

TRAINING MIDNIGHT
Written for Hearts United for Animals
by Allison Hunter-Frederick © 2008

Cast of Characters:

Midnight: a Black Labrador retriever pup

Val: an alley cat

Cracker: an Amazon parrot whose girlfriend Polly lives in the rainforest

Grandma Greta: a retired classroom guinea pig who is frail and almost blind

Sprinter: a hamster

Hatch: a duck sold at Easter in a department store

Act I

(Val, Hatch, and Sprinter are already on stage.)

MIDNIGHT (bounding up to animals and skidding): I'm going to get trained! I'm going to get trained! I'm going to get trained!

VAL (backing away): Whoever would want to take on that task?

(Grandma clears throat. Midnight looks sheepish and races back to Grandma. He accidentally knocks her over, then picks her up, and lets her lean on him.)

GRANDMA: Tut-tut, Val, be positive. Many visitors at the shelter have inquired about adopting Midnight, while also acting hesitant around Midnight because of her energy. The keepers feel if she were trained, she might get more easily adopted.

CRACKER (flying overhead): Someone wants Midnight? (Breaks into song.) Oh who oh who would that be?

VAL (licking her paws as she speaks): Good luck with that plan.

HATCH: Labrador Retrievers are supposed to be well-controlled dogs. As adults, they can stand, point, and retrieve without a hitch. With some training, who knows?

MIDNIGHT (bounding away again from Grandma and jabbering): I'm going to learn to follow commands and I'll get rewards and I might even get a puppy party! (Midnight races about excitedly and barrels into animals.)

CRACKER (chanting): Party time! Crackers and toast! Party time! Crackers and toast! (Whistles as he lands on stage edge). GO FOR IT!

HATCH (picking himself up and muttering): Then again, I also hear Labrador Retrievers are among the hardest of shelter dogs to get adopted. You'd think there would be a reason.

SPRINTER (pointing finger at Hatch): No, Hatch, don't get negative! (Points finger at Val.)

That's *her* job. (Puts hand on waist.) Let's be positive. Let's try instead to *help*.

HATCH: What do you have in mind, Sprinter?

SPRINTER: The keepers are going to train Midnight. Why don't we train her too? If we train her well, maybe she'll be among the *first* of the dogs to get adopted!

(Midnight stops, sits, perks her ears, and eagerly wags tail.)

VAL (yawning): Hey Sprint, we all know you like to train, but that doesn't mean the rest of us have any interest in it. Some of us don't need rules or sweat or....

SPRINTER: Work?

VAL (smiling) Exactly! I'm glad we're of the same mind.

HATCH: Training is supposed to be done in short sessions, several times a day.... (Shrugs) Doesn't sound like too much work.

VAL: What are you—a walking encyclopaedia? (Sticks her tail in Hatch's face.) I'm bored.

GRANDMA: I think we *all* would like to help Midnight. (Pulls each animal into a circle except Val who struts to the side of Grandma and sits.) Let's make a training plan!

SPRINTER (pacing): If we're going to train her, we need a plan. (Stops momentarily to ask a question.) Grandma, what do the keepers plan to teach Midnight?

MIDNIGHT: They're going to teach me all kinds of commands! (Midnight performs wrong commands as she yells them.) Sit! Lie down! Roll over!

VAL: I see the shelter keepers have their work cut out for them. What you need is negative reinforcement.

SPRINTER (still pacing): What's that?

VAL: It means we punish Midnight whenever she makes a mistake. (She bats Midnight on the head. Midnight lowers her head and backs away.) For example, I like the idea that every time she bangs into us, we can hit her.

CRACKER (sidles up to Val): Val, give me a cracker.

(Val doesn't comply. Cracker pulls her tail and then escapes to stage top. Val tries jumping and poking, but can't reach.)

CRACKER: I like that idea of negative reinforcement. Let's pull Val's tail every time she doesn't comply with a direction.

SPRINTER (ordering): Stop it the two of you! Everyone listen! Isn't this about Midnight?

HATCH: Yes, it is. How about we use *positive* reinforcement?

SPRINTER (impatiently gesturing): And that is what?

HATCH: Every time Midnight follows a command, even just one of them, we give her a treat. That way, she receives positive reinforcement for her actions and is more likely to continue them.

SPRINTER (shaking his head): You know my health rules. No treats!

HATCH: We can give her small treats and as she gets better make her do more to earn them.

SPRINTER: Grandma, do we really need to fatten Midnight to train her?

GRANDMA: I do like the idea of positive reinforcement. Perhaps we could at least praise her?

SPRINTER (nodding): Praise is fine. Now, this is what we're going to do. Except for Midnight, we're all going to line up. Then we're all going to all take turns calling Midnight. And we're going to train her to COME and SIT. We can do it! She can do it! (Raises arm like a sergeant.) Now let's get to work!

Act II

(All animals except Val are on stage. They're in a horizontal line, except Midnight who sits apart from them. Midnight's face and shoulders are drooped as if she is discouraged. All the others except for Sprinter are stretching their muscles and acting tired.)

HATCH: Sprinter, let's stop. Remember, training is supposed to be done in short sessions.

