



McGee the Dog:
How a Homeless Dog Rescued Me from My Own Triggers
By Teresa Pitt Green

Often, we are drawn a step closer to God unexpectedly. In my case, a rescue dog helped me turn to God in my lifelong struggle with triggers from abuse.

Shenanigans St. Michael (“Mickey”) McGee was a pretty little black spaniel who had charmed work crews in the landfill for over a year. Their efforts to coax him out of the junk heaps with whistles and treats were to no avail. McGee gobbled up whatever scraps and water they left behind after closing, but he defied capture. It was a thunderstorm that finally drove the popular little spaniel into a truck, which drove him to a rescue shelter, which introduced him to me. Our story begins with me glancing in my rearview mirror to see McGee sitting pertly in the deck of my station wagon, eyes on the road ahead, nose held high and sniffing madly after the smells of our homeward ride.

McGee was a merry fellow. He was not feral as might be expected after living at least a year of his young life outdoors unprotected. Like all rescue animals, he gave hints of a backstory. For example, he was absolutely delighted with the car ride and knew exactly how to walk into a house, check for the kitchen, and leap onto the couch. Scars on his snout suggested he had been forced to defend himself at least once in his life. The rescue league described his personality as “peaceful” and “merry” and “sweet.” They were not wrong, but they were not entirely forthcoming. I was about to learn that McGee was still haunted by his back story.

McGee’s first night was eventless—even comical. After luxuriating on the furniture and gobbling too much food, McGee trotted after me to my bedroom. Before I knew it, he burrowed into a tall pile of blankets and disappeared. There would be no movement until morning. I had to assume he was alive. For the second night, I piled the same blankets on his dog bed. McGee took the cue and buried himself there. However, this time I noticed something

I had not noticed the night before. Two little dog eyes were peering outward from between two layers of the pile. His attention was trained on my every move. That lasted all night. I knew, because I was quite an insomniac myself. We spent hours watching each other while neighborhood noises wafted through the windows and revealed the changing sounds scenes of night and dawn.

That dawn, I rose to dress for a morning walk, threw on some clothes, tied my sneakers, and prepared to brush my hair. Suddenly, the dog hidden in the pile quaked with a disturbing moan. I rushed to him. What was wrong? McGee nipped at my hand as he fell into a seizure. Was he sick? The rescue league certified health, but maybe they missed something. What was happening? At least I knew enough to step back and let a seizure subside, opening windows to help him cool off, but I sat nearby wondering frantically why McGee would bite at me without warning. I recognize something from my own experience. A random image or scent could trigger some dark memory of abuse and leave me in a panic, even though I was in the moment quite safe. It was a baffling experience, and it was exhausting, as the little dog before me seemed.

There was a problem. If I was right, and if the dog had been triggered by some scent or sound, I had no good fix to suggest. My approach had been lacking. I had no wisdom. At best I tried to avoid triggers. When an emotional shock hit, I would just soldier on, exerting mind over matter. What an embattled way to live. My stoicism was now exposed. What good would it do to tell a dog to exert intellectual might over his physical reactions?

My vet confirmed McGee was physically healthy a few hours later. He cautioned me, however, that what had been a seizure could become aggression. He suggested using a muzzle and gave me a prescription. Reasons for concern continued to accumulate. Brushes triggered seizures. Umbrellas, walking canes, and kitchen utensils did too. Even my body language could spook him. Whenever I raised my hand, McGee panicked and fled quaking into his blankets. If I reached to pet him, sometimes he recoiled. The medicine did little except leave him groggy, but I learned a groggy dog can still react. I was forced to limit introductions to my friends. A friend told me about a behaviorist who might help.

The behaviorist had an abundance of tattoos and earrings. She sat on the floor playing with McGee for a long while, and then she got right down to business with me. She instructed me to remove all possible triggers, which we would later reintroduce in increments. For now, the brush would be kept out of sight. For rainy walks, the umbrella was replaced by a camper's cape. There would be no cooking. The behaviorist explained that we had one goal: to create a sense of safety so pervasive, so dominant that McGee would decide it was the norm. We were, she said, restoring broken stability in his life.

