuse their anger. Frequently, clients would begin petting Umaya, start talking, and not even realize that they were sharing painful memories, releasing old hurts, and freeing their spirits. Umaya

wordlessly provided support and a sense of calm. As I saw clients experiencing Umaya's presence in such a profound way, I began to consider how powerful it would be for some of them to have a dog of their own.

In our fast-paced world, doctors are often quick to advise patients suffering from traumatic stress, depression, anxiety, and other emotional and psychological problems that their ills can be solved through the use of one medication or another. Too many people think the pill itself is a "magic bullet" that will make their lives happier, easier, and more secure. It isn't. Medications must be taken under careful supervision, and many anti-depressant drugs carry the risk of negative side effects, including in extreme cases suicidal tendencies. Although many individuals do require medication, which has helped countless people, there are other pill-free choices that are extremely beneficial and may not have been considered. For many people one choice that they may have never heard of, either by itself or in combination with drug therapy and psychotherapy, might make all the difference.

Service dogs have been assisting the blind, the hearing-impaired, and those in wheelchairs and with other disabilities for a long time. There are also Therapy dogs who help enhance quality of life for many people by visiting hospitals, nursing homes, and, other institutions providing comfort and support. Umaya's strength and calming influence were a revelation to me, and when I saw the way that my clients responded to her, I began to realize that having a dog could have a profound impact on some of my clients' lives.

This is not just the story of our journey, however; it's a window onto the world of psychiatric service dogs for people with invisible disabilities, showing how the dogs can change and enhance the lives of their human companions. In the following chapters, we'll meet some of these amazing dogs and see how they have helped a number of individuals improve their lives in profound and unexpected ways, allowing them to gain self-esteem, self-confidence, assertiveness, and so much more. These dogs provide emotional support, as all dogs do, but they are specifically trained to perform certain tasks unique to the individual's needs. Through the stories of these dogs, I hope to show how you, a friend, or a family member how he or she might benefit from such a healing companion.

In addition to these remarkable stories, this book will also explain which dogs are the right candidates for the job, which dogs are not, and how to tell the difference. Here's a hint: It has nothing to do with the dog's breed. Mixed-breed dogs are very well suited to assist those with invisible disabilities. These dogs can be in-home companions or full-time Service dogs who also accompany their companions out in public and to work. I'll discuss how these dogs are trained, how the dog may impact other members of the family, and how to make life more comfortable and less stressful for the dogs while they are undertaking their essential tasks. I'll also provide a helpful list of resources for further information, support, and services.

For anyone who may not know about the profound benefits that these service dogs may bring, as well as for anyone who loves dogs and enjoys learning more about their value to their companions, I hope this book will serve as an informative, practical, and inspirational guide.

Umaya started me on this extraordinary path. Now, share the journey of my clients and others who have opened their hearts to a service dog and found a healing beyond their expectations.

1

Mindy's Story: Umayya Leads the Way

There's something calming about the presence of a dog.

When I began to bring Umayya to my office, she spread joy wherever she went, but when she walked among my clients, her tail wagging so hard that her entire rear end wiggled in turn, it was just about impossible to ignore her enthusiasm. She would move from person to person in the waiting room, inviting them to play. The clients simply loved her, but Umayya would ultimately prove capable of so much more. There was no design behind my discovery of Umayya's gift. It was, you might say, serendipitous.

For some time I had been working with a young woman named Mindy, who was in her 20s but looked younger. An incest survivor, Mindy had lived a life of which nightmares are made. Violent crimes always leave the survivor feeling insecure, but imagine what it must be like when the violence begins in

infancy. Experiencing night after night of sexual abuse, Mindy never felt safe even in her own room. Although it is often a male relative who carries out the abuse, that wasn't the case here. Mindy's abusers were her mother and her sister. A mother is normally equated with nurturing, safety, protection, and love, but the unthinkable had happened to Mindy as a child.

It came as no surprise that Umaya was a gentle support during Mindy's sessions. People often feel comfortable and safe with a dog and will talk in its presence when they are uncomfortable talking with another person. As Mindy opened up and began to reveal her childhood horrors, her stress level would naturally increase. And there would be Umaya, rapidly rubbing her tongue on the rug in response to the tension in the room, as if she were trying to get a bad taste out of her mouth. Mindy would look at Umaya and realize that Umaya was reflecting her own stress, that she was mirroring the uncomfortable feelings Mindy was releasing as a result of describing her trauma when she, herself, didn't know how to deal with those emotions. But what happened next with Mindy and Umaya was even more extraordinary.

