

SAMANTHA WARWICK

FINDING MY WAY BACK TO WRITING

And the unexpected medicine dog

Spring 2016. I was at the end of a three-year affair with Calgary's chronic pain centre, attempting—in every conceivable way—to resolve a chronic daily headache condition. By chronic daily headache, I mean constant daily headache—not headaches that come and go or respond to first line treatments. The centre had provided a neurologist, musculoskeletal expert, physiotherapist, nutritionist and cognitive behavioural therapist. I'd also tried alternative therapies. After years of undergoing an unsuccessful battery of tests, medications, remedies, modalities, and every kind of bodywork, there was nothing more the centre could offer me and I was discharged from the program.

The pain, thought to be coming from a problem in my neck or thoracic spine, made it difficult to sit down to write. For a while, the only writing I could manage was the journaling prescribed by a psychologist. I clung to the daily routines that brought me solace in this downsized version of my life: program direction for the Writers' Guild of Alberta, warm yin yoga, coffee in the sun, music, swimming if I had enough energy, and the handful of people I could confide in.

I devoted myself to my work with the WGA, which boosted my morale. I could accomplish the requirements of this position most days, and the role kept me connected to the writing community. Interviewing, promoting and scheduling other writers was meaningful, but despite this inspiring and supportive setting,



SAMANTHA WARWICK AND LULU
— PHOTO BY DAVID WHYTE OF GRIFFIN PICTURES

I couldn't rally to write my own material. I put on a cheerful front, ashamed of this relentless pain, only to collapse into a ball of exhaustion after spells of extroversion.

Occasionally, I would blast out scenes for my second novel or a solicited piece of nonfiction for a magazine or blog, but I couldn't sustain a daily writing practice. Sitting for long periods of time made the headache worse, and reading became a challenge—a devastating development for anyone who must sit and create to feel whole and alive. I grieved the loss of creative energy.

Enter, Lulu. My heart swelled every time I saw someone walking a dog, or when an office mate brought one to work. I am, however, allergic to some breeds, which prevented me from seriously considering adoption. But leaving the chronic pain centre had thrown me into an *F-it* phase. *F this headache. F this situation. F allergies!* My heart continued to squeal inside its socket at the sight of little dogs on the street, and I secretly filled out rescue applications without submitting them. Looking back, living with this chronic, private, unseen condition, this inability to write, focus or read the way I once had, made me lonely. I was lonely even when surrounded by friends, family, or colleagues, because mostly I chose not to disclose how debilitated I felt, and pushed through daily expectations instead.

I talked to my husband about adopting a dog. "You're allergic," he said. "We travel too much." The truth was, *he* travelled too much. I stood tall, took a deep breath and made my case. I would be the primary caregiver, I said, I'd handle training and walks and whatever else arose. He ultimately agreed to foster a dog, and that we would assess how that went. Thirty-six hours later, Lulu was in the house: a six-pound black and tan Chihuahua mix, rescued from a Southern California shelter. She was terrified, traumatized and aggressive. The rescue team needed to rehome her immediately. My husband recoiled at this tiny, barking dragon. But, her bark was more of a cry and her tail was planted between her legs. I felt the same.

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We adopted Lulu in a matter of days, and I took her everywhere in an effort to restore her confidence: dog-friendly shops, long walks, the office. She and I went to intensive dog training for three months. Within weeks, she was wagging her tail at colleagues, friends and strangers. She initiated play by suddenly engaging with a hair elastic on the floor and inviting me to join. As her behaviour settled, and the “true” Lulu emerged, I noticed changes in my own mental health and pain levels.

Her temperament was now calm and unbothered by public environments and strangers, and she accompanied me to medical appointments outside of the pain centre where she sat quietly on my lap, completely relaxed. I remarked to my doctor that my lifelong allergy to dogs was negligible with Lulu. We talked about neuroplasticity. Was it possible that Lulu was improving my mental and physical state by drawing my attention away from the pain? Could this be rewiring the



LULU CO-HOSTING A WGA EVENT AT SHELF LIFE BOOKS
 – PHOTO BY MONIQUE DE ST. CROIX OF UNIQUE
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faulty neurological pathways that were perpetuating the headache? “Yes,” she said. “Absolutely possible. The plasticity of our brains is real, and specifically what interrupts problematic neural pathways for each individual is unique.”

There’s no shortage of evidence-based research on the healing and therapeutic influence of human-dog connections. Science concludes that bonding with a dog lowers cortisol, blood pressure and anxiety, deepens breathing and increases oxytocin (the “love” hormone) in both humans and canines. Our interactions boost serotonin and endorphins, which elevate mood and reduce feelings of loneliness and disconnection. These physiological and neurological shifts may explain why spending time with a dog (or other animal) can lower our perception of pain.

Service and support dogs are not new—or “trending”—as a sarcastic customs agent said to me once as I travelled through an airport with Lulu in tow. Dogs have been assisting the wounded (physical, emotional, mental) and providing comfort in formal capacities since at least World War II. From vision and hearing impairments, post-traumatic stress disorder, epilepsy, learning disabilities, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and autism, to anxiety, depression, isolation, loneliness and pain, dogs have helped millions of people regain their quality of life.

Here are three of the many lessons that Lulu has offered as I rebuild a more resilient writing life:

All we have is now. Lulu lives in the present moment. She sinks into sun patches like a Zen master—eyes closed—breathing, being. Humans need to work harder to achieve the same state. Breathing is the simplest way to bring the mind back to the moment. As writers, sitting in meditation for as little as two minutes before writing can kick-start new pathways in the brain, increase psychological clarity, enhance compassion and sharpen emotional intelligence.

Connection. On our walks, Lulu is curious and connected to her environment. She stops to smell the earth, air, river, and

traces of other creatures. The walk may be familiar, but each day brings a renewed atmosphere. She reminds me daily to appreciate our time outdoors. When I pull my phone from a pocket to make calls or check my email, Lulu assumes a stance of disapproval. Eyes wide: *Why are you choosing to disconnect from this experience?* she seems to ask. *Why are you disconnecting from me and this walk? Look up!* She reminds me that ideas so often land when we’re most open, present and receptive: in the shower, almost asleep, during an unencumbered walk.

Shake it off, keep going. Moments after Lulu experiences a negative encounter with an aggressive dog or unpredictable human, she instinctively shakes her body, as though removing the intrusive energies from her being, before trotting onward into her day. To keep shaking off—resetting and letting go—is the only way forward as I return to and deepen my relationship with writing.

Today, as I write this, with Lulu at my side, my pain levels and associated emotional challenges are less. I’ve regained the fortitude to prioritize writing again. On low days—feeling depleted by circumstance—Lulu senses the change. She attaches herself to my ribs like a burr. Licks my hands. Tracks my every move with her gaze. I want to know *how* she knows. She feels the change and adjusts her behaviour to interrupt the unhelpful neurological patterns that she perceives in my physiology. And so, I pick up my pen, breathe into the moment, connect to my environment, shake off what I can—and write. ■

Samantha Warwick (she/her) is the author of the novel Sage Island. Her nonfiction and poetry have been broadcast on CBC Radio and appeared in various literary and commercial publications including the Globe and Mail, Geist, Event, Dog Eyes Magazine, Alberta Views and FASHION. Sam directed WGA programs in Calgary between 2005 and 2020. She’s now at work on her second novel and recently completed yoga teacher training (with Lulu, who simultaneously earned her own honorary 50-hour certification). Author website: samanthawarwick.com Instagram: [@sam_and_lulu](https://www.instagram.com/sam_and_lulu)