She challenged me to become hyperaware of my movements, avoiding any action that could seem like the precursor to violence. I refrained from petting him until, each time, I had presented my hand and measured his reaction. These were awkwardly conscious changes. I had doubts. Would this make any difference? Yet, the impact was immediate. McGee had no further seizures. He never nipped at me again. He seemed back to the merry little self I had first met.

The behaviorist moved us forward. I was to choose one trigger to de-sensitize McGee. Success hinged on whether he could rely on the safety I provided. If he could, he might react with less fear to a trigger over time. It boiled down to his ability to relax into my authority in his life to keep him safe. Could I? Thinking through all my actions and signals created new habits. It felt like my frustrated struggles to unlearn the faulty lessons abuse had taught me. Freedom from a dark past takes so much conscious effort. Here I was, responsible for helping McGee be free from a past no one would ever know. As I tried to change how McGee responded to his triggers, I was also challenged to change how I responded to my own triggers as well.

The de-sensitizing progressed in tiny increments. I began in a room down the hall, letting McGee see me brush my hair from afar. He was two rooms away. I took care to stand still and not look at him. No matter how carefully I planned the first day, McGee started quaking and ran away to hide. The behaviorist encouraged me to repeat each stage until McGee did not react at all. Within a couple weeks, I was able to walk toward him with a brush in his direction. Then there was the watershed moment when I dropped the brush on the floor far from where he lay. Over time, I nudged the brush bit by bit closer to him. He tiptoed past. One night, I was reading, sunken in an easy chair in the dark living room. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched McGee trot triumphant down the staircase, wagging his tail. The brush was clenched in his mouth. He settled nearby, gnawed the handle for a while, and then abandoned it, never to pick up a hairbrush again, and never to react to one either.

Learning to de-sensitize McGee was also a turning point in my recovery. Caring for McGee taught me how conscious choices could be made to foster a sense of safety. It was a short-lived effort to create a safe space for a dog's lifetime. What was holding me back from creating a safe space for myself?

There would be no more seizures for McGee. There were rare moments when he flinched, or when he howled in his sleep. These were my cues to take time to assure him. Sometimes all McGee needed was to hear the sound of my voice or to see my hand. His body would relax. His tail wagged. Other times, I spent extra time together so he could feel my protective authority. It was quite moving to his fears soothed when he looked at me with trust. I had to ask myself why I had been holding back from letting my relationship with my own

Master have the same effect on me. My heart had recognized McGee's suffering from my experience; how could I overlook that Jesus became incarnate to experience mine? Couldn't I find safety in his hands wounded in that process? In my recovery from darkness, didn't I want to be the sheep who could recognize her Shepherd's voice?

There are stories, from historic disasters like Hurricane Katrina, of pet owners refusing to abandon their animals despite grave danger to their own lives. Many died rather than abandon the creatures whose lives depended on them. Any pet owners I know would do the same. As the media reported these inexplicable self-sacrifices, it seemed to me we could see a hint of why Jesus endured his Passion and Death so that we would not be abandoned to the disaster created in Paradise. In caring for McGee, I had already been granted a small insight into the heart of God. How much more could I be sure that God had not abandoned me, and that His son could help me walk out of the places I was hiding not unlike McGee in his pile of blankets.

McGee lived nineteen merry years with me. All my dogs have been deeply bonded with me, but none more so than McGee. Our connection gave us both a better life and gave me a turning point in my recovery from abuse. The junctures when we deepen a connection with God are seldom of our own doing. More often, they are points of misery or crisis. Half the time I have not even known exactly what I needed to be rescued from; I was praying for a single solution while focusing in one direction, but God has been busy healing my whole life. The growth God cultivates at times has felt like tumult. It can even feel like abandonment. Yet, if I got around to paying attention, I recognized the Master's hand reaching into the triggers of my life with divine protection from the cruelty of some people and the failures of others in my past. There were many options, facsimiles, and idols along the way to distract me with false promises. Yet, with prayer and growth, with grace, there comes a point when there can be no doubt which hand is the real thing. We just need to look for the hand pierced from nails, bruised from abuse, misshapen, dirty. His is a voice like no other. In God alone do we find the rescue we need.