One day, I walked into my office for a session to find Mindy waiting, talking to Umaya. But her voice sounded different. Childlike. As I observed her interacting with Umaya, I realized that Mindy wasn't acting "like Mindy," but had assumed another personality. I understood then that Mindy had multiple personality disorder, the result of the trauma she had experienced as a child. Umaya had not just brought out a childlike quality in Mindy; she had coaxed out a child, another self, within her.

When children are abused in infancy, before the personality has had a chance to form, multiple personalities may be created to help the child cope with extremely difficult circumstances. In therapy, the multiples can look to the therapist as a comforting figure, a parent, but Mindy was convinced that they saw Umayya in that role. The little ones, as Mindy referred to those parts, wanted Umayya to protect them, “almost like they wanted to be enveloped in her love.”

Though there was nothing unusual about her outward appearance, before Mindy realized that she was a multiple, she felt like she was living in the midst of a war zone. As Mindy and I continued to work together, we would ultimately discover that she had several parts within her that had helped her survive: some male, some female, some adults, some children, sometimes aligning themselves with each other in groups. As Mindy began to remember her difficult past, while working with a psychiatrist as well as with me, the memories were disturbing, and she never knew what would set her off. She was balancing three jobs to make enough money to survive, and she felt as if she was constantly running, like “the lid on everything had flown off.” Every act became a chore and Mindy had to relearn basic life skills, to feed herself, to bathe herself, to take care of herself. She had to learn to be more direct and assertive with others. And she needed to find a sense of security, of love.

During this difficult time, it seemed that Mindy was less afraid of dogs than of humans. Whereas dogs make their needs known simply and directly, Mindy’s experience with people up until that point was that they communicated through a series of mixed messages so she couldn’t make sense of anything. When her psychiatrist and I both suggested that she should

consider adopting a dog, Mindy looked at me one day and said, “I need an Umayya.”

Many discussions ensued about this prospect. Mindy wanted to know what was involved in caring for a dog, and how much responsibility she would be assuming if she adopted a canine companion. She wanted to understand what the dog would need in order to have a good life, and she needed to believe that she could take care of those needs. And we had concerns as well. Because Mindy has multiple personalities, we had to consider what would happen if any of the parts didn't like a dog or became jealous of the time Mindy spent with her companion. Then there were the daily walks, playtime, and training to consider. She would have to feed and groom a dog, as well as take it regularly to the veterinarian. She would have to be responsible for another life.

Mindy's landlord didn't allow dogs, and Mindy didn't think she was capable of asking for special permission because, as a childhood abuse survivor, she felt intensely worthless. After Mindy's psychiatrist wrote a “prescription” for a dog, Mindy was finally able to approach her landlord, but it would take another couple of months before she would bring a dog home. When Mindy underwent a brief hospitalization, she understandably had mixed emotions about going forward with our plan. The thought of getting a dog helped her to recover and leave the hospital, but she worried about being able to take care of herself and about bringing a dog home into her environment. Mindy had always been so careful not to burden anyone else with her problems that she found it hard to get close to another human being. But Mindy's doctor and I were convinced that the dog would be a lifeline for her.

Once she had committed to the idea, Mindy was adamant about getting a shelter dog, and she and I visited the shelter numerous times together. We made several trips as Mindy got to know the dogs, until one day she spotted a black and tan Terrier/Beagle mix who seemingly held no appeal for anyone until Mindy came along. The dog's beautiful, soulful eyes and her absurdly barrel-chested body captivated Mindy immediately, and the feeling was mutual. After she and I convinced the shelter employee, who expressed some concern about letting a dog go home with a young woman who had just been released from a psychiatric ward, Mindy received approval to adopt her dog. Mindy knew that the little Terrier/Beagle cross, whom she named Ninna, was meant to be hers.

The name Ninna had special significance for Mindy. While being sexually assaulted by her mother and sister, Mindy would disassociate from the act, her mind floating free, carrying her away to the home of a sea hag named Ninna who lived on the beach. "She changed form every time we visited her," Mindy recalls, remembering that Ninna would take them—her parts—on night flights "above the ocean and through the stars." Ninna became their caretaker and protector in the fantasy world that the young Mindy and her parts created, someone who cared about them, protected them, and taught them how to survive. The canine Ninna became for Mindy the real-life embodiment of that personality: the caretaker and protector.

