

Hazel Grace and the Belly Rub

Connection, Coherence, and the Little Dog Who Carries Peace



Jeffrey E. Hansen, Ph.D.

A Presence You Can Feel

Hazel Grace has been with us long enough now that it feels as if she has always been here. Six or seven years, give or take, which in dog time is a lifetime and in heart time no time at all. She is a Shorkie, that improbable blend of Yorkshire Terrier resolve and Shih Tzu charm, with the squish nose, the oversized head, and the sturdy little body that looks as if it was designed for one primary purpose: disarming the human race through cuteness. She can get away with almost anything because the face appears and judgment quietly dissolves.

But her real gift is not her cuteness. Her real gift is presence.

Leah, Daphne, and the Legacy of Attunement

That story begins, as so many good things in our home do, with Leah. Long before Hazel ever wore a hospital vest, Leah had already lived a life of attunement with animals that most people only glimpse. Horses settle around her. Dogs orient to her. Anxious creatures sense that she carries no threat. She does not talk about regulation. She lives it. Years ago, that steady presence formed an extraordinary bond with Daphne, our Sheltie, who became a hospital visitation dog and Leah's inseparable



companion. Losing Daphne was not simply the loss of a beloved dog. It was the loss of a shared rhythm. The grief was deep and real and quiet.

The Calling and the Purple Uniform

Hazel came later and she came differently. Not the instant scholar that a Sheltie can be, not the effortless prodigy, but a little more Yorkie in her negotiation with the universe. Training her for



hospital work took time, patience, and the kind of faithful consistency that Leah gives to everything she loves. COVID slowed the process but never stopped the calling. And the day Hazel finally passed the test, that demanding evaluation for visitation dogs, something beautiful came full circle.

Now there is a ritual before visit days. The bath the evening before. The quiet preparation. The purple Dignity Health uniform. The badges. Hazel watching every movement with growing awareness that she is going to work. When they leave the house together there is a sense of purpose that is almost liturgical. And when they walk through the hospital doors, people know her. Not as a program. By name.

Softness That Goes Beyond Fur

The first thing everyone says is the same.

She is so soft.

They say it with surprise, almost reverence, as their hands sink into that impossibly gentle fur. And yes, her coat is extraordinarily soft, but that is not what they are really talking about. What they are feeling is the softness of her presence, the absence of threat, the tenderness of a nervous system that has nothing to defend and nothing to prove. She is soft in the way safety is soft, in the way welcome is soft, in the way grace is soft. You can see the realization cross their faces as they continue to stroke her. They are not just touching softness. They are being met by it.

Eyes Like a Full Moon

And then there are her eyes.

They are enormous, the size of saucers, the size of a full moon, and she knows exactly how to use them. She does not glance and move on the way most dogs do. She settles into the gaze and holds it. As children we used to have staring contests to see who could last the longest without blinking. Hazel could easily win every time. There is no anxiety in her, no need to break the connection, no flicker of avoidance. She simply stays.



It feels less like being looked at and more like being received.

She looks into a person as if she is trying to drink them in, as if their presence is something to be absorbed and cherished. It is steady, unhurried, and completely unafraid. People begin to smile, then they soften, and then something deeper happens, because it is almost impossible to be seen that directly without becoming more present yourself.

Co-Regulation in Real Time

Because she arrives already settled, the person in front of her begins to settle.

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Her body is loose and grounded. Her breathing is slow. Her heart moves in that smooth, coherent rhythm that comes with safety and connection. She is the stronger, more regulated nervous system in the interaction, and the other nervous system begins to co-regulate to her. Shoulders drop. Hands become gentle. The hurried pace of the room slows. Their physiology finds her physiology and rests in it for a while.

You could describe it in clinical language, in terms of polyvagal pathways and relational neuroscience and the synchronization of living systems but standing there in a hospital room or on a sidewalk it does not feel technical. It feels like relief. It feels like being seen. It feels like coming home.

She proclaims something without speaking. She emanates what can only be described as the love of God, not as an idea but as an atmosphere. People feel received in her presence. They feel, for a moment, that nothing is required of them except to be.

The Belly Rub at the Center

And then comes her signature act. She rolls onto her back and offers her belly with complete trust. In that instant there is laughter, touch, eye contact, and the quiet alignment of two nervous systems coming into balance. It is the passing of the peace on four small legs.

The Neighborhood Ritual

In the neighborhood she has her chosen people and her chosen houses. She will stop mid-walk and sit facing a front door with absolute confidence that love will appear. If no one comes out, the disappointment is real and almost comical. But when the door opens, she can barely contain her joy. She sits as she has been trained, her entire body trembling with anticipation, tail wagging while she holds the posture for half a second before rolling over in complete surrender.

Every time it happens, something changes in the human being in front of her. The day becomes lighter. The pace slows. The isolation breaks. They walk away carrying a little more regulation than they had before.

The Ambassador of NeuroFaith

She is the ambassador of NeuroFaith in our neighborhood without ever using the word.

She brings coherence into ordinary space. She creates connection where there was distance. She demonstrates, over and over again, that healing does not begin with explanation. It begins

with presence. A calm body invites calm. A peaceful heart invites peace. A settled nervous system becomes a place where another life can rest.

The Center Holds

This is the ministry of a small dog with impossibly soft fur, full moon eyes that look into your soul without blinking, and an absolute preference for belly rubs over treats.

If her name were translated rather than spoken, it would have to be a word for love in every language at once. Amore. Agape. Phileo. But Hazel Grace is the right name. Because wherever she goes, the center holds. The center of regulation. The center of connection. The place where two hearts find the same rhythm and remember, even if only for a moment, what it feels like to be at peace.

And it all begins with a little dog who arrives already living in that coherence, then looks into you as if you are the most important being in the universe and rolls onto her back, trusting that love will meet her there.

And behind that quiet miracle stands Leah.

Leah, whose heart has always known how to listen to living beings in a language deeper than words. Leah, who carries a presence that horses settle into, that anxious dogs orient toward, that people feel before they understand. This is not an easy calling, though it looks effortless from the outside. It is hours and years and patience and consistency. It is showing up again and again with a regulated heart so that another nervous system can learn safety. It is grief when a beloved companion is lost. It is beginning again. It is the unseen work that turns a small animal into a bearer of peace in hospital rooms and hallways.

Thank you, Leah, for the way you have given that gift to the world. Thank you for the countless hidden hours, for the training, for the tenderness, for the steadiness, for the courage to keep doing work that is holy and exhausting and beautiful all at once. I am never prouder than when you walk out the door on those Thursday mornings, uniform ready, leash in hand, stepping into your calling at Yavapai Medical Center with quiet purpose.

And Hazel, little ambassador of coherence, carrier of the torch, you who do not know the words for what you are doing and yet do it perfectly. You bring love and peace and presence into rooms where they have been in short supply. You remind people of their own hearts. You create connection where there was isolation. You live the gospel of regulation without ever speaking a sentence.

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This is what it looks like when love becomes embodied and walks into the world on four small legs and in one faithful human heart.

And I stand here in gratitude for both of you, watching the center hold.