

## DOGS -- THE LEONBERGERS

Lake Cedar in Minneapolis is in a beautiful area adjacent to the innermost western suburb. When my family lived in the Kenwood Park area, my brothers and/or friends and I used to bike there to the beach for a swim several times a summer. The route was easy to follow, past Kenwood Park, past the far side of Lake of the Isles, through rarely traveled streets that featured old, faded-elegance houses, over the railroad tracks on a very old, rickety, back road bridge, past a lot of woodsy areas, to the south end of the scenic Lake Cedar. Sometimes I would borrow my middle brother's bike (when he was off somewhere and not using it), which was a bit faster than my own smaller bike. My legs just barely reached the pedals, and it was tricky to balance since it had a major defect: if the front wheel was turned to the left a little, during steering and balance, the right pedal would collide with the fender, interrupting the progress of my right foot, and, hence, the bike itself. This was due to some previous spills (not by me) that had bent the fender (and the whole front fork), twisting things a bit askew. James was completely at home with this drawback and never ever thought about it as he cruised the streets at rather high speed, taking rises and curves with ease, but I needed some practice and constant vigilance.

These days, in current times, this wooded section has turned into a beautiful enclave of newer homes built on the hills overlooking the lake, and on the twisty streets behind them. The address was new to me, but once I checked the map, I knew how to get there, just off the road I had taken to the beach, only a block or so from the creaky bridge, now rebuilt to higher standards of safety and durability.

I was acquainted with the owner of the nice baby grand. She had occupied other residences over the previous decade or so. This new house and partner came with some new features, notably two 100-pound + giant dogs, relatives of (and resembling) the St. Bernard. They were completely docile and friendly, and as a guy who used to have Great Danes back in my early adult years, I was not taken aback by their size.

As the owner explained, this breed of dog is famous for having a great natural instinct to help people when they seem to need it, such as when someone is floundering in the water. The Leonbergers are strong swimmers, float well with all that thick fur, and they don't really need much training; it just comes to them. A swimmer, even one who doesn't need rescue, can easily be safely pulled to shore just by holding on to one of their backs. They seem to enjoy doing things for people, which makes them very helpful in a number of situations.

One task that a piano tuner must occasionally perform is maintenance of the piano's humidity control system, which on a grand hangs mostly out of sight from under the bottom of the soundboard, attached to the braces there. Replacing the cloth pads that are part of the humidifying portion of the system (a small suspended water bucket with a heating rod above the water to accelerate the evaporation of the water the pads have soaked up—all run by a control box), requires my getting down on the floor under the piano to reach up to the top of the bucket. Those pads sometimes are so encrusted with

dried scale from the water that I need to spread a sheet on the floor to catch the flying pieces.

On this occasion, while the dog owner was standing beside the piano, and I was struggling underneath, one of the Leonbergers sensed something was amiss. He had never seen a human lying on the floor under the piano before (most *people* don't even see that), and he became alarmed on my behalf; that's just his sweet, caring nature. He was unsure how to approach this dilemma, so he parked his cold, wet nose on my forehead. And kept it there. I was not in trouble, and this extra factor in my work rather slowed me down, but when I pushed his head away, he brought it right back in place. I guess he figured it must be reassuring to me to have his presence in case I needed his help getting out of there. I suppose if I were buried in the snow with just my forehead showing, it would be a great relief to have a solid savior there to mark my place for other humans to find me, and to reach up to when I needed some muscle power to leverage me out of the bank. For all I know he may have been prepared to dig me out of the snow if I had asked for it. I placed the new water cloths in position on the heating rod, and finally, in stages, extricated myself from under the piano, to the relief of my helpful friend. The owner thought it was really amusing, and explained that telling him to stop would have been very ineffectual. I thanked the beast thoroughly for his concern. Well, if I'm ever in a flood or a blizzard, I would want a Leonberger in the vicinity. They are so cheerful, friendly, practical and willing to help. Great traits for a dog to have.

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