As Mindy assumed the responsibility for the care and feeding of her dog, she learned to begin to care for herself as well. Before Ninna, Mindy had spent so much time disassociating while there was constant chatter in her head that she couldn't

focus or function. Now, when she put her hand on Ninna, Mindy had to remind herself that she was in her own apartment, her own bedroom, where no one could hurt her anymore. “She helped us rediscover how to be present,” Mindy relates. And with Ninna in her life, Mindy has learned to establish regular habits—eating, bathing, going to work—and Mindy loves the long walks that she and Ninna share. Ninna has helped Mindy discover “the beauty and magic in the every day rituals and looking forward to small things every day.” When out on walks together if they pass someone who makes Mindy feel uncomfortable or stressed, Ninna blocks the intruder from coming too close to Mindy.

To many who don't know Mindy well, her life appears normal. She has graduated from college and she now holds a responsible job. She has had the occasional set back, but her concern for Ninna helps her through difficult times. The routine established between Mindy and Ninna has helped Mindy with the basic activities of daily living. If Mindy forgets to feed Ninna, Ninna will nudge and pester Mindy, reminding Mindy to feed her, which reminds Mindy to feed herself. Mindy knows that Ninna needs her to be healthy enough to care for her, ensuring that Mindy takes care of herself as well and reinforcing her need to stay on her medication. In addition to providing Mindy with a feeling of stability and security, Ninna has been trained in specific tasks that help to mitigate the effects of Mindy's disability. When Mindy is crying or upset, Ninna disrupts the emotional upheaval Mindy is experiencing by nudging, pawing, and licking her, and this physical stimulation

diverts Mindy's attention, helps her regain a sense of calm, and can prevent her from entering a disassociative state.

There have been unique challenges. Not all of Mindy's personalities wanted a dog, and when one of the parts wanted to kick Ninna, Mindy had to physically remove herself from the room in order to ensure that that part didn't harm her. Mindy was able to manage these feelings, but this concern was a serious reminder to Mindy that she needed someone else in place, a backup, to look out for the dog's safety if she were hospitalized or had some problem dealing with the dog or meeting the dog's needs. But Mindy knew that I would be there for her if she and Ninna needed help. Love, security, and a sense of stability walked into Mindy's life and heart the day she brought



Even at rest, Ninna's eyes and calm presence provide Mindy with reassurance and a sense of security.

Ninna home. Now, when Mindy goes to sleep at night touching Ninna, she feels safe.

Both Mindy and Ninna approach life somewhat warily. “She’s great! But she can be very demanding,” says Mindy of her canine companion. Fortunately, Ninna doesn’t bark a lot, which is good, because some of Mindy’s parts who are children are scared by barking. They are also scared of sudden movements, as is Ninna, who often twitches first when Mindy reaches to pet her. Mindy has learned to read Ninna’s body language and understand when she needs to be removed from a particular situation. She knows that having a dog means taking responsibility for protecting the dog as well as loving and nurturing her. They’re two survivors helping each other.

Somehow, it seems preordained that Mindy and Ninna would come together. “When I see her sprawled out in a very elegant, absurdly relaxed pose and she gives me that look over her shoulder, like, ‘Oh! It’s you! You’re home!’ I think, ‘Wow! I did something great! She is so comfortable. It’s fantastic!’” Mindy and her parts are also finally learning to be comfortable both within a space and within themselves. For Mindy, seeing Ninna like that is similar to a gentle elbow nudge saying that she can try it, too, that it’s okay to relax in her own home. “It’s amazing to love and be loved back, and to be able to take it for granted sometimes, to never question it, it’s always there. And I don’t think we’ve ever had that before,” says Mindy, as if she is speaking for Ninna as well. Together they have forged a relationship filled with unconditional love.

As Mindy looks to the future, she's concerned about how long she and Ninna have together, or if she could live without a dog again. She knows that every moment is precious. When the time comes, Mindy will honor Ninna by choosing another canine companion with whom she can share her life, a fitting tribute to this special dog.