SPRINTER (waving suggestion aside): It's also supposed to be done several times. And it's just one command. We'll stop when she gets it.

HATCH: We're doing *two* commands: COME and SIT.

SPRINTER (snapping): It's still just *one* set. She should be able to COME and SIT.

HATCH (taking deep breath and speaking slowly): I know that I'll regret crediting her, but.... Perhaps Val was right about your liking to train? Maybe this is more about you, Sprinter, than about Midnight?

SPRINTER (ignoring him and ordering): Midnight COME and SIT!

(Midnight jumps up, runs forward, and barrels into Val who saunters on stage. Val hisses at

Midnight, who flops on the ground and starts to bawl.)

MIDNIGHT: I'm never going to learn! No one is ever going to adopt me! I'm no good!

SPRINTER (yelling at Val): Where were you? The rest of us were here all afternoon teaching Midnight, while you were who knows where? No one could find you!

VAL: Maybe I didn't *want* to be found. Maybe I wanted to do something better with my time than train an oversized slobbering puppy.

SPRINTER: Like what?

VAL (stretching her front legs): Oh, like sleep. (Val rolls over and then bounds to feet.) Yes, I sure do feel rested! Whereas, the rest of you look rather exhausted.

CRACKERS (muttering): Beauty sleep. Not enough. Get more.

(Val strikes at Cracker who escapes to stage top. Val tries jumping and poking, but can't reach.)

SPRINTER: At least we've been trying to help! That's what friends do!

VAL: Well, it doesn't look like your training worked, so no harm done, right?

HATCH (lecturing): No, Val, it's not all right. You should have been here, because this was about trying to help Midnight. And it might have worked, if Sprinter would have listened to any suggestions, but he wanted to control everything as much you wanted to be lazy and selfish.

GRANDMA: Enough!

(Cracker quietly returns to the group. Val leaves him alone. The rest of the animals except for Midnight sit to listen to Grandma. She says nothing to them. The only sound for a minute is that of Midnight who is whimpering with her paws over her head.)

GRANDMA (speaking softly): Sprinter, it's time to stop training for today.

SPRINTER (lowering head): But, we didn't succeed.

GRANDMA: We made progress. She's getting better. And maybe tomorrow we will succeed. We have plenty of time. We don't need to do it all in one day.... We also don't need to do more than one command at a time. Sometimes Midnight came. Sometimes she sat. Maybe trying to do both was too confusing for her.

SPRINTER (sighing): I really did just want to help her get adopted.

GRANDMA: I know. We all do. There may even be people out there who will decide to adopt Midnight just as she is now without being trained first, and then those people will train her.

CRACKER (strutting): Yeah, she should get adopted just the way she is. We all should.

VAL: But not all of us will.

HATCH: Val, why do you always need to be so negative?

VAL (looking at Midnight): Do you really think anyone will adopt that crybaby?

GRANDMA: Val!

VAL: Oh, Grandma! It's just more fun to be negative!

GRANDMA: Really, Val? Or is it easier if you don't care?

(Val slinks away and looks admonished.)

MIDNIGHT (looking up): I'm sorry, Sprinter, that I failed you.

(Sprinter goes to Midnight and hugs her.)

SPRINTER: I love you, Midnight! And someday people out there will too, enough to take you home with them.

MIDNIGHT (shyly wagging tail): Do you want me to try one more time?

ANIMALS (groaning in unison): No! We're done!

(Midnight's face and shoulders droop again, as if she is going to revert to tears.)

GRANDMA: Midnight, we love you and we will gladly train with you another day, but today I think we're all tired. (Looks at Sprinter.) And I suspect a little bit hungry, given that someone wouldn't let us have any treats.

CRACKER (flying off stage): Hungry! Hungry! Anyone want crackers and cheese?

SPRINTER (thrusting hand upward and ordering): Everyone, go eat!

(All animals except Val and Midnight wander off stage chattering about foods they want.)

VAL (sighing): Well, don't just sit there, you drooly thing. You've been knocking everyone over all afternoon. You need to eat more than anyone. Come on.

(Midnight comes to Val and perfectly sits.)

(Val stares for a few seconds and then pats Midnight's head.)

VAL (speaking too low for other animals to hear): Good dog.

CURRICULUM IDEAS:

1. Attend or research obedience courses for dogs. Setup a mock class using some students as trainers and others as the dogs.
2. In teams, research the pros and cons of positive and negative reinforcement. Have one person present for the positive side and the other person present for the negative side.
3. Interview local pet store and shelter workers. Tally what the most popular pets are to get adopted and what are the least popular pets to get adopted. Also collect suggested reasons. Present results in the form of a newspaper article.
4. Research types of courses (such as agility) available for dogs. Write a how-to piece on how to train a dog for one of these programs.

(PLAY EXTENSIONS)

1. Research how to train a dog. Then write a third act in which a human helps the animals to train Midnight to follow commands.
2. Research the six animals presented in the play. Decide which animal you could most easily train. Rewrite the play to have this animal being trained.
3. Read the HUA descriptions of the personalities for the six portrayed animals. Decide which animal you think would most likely act as a trainer. Rewrite the play to have this animal being trained.