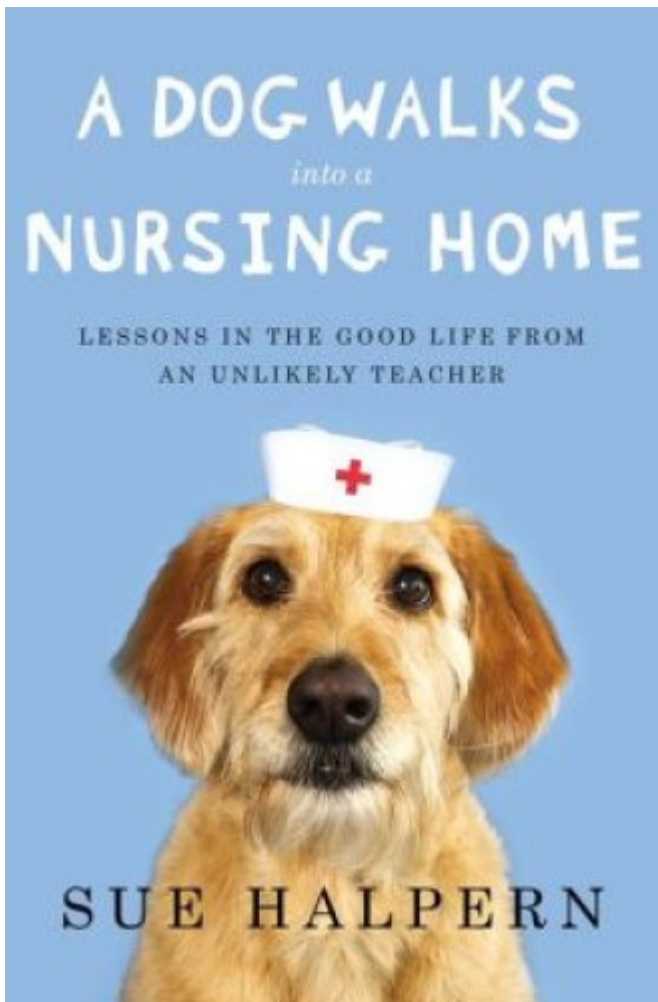


A Dog Walks into a Nursing Home, by Sue Halpern

reviewed by [LaVonne Neff](#) in the [October 2, 2013](#) issue

In Review



A Dog Walks into a Nursing Home

By Sue Halpern
Riverhead Books

Pransky was bored. Long ago the middle-aged Labradoodle had mastered the doggie imperatives: “Come.” “Sit.” “Stay.” More recently she had learned the names of her possessions: “Bear.” “Bone.” “Ball.” And she knew what to do with them: “Find your

sock and bring it inside.” “Drop the toy.” “Go to bed.” A dog of immense energy, every day and in all weather she bounced and rambled through meadows and woods. But that wasn’t enough for Pransky.

Sue Halpern, Pransky’s owner, was bored too. Her husband (environmentalist Bill McKibben) was often away from home because of work commitments. Their daughter was about to leave for boarding school. A woman of immense energy, Halpern is a scholar-in-residence at Middlebury College; has written for a host of national magazines, including *Rolling Stone*, the *New Yorker* and *Mother Jones*; edits the electronic imprint of the *New York Review of Books*; and wrote five books before this one. But that wasn’t enough for her.

So what new, invigorating activity could a woman and her dog pursue, living as they did at the end of a dirt road in rural Vermont? Because Halpern didn’t own sheep, Pransky couldn’t herd. Though Pransky occasionally hunted, Halpern wasn’t enthusiastic about increasing her neighborhood’s toll of dead bunnies and squirrels. And then Halpern learned about Therapy Dogs International, one of many organizations that train and certify dogs and their handlers to volunteer in hospitals and nursing homes.

The job description, she writes,

was like reading a classified that had our names on it, one that said “Wanted: irresistibly cute blond dog with a black olive nose and distinctive eyebrows who is friendly to all, kind, enthusiastic, well behaved, smart, and willing to spend time with people who could use some love and affection. . . . Must have a loyal human partner who need not be anywhere near as attractive.”

Halpern and Pransky signed up. The training, Halpern quickly learned, would be rigorous, with no exceptions or shortcuts. Pransky would not be allowed inside the local nursing home until she was fully certified, and that meant, among many other things, learning to walk patiently on a loose leash. Pransky was lovable, brilliant and obedient, but a leash, to her, was simply an invitation to pull, as if she were the boat and Halpern the water-skier. Pransky did not like to be restrained.

