

LEARNING ABOUT OUR NEIGHBOUR FROM GONZO

by

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Strange title? Yeh...

Gonzo is our little two-year old Shih Tzu, 14 pounds of exuberant fun coupled with a sincere allegiance that few humans can match. He plays with you endlessly unless he is sound asleep, which is about 18 hours daily. Oh, yes, he's a male, so he is even more bent on being mischievous, but not vindictive, at times.

Gonzo is very trustworthy. He learned his potty training in three days, and we've never had an 'accident'. He *is* a Shih Tzu. This means he is very independent sometimes to the point of no return, but his affection, simplicity and otherwise reliability carry the day. As those who own a Shih Tzu know they are prone to do their own thing. How any of them ever wins any dog show is beyond me. I know that if they *were* Gonzo, they wouldn't win, but they would steal away the judges' hearts in any case.

You see Gonzo is a dog replica of what a true Christian should be. He is trustworthy and loyal, obedient mostly but capable of annoying independence, although it is not so intentioned. He is a straight shooter, incapable of real deception and obstreperous behaviour. He trusts you, and you trust him. You and he treat each other as you wish a neighbour would treat you, God's commandment that works as well on dogs as it does humans. But in order for it to work, it has to be tried, be put in motion so to speak.

Gonzo has faith in us that he will be looked after, fed, clothed, and taken on his daily walks. Oh, yes, that's right. You read correctly. I said "clothed". You see my wife loves Gonzo so much that she has concluded his fur just can't keep him warm in Dallas, Texas! Absurd, of course, but nevertheless, she bought him a few little outfits. He has a bright red set of pajamas, sweat suit (believe it or not), pullover sweater, karate robe, plaid coat and plastic raincoat.

Dog owning friends of hers told her he would never wear such things, we'd never get them on him, he'd keep wriggling out of them, chewing them up. Never happen! This pooch loves his outfits. He loves playing 'dress up' so much that he almost demands to wear one of these daily. All he needs are sunglasses and a backpack to be California beach and/or mountain bound!

He takes the normal medicines to keep off and contain mosquitoes, including a monthly heartworm pill. We have 'worked' with him and apparently convinced him that these pills are his 'treats'. The result: he gobbles them down, even standing on his hind legs for a time begging for one of them he particularly 'likes'!

He goes everywhere with us. Last year he traveled in the car to North Carolina. He's a great hit at the motels! Our son thinks we're nuts – the way we treat this mere dog.

Gonzo is a strange dog. He almost never barks and never bites. His bag is to lick you to death. He is loved by the elementary and middle-school kids in our neighbourhood who sometimes see him on his daily walks. 20-30 of them crowd around him peppering me with questions like "Mr., will he bite?" Ans: "No". "What's his name?" "Gonzo" "How old is he?" "Two". "Can I hold him?" "Yes, but remember he will want to lick you, so..." "How much did he cost" (I guess Americans start learning about prices and costs at a very early age!) "Never mind". He lets them all pick him up; all he does is try to continuously give them licks of affection.

When we meet other dogs, he never barks no matter what they do. He just lies down and looks at them. Eventually, they quit barking and peace ensues. Oh, if only we could apply these principles to secular and spiritual life!

Gonzo even has a physical handicap. His tongue is too big for his mouth. So it is always protruding about an inch past his lips. Very rarely does he have the tongue inside his mouth. The vet says it is simply too big! We wouldn't have Gonzo any other way. He wouldn't win any dog shows where the competition centers on being the 'perfect dog' in the particular category because not many other Shih Tzus have the tongue out all the time.

Back to barking and biting, in reverse order, this dog really does not bite. He does not understand the concept of biting. He does play and nibble your fingers, but if you say "easy now, easy," he immediately stops nibbling, changing to licking. He only barks at dogs he sees on television. We have a difficult time watching dog shows or anything with horses in it on TV because he goes ballistic. He jumps off his stool and begins barking so hard in front of the television set that his head looks like it is going to become detached from his neck! When the offending animals leave the screen, he immediately calms down.

Now, what is the point in all of this?

Perhaps some of it is to demonstrate how others react to kindness and good treatment. You may say, "But it's a dog, not a person". True enough, but Gonzo is also God's creature, just like us except for the human factor! We find that the better we treat Gonzo the more he responds, disproportionately so. He then seems to 'bend over backwards' to please. Of course, this is within the limits of his being a Shih Tzu.

We need to treat people, our neighbours, at least as well as we treat our dogs! We should treat our every day neighbours as well as Gonzo. I don't mean that literally. Naturally, our treatment of our neighbours would have to be somewhat different, but it would begin with treating them as our brothers and sisters in a spiritual sense. We should be concerned with our neighbours' health and wellbeing and try to help them if they are having any difficulties. Even if we cannot personally assist, perhaps we could help in arranging for others more qualified than we are to help. We should

help even more so because the neighbour is a sinner as we all are. Christ came for sinners not the righteous:

And it came to pass, as Jesus sat at meat in the house, behold, many publicans and sinners came and sat down with him and his disciples.

And when the Pharisees saw it, they said unto his disciples, Why eateth your Master with publicans and sinners?

But when Jesus heard that, he said unto them, They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick.

But go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice: for I am not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance. (St. Matthew 9: 10-13)

Perhaps an illustration from one of the most spiritually uplifting books will help. In *The Way of A Pilgrim*, the author is anonymous. We don't know much about the pilgrim, but do know that "he is 33 years old, has a withered arm, and walks unendingly carrying a knapsack that holds only dry bread, his Bible, and the *Philokalia*."¹ Interesting age, don't you think? A couple of examples should be spiritually interesting:

'I suppose you are not without worries and bothers, with this guesthouse of yours? Of course there are quite a lot of our pilgrim brotherhood who take to the life because they have nothing to do, or from sheer laziness, and sometimes they do a little thieving on the road; I have seen it myself.'

'There have not been many cases of that sort,' was the answer. 'We have for the most part always come across genuine pilgrims. And if we do get the other sort, we welcome them all the more kindly and try the harder to get them to stay with us. Through living with our good beggars and brothers in Christ they often become reformed characters and leave the guesthouse humble and kindly folk.'²

...

...there came into my mind the following saying of Nicetas Stethatus in *The Philokalia*: 'The nature of things is judged by the inward disposition of the soul,' that is, a man gets his ideas about his neighbours *from what he himself is* (emphasis supplied). And he goes on to say, 'He who has attained to true prayer and love has no sense of the differences between things: he does not distinguish the righteous man from the sinner, but *loves them all equally and judges no man* (emphasis supplied), as God causes His sun to shine and His rain to fall *on the just and the unjust* (emphasis supplied).'³

Gonzo reacts to our kindness with his own. He reciprocates even more so than we who initiated it. Then we are encouraged to reciprocate further. It is no different from our relationships with each other. Even if people are harsh with us or mistreat us in some ways, responding with kindness is the Lord's Way and pays spiritual dividends. There are sinners in this world. They are all of us. When we respond with kindness in reply to others' rudeness or other 'bad' behaviour, we see the Lord in those people, and 'set the stage' for them to spiritually transform themselves. We are not to judge but truly act as Christian neighbours, come to think of it, much like the loving responses to kindness of our good pal Gonzo.

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ Anonymous (tr. From the Russian by R.M. French/Foreword by Huston Smith) *The Way Of A Pilgrim*, Foreword, HarperSanFrancisco (corresponds to a time period of 1853-1861), p. *viii*.

² *ibid.*, pp. 82-83.

³ *id.*, p. 85.