As Mindy's story reveals, having a dog to love and care for can have a profound and beneficial effect on the lives of those with emotional challenges. We are accustomed to thinking about the usefulness of a guide dog for the blind or a service dog to assist someone in a wheelchair. We are less familiar with the idea of a healing companion for individuals who are suffering from emotional challenges, such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, or other invisible disabilities. For those who are coping with these challenges, a PSD may be a critical part of their recovery and a source of much needed comfort, responsibility, and assistance.

However, PSDs are not for everyone. Every individual has different needs, desires, and capabilities, and you should explore all of your options to determine the right course regarding finding a suitable dog and how to integrate the dog into your life. In the chapters that follow, we'll look more closely at how individuals who experience agoraphobia, panic attacks, depression, bipolar disorder, traumatic stress, eating disorders, and other mental health challenges have benefited from bringing a PSD home. We'll also look at the legal protections and practical considerations you might face. But first, here are some basic questions to consider before embarking on this journey with your own healing companion:

1. Are you legally disabled? A PSD is not simply a welcome canine companion but a service dog trained in very specific ways to mitigate the effects of the disabilities of its handler. In order to qualify as disabled under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), your emotional or psychiatric condition must “substantially limit one or more major life activities” such as caring for oneself, speaking, breathing, concentrating, thinking, eating, communicating, sleeping, and working. Further, you must “be regarded as having” and there “must be a record of” your having such an impairment. For you to enjoy all of the legal protections afforded to you under this act, you must fit the definition of disabled, and your dog must be individually and specifically trained in work or tasks that mitigate the effects of your disability. (For the full text of the ADA, see www.ada.gov/pubs/adastatute08.htm.)
2. Do you have the financial resources to care for a dog? Consider realistically whether you can assume the burden of feeding and sheltering a dog. In addition to the cost of food, kennel supplies, and toys, keep in mind that you will need to have regular veterinary visits and will need to consider some professional training. You must be willing to make an investment in the health and well-being of your dog over the course of its lifetime.
3. Do you have the time and temperament to care for a dog? Dogs require daily attention, walks, feeding, grooming, and love. If you have had a dog in the past, you may already feel certain that you can assume these responsibilities capably. If not, consider carefully the

impact that taking care of the dog will have on your schedule and lifestyle.

4. Do you have a network of people supporting the integration of a PSD into your life? Anyone with a dog knows that sometimes you need help, someone to assist you taking the dog to the vet or with the occasional walk or trip to the dog run. For people coping with emotional difficulties, there may be numerous instances when you are temporarily unable to care for your dog. You will need to make sure that there are a number of reliable people to whom you can turn if such a situation arises.
5. Does your family support your choice? Bringing a new dog into the home means changes for everyone. Consider how your bond with the dog will affect the feelings of other members of your family. Make sure that they understand the dog's therapeutic role, and be clear about how responsibilities for the dog will be handled.
6. Do you have a therapist who supports your choice to get a dog? Talk with your regular therapist about the benefits of having the dog in your life, what outcome you expect, and what role he or she will have in helping you gain the full benefit from your dog. Many professionals may not yet be familiar with the growing role of PSDs, but you will benefit if your therapist is open and encouraging as you begin your own journey with your PSD.
7. Are you willing to work with a professional trainer to train your dog to realize its full potential as a PSD? In this book, we will discuss how PSDs are trained and the tasks they can perform. However, there will be instances

- when you will need to work with a professional trainer who can help both you and the dog learn to mitigate the effects of your disability, interact well together, and behave appropriately in public.
8. Can you deal with the sometimes-unwanted attention that a PSD will bring when you are out in public? Dogs frequently attract strangers, welcoming their advances and delighting in the attention. A PSD may also invite curious glances or comments from others who may want to know more about the dog's abilities and training. Consider whether you will find such attention an opportunity to interact with others or a painful or awkward burden.
 9. Are you prepared to cope with the dog's need to retire, deciding the dog is not the right fit, or the dog's aging and death? Inevitably, there will come a time when your PSD is no longer able to be an active part of your therapy, and this transition can be painful. Consider whether you will be able to withstand these normal feelings while providing the care your dog deserves after a lifetime of service.

Despite these concerns, for many individuals a dog can be a remarkable aid to a fuller, more productive life. As Mindy remembers the many years that she and Ninna worked together, she recalls appreciatively, "Ninna not only helped me feel safe in the world, but she got me out into it to discover all that surrounded me. She made the world navigable." Read on to discover how others learned to navigate their way through life with the extraordinary benefit of a healing companion.