**WARNING LABEL FOR A PUPPY**

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This morning, as I was watching my energetic, teething puppy careen around the living room, I reflected on the recent "no one knows what to expect from a Lab puppy" discussion. It occurred to me that my digital camera, which I had out in hopes that sometime she might stop careening and hold still long enough for me to snap a picture good enough to put on the web, came with approximately 50 pages of warnings - WARNING: Do not hack open this camera with an ice pick and consume the batteries and interior parts, and so on. But my dog came with no warning labels of any kind, unless you count the "live animals" sticker. (Suggested modification: Lively animal.)

 So I decided to try my hand at writing my own warning label. (WARNING: long!)

WARNING: This is a Labrador Retriever puppy. It is VERY cute. It is VERY loving. It is VERY energetic and smart. It likes you. If you feed it and pay attention to it, it will love you. And you will not be able to help loving it back, unless you are an emotional cripple with a severe psychiatric disorder.

This cute puppy is WORK. For the next TWO YEARS, you will not be able to leave it alone, out of your sight, in your home, unless you actively hate your home and its furnishings (and your dog). You will need to watch it to potty train it, then to train it not to destroy your things, then to train it not to destroy your things a second time when it starts teething, then to train it a third time when it enters adolescence. Much like humans, adolescent dogs tend to forget everything they ever learned. You will teach this animal and then teach it again. This will require patience, discipline (for yourself), consistency, and time. Most of us find that at least one of those commodities is in short supply. And that is far from the only work you will do. Much of the rest of it is menial - like lifting 50 pound sacks of dog food or washing floors covered in paw prints three times daily - and much of it is fairly disgusting - like picking up poop and removing unidentifiable, half-rotted, revolting things from your puppy's mouth.

This cute puppy is EXPENSIVE. You will pay thousands of dollars for vet bills and food for this dog. You will pay thousands of dollars for things the dog does not really need, but that you buy anyway because you love the dog - toys, treats, strange gadgets, food containers that seal in freshness, unusual toys, a supply of tennis balls sufficient to keep a tennis pro in business for ten years, books about the dog, and truly strange toys. Depending on how vigilant and lucky you are, you may also pay thousands of dollars for things the puppy destroys, plus of course the money you will have to spend replacing the clothing the puppy chews through in its first few weeks with you. If you want to be able to live with the puppy and you are not experienced with dog ownership, you will also need to invest serious amounts of money - possibly more thousands of dollars - in training it, and I am not talking about the kind of training that puts advanced titles on a dog. I am talking about the kind of training that keeps you and others from wanting to kill the dog, day in and day out. What you paid to acquire this puppy is only the beginning.

This cute puppy is EXHAUSTING. You will need to get up every three hours - and that's the outside limit - to take this puppy out. After a lengthy night of getting to sleep only to hear the puppy potty alarm go off, you will be extremely tired and dying for just an extra half-hour of sleep. Your puppy, however, will be raring to go, and will wake you up at 5:00 a.m. to let you know that. And since a tired puppy is the only good kind of puppy there is, you will need to keep the puppy exercised and occupied. It is hard to accomplish this without also tiring yourself out. And the rules do not change if you work, have children, care for an elderly invalid in your home - your puppy still needs exercise if it is to behave. So expect to come home from a wearying day at work after a night very short on sleep, make dinner, do your chores, care for your kids, and still find the time to take the puppy for a long walk, play with it, and throw balls for it to retrieve in the backyard.

This cute puppy is EMBARRASSING. This puppy does not care what other people think of you, and if you are to own it, you'd better stop caring, also. It will always behave its absolute worst in public and in training class. It will cause you to discuss, openly, freely, and with total strangers, topics that you formerly reserved for hushed talks with trained health professionals. Your puppy countermeasures and training techniques will always get a hearty laugh from the non-Lab-owning members of your family, and you may frequently be accused of treating the dog better than any human. (Proper answer: "Yes, that's true. Who wouldn't?") And if you take the puppy anywhere with you (and you'd better), be prepared to get more active disapproval and nasty comments from passersby than you got when you were a teenager and actually courted that sort of thing.

This cute puppy will CHANGE YOUR LIFE. If you have never in your adult life had a dog or a child, be prepared to become a different person. If you are a very tidy person and you take pride in your appearance, be prepared to discover that it is not the end of the world to arrive at work in a $600 suit with dog hair or paw prints on it. If you a very hygienic person and shower twice daily, be prepared to discover that you smell and feel only marginally worse - and have a bit more much-needed time - if you shower once daily. Or maybe every other day, or less. If you are a person who only enters the kitchen in search of napkins to use while eating the delivered pizza, be prepared to discover everything there is to know about your kitchen. You will be spending upwards of six hours per day in there, with the puppy, for months. If you are a person who values your social life and your friends, be prepared to limit your contact with the outside world to the occasional electronic postcard. Especially if you work, your puppy will need - and deserve - almost every spare minute you have. If you are a person who values privacy and leisure time, be prepared to discover that you have just acquired a family member who will severely limit your access to both of those for at least the next two years.

This cute puppy will grow up to be a great dog, the dog you dreamed of all these years - provided you do your part. And your part is not small, and it is not easy, and it does not pass by quickly. Dogs do not come pre-programmed for your convenience; you get out of them what you put into them. And they are not toys that you can use only when it is fun for you. All of this work is part of the commitment you make when you obtain a puppy, and although you will not always enjoy it, it is something you have to do. If you are not prepared to accept, cheerfully and without reservation, every condition outlined above, then do yourself and the puppy a favor and get a potted plant.