Halpern might have written a humorous book about Pransky’s irrepressible high spirits, or a sentimental book about how Pransky brought comfort to dozens of elders living on borrowed time, or a memoir about how her bond with her dog led to all kinds of self-discovery and growth. But such books are already a dime a dozen,

and Halpern is too original a journalist to take the well-trodden path.

Instead, Halpern sets the story of Pransky's new job in an ancient framework. Restraint—the requirement that was such a challenge for Pransky—is one of Plato's four cardinal virtues, along with courage, wisdom and justice. Some 800 years after Plato, Augustine added three theological virtues—faith, hope and love—to make up the familiar list of seven.

Without restraint, Pransky could never have worked as a therapy dog. Restraint enabled her “to be comfortable around people who were wheezing or limping or moaning,” to “walk by a plate of food on the floor and pretend not to be interested,” and to be calm “around children—even running, squealing children.” Without restraint, Halpern would not have kept on working with her, week after week, until she finally figured out a way to cheat on the doggie exam and get Pransky certified. (Virtue can take a dog only so far.)

Prudence—or “‘practical wisdom,’ the basic knowledge of what to do and how to be”—did not seem to be Pransky's forte her first day on the job:

Joe was sitting in his wheelchair. A camo-print baseball hat covered his bald head, and he wore a baggy gray sweatshirt that fell loosely to his lap, which was where, for all intents and purposes, his body ended, too. The man was all torso; his legs had been amputated at mid-thigh.

“Come here,” he said to Pransky, with a slight slur in his voice. She drew close. Joe reached over and vigorously rubbed a spot on her head between her ears, and as he did, Pransky stuck her nose in his lap and avidly inspected his stumps, which were wrapped in flesh-colored elastic bandages. Mortified, I quickly assessed the options: pull her away and maybe make the situation worse, or do nothing and maybe make the situation worse. It was lose-lose all around.

As it turned out, it was Halpern, not her dog, who had come up short in the prudence department:

“Nice dog,” Joe said, beaming at Pransky. And with those words, a spell was broken. If he . . . was not embarrassed, why should I be? Empathy requires us to imagine ourselves as someone else, but that's not what I was doing. Instead, I was putting my intact self in that wheelchair, which was not the same thing.

Enjoying a good dog story is reason enough to pick up *A Dog Walks into a Nursing Home*. Getting a glimpse into the lives of nursing home residents—so often invisible to us younger and healthier people on the outside—may be an even better reason: Fran, the reporter; Clyde, the skirt-chaser; Iris, who had a hard time talking; her roommate Dottie, who couldn't hear; Vinny, the sports fan; Martha, the birdwatcher; Mr. and Mrs. Carter, providers of dog biscuits.

But what really sold the book to me is the way Halpern infuses her stories with goodness. Faith is “the miracle of waking up to not writing people off.” Hope radiates from the beautician's curling iron. “The simple maxim was this: people without hope for today, let alone for tomorrow, did not get their hair done.” Fortitude, or courage, keeps the residents celebrating life in spite of loss—and keeps Pransky coming back, week after week, in spite of her own fatigue. Who'd have thought a goofy Labradoodle and a few dozen often-confused people well past their prime could inspire such rich meditations?

I thought of Pransky the other day when I noticed a seriously deformed woman at Whole Foods. Some part of me I'm not proud of recoiled. And then a little voice in my head asked, “What would Pransky do if that woman walked up to her?” Of course. She'd wiggle with joy, thump her tail and angle her head to be petted. That's not because dogs are nonjudgmental, Halpern writes; dogs are “making judgments about people and situations all the time.” What Pransky does instinctively, and what a lot of us humans have to be taught, is to “meet people exactly where they [are] (disabled, jolly, mute, demented, frail, lonely, tired, chatty), without a moment's hesitation.”

“I didn't expect to start thinking about virtue by following my dog into a nursing home,” Halpern says. “Who would? But it was hard to butt up against mortality and not be reminded, week after week, that though you were rich in life, you had a good chance of squandering your inheritance, so maybe you'd better start thinking about how not to do that.” Unless, of course, you're a dog, in which case prudence suggests that you live in the moment and charge ahead. Something just around that corner smells mighty attractive.