

Althea, My Animal Reiki Teacher

BY KATHLEEN LESTER

PHOTOS COURTESY OF KATHLEEN LESTER

EVERY ANIMAL WE MEET can be a teacher. Althea set the standard for me. Althea became my canine companion during my first marriage when we adopted her as a puppy. All we knew about her was that her mom was a registered Rottweiler and the puppies came out all black, meaning her dad, who must have jumped the fence, was likely a black Labrador Retriever. While my marriage did not last, Althea grew to be 100 pounds of pure love. I felt a love so strong that I fought for custody of her and gave my ex-husband a significant amount of money as part of our settlement agreement to have sole custody of her. My love for Althea was much more significant than money but I had yet to know how significant.

The Lesson of Love

I grew up in an environment where love was not shared readily or easily. What was shared were criticism, insults and put-downs with a few “ataboys” thrown in. My family lacked the experience of showing love and as a result, so did I. The first thing Althea taught me was to love, that my heart could open



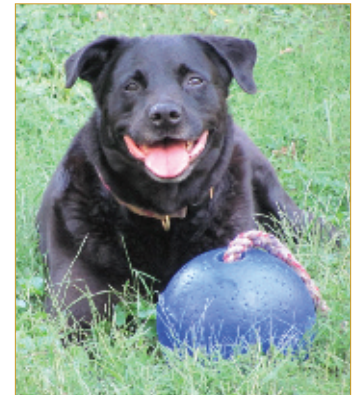
to another being, and reciprocation of love without expectations or conditions. I never had known love like this, and it was simply amazing. My prior experience was the love you feel when you fall in love, but most of my relationships did not make it past the “in love” stage to that deeper unconditional love, or if it started down that path, I started to place conditions on it.

Even as much as we loved each other, Althea was not a cuddly dog; she liked her space. So, the love I experienced was not through touch, but rather a knowing, a reciprocal sense of gratitude and compassion for one another. We felt it while sitting in the same room, greeting each other after being apart, enjoying a walk, and even when we were not together, we could tune into each other in a way I had never experienced. I felt true unconditional love for the first time.

When we became companions, I was a student of Buddhism and had a meditation practice, and I found moments where I truly lived in the moment. But, something was lacking, I could not truly understand how to live in the moment from my heart, and I felt alone as a result. As Althea and I ventured out on our walks, I began to spend more time in nature, hiking, going to the beach, and simply being with her in these environments and connecting to Mother Earth. I was not alone; she was always with me. Then I began to see that the trees and rocks and water were always with me too. With Althea, I began to realize I was part of a more substantial fabric of life; we felt the connection together, or should I say, she guided me there.

The Real Work Always Begins Within

Soon after Althea came into my life, Reiki kept showing up. I began to attend Reiki sessions, and then Reiki books started flying off the shelves in front of me until one day my Reiki practitioner asked me if I wanted to take one of her classes. I, of course, said, “No, I can’t learn Reiki.” And then, after going home and doing some meditation



and taking long walks with Althea, I said yes. I do not know what prompted me to say yes, other than a profound feeling that Reiki was going to be important in my life—likely a feeling facilitated by Althea. So, I took Reiki Level I and did not feel like I “got it,” but went on to Reiki Level II anyway to see if that would help. After my Reiki II class, Althea’s teachings continued.

I was facilitating a distance session with Althea one day, and I received a clear message, “No Mama, you need it more than I do.” “Huh?” I said. “Did Althea say that?” And then I began to practice my self-healing in earnest. I returned to the study and practices in Reiki Level I and continued to practice on myself. So here was Althea guiding me to what I needed to do.

When I began to work with the practices in Reiki Level II, I beamed Althea with Reiki, and she ran down two flights of stairs

and basically gave me two middle fingers, saying, “Don’t ever do that again.” I sat in meditation trying to figure out why she ran from me and eventually came to the realization that I had not asked for her permission. And so, it was then that I knew I had to work with animals and help people understand that you cannot just “do Reiki” to animals, they must consent to participate. Reiki is much more than doing something; it is “being” in a unique way, it is getting out of your way and embodying the precepts. Once I learned this lesson, Althea was receptive to Reiki. And from this experience, I not only learned to ask permission but each time an animal refused treatment, I learned to look within for the answer.

With a nudge from Althea, I began to work with friends’ and families’ companions and started my practicum at the local animal shelter. I went in with the intent of helping the animals in the shelter, my heart was open and brimming with compassion, or so I thought. I soon realized as some of the shelter animals refused a session, that my ego had slipped into my compassion and I was not truly compassionate. I had to reflect on what compassion was. Reiki is not about “helping” anyone, it is about being a beautiful bright light that shines, allowing others to take what they need for their healing. My offer to help was, one—seeing the animals as less-than, and they are not less than me, but equal to me; and, two—offering to help included my ego, which has no place in our Reiki work. True compassion is through gratitude with no expectations, and “I” coupled with expectations of helping is not compassionate at all. Wow, what an amazing lesson on compassion!

The Teacher IS the Student

After a few years of practice, I knew that one of my contributions was to help spread the word of how to share Reiki with animals. I began teaching Animal Reiki and what I soon realized was that while I was saying the words, Althea was teaching the class. She would demonstrate a Reiki session, she would be a willing client for students, and she was not shy about getting up and not allowing some of them to work with her. She took charge of identifying those that needed more self-healing, and I helped to coach them and guide them to continue their healing practices.



Althea also helped with attunements, always choosing one or more students to lie next to during attunements, letting me know that they could use some added support, and of course, sharing her healing gifts. Almost always, the person she chose to lie next to had an emotional reaction to the attunement. I then started to guess which person she would lie next to by tuning in more to the students throughout the day and eventually I was able to know who she would select. Ultimately, she taught me to see the persons in class more clearly and use my intuition to guide me in the attunement process, rather than relying on performing a sequence of events. She guided me to facilitate and be the rain that falls during the reiju or attunement process, becoming one with the client.

Her gift of compassion and guidance on my journey as an Animal Reiki Practitioner and Teacher has shown me the true meaning of Reiki and helped me to let go of the external and go within, healing the layers of suffering I have carried. Althea is no longer here in physical form but she continues to guide me daily and help me uncover my pain so that I can let it go and not let it define me and ultimately shine my beautiful bright light, not dimmed by my suffering.

Although I am a teacher, I know through Althea’s teachings that I am also always a student. In each class, I am open to all the lessons that present themselves, whether from human, animal or spirit. Althea and I connect regularly and she continues to guide me. I also experience every animal I encounter, from a fly to an elephant as a teacher, and always ask, “What can I learn from him or her? Is there a lesson that I can use to grow, to do my part to raise my vibration?” 🌿

**In loving memory of Althea,
companion, teacher and spiritual advisor.**



Kathleen Lester is an Animal Reiki Practitioner & Teacher, Medical Reiki Master™, certified animal massage therapist, and animal communicator. She founded the Animal Reiki Alliance in 2010 to promote Animal Reiki as a respected complement to veterinary care and to support the animal services community. She practices in Baltimore, Maryland, and you may contact her at klester@animalreikialliance.com or (443) 986-1516 or at her web site at www.animalreikialliance.com