

## Dances with Dogs

By Casey Lomonaco, KPA CTP

I was terrified of my dog. The Saint Bernard I'd dreamed of since childhood entered my adult life as a rescued adolescent dog with myriad physical and behavioral problems. Monte's reactions to other dogs put my family as well as other community members (two and four-legged) in danger. People called him Cujo, and I felt ashamed of myself and my dog because by all appearances, they were right.

He dragged me into the middle of a busy city street after another dog. I was badly hurt, and my husband had to take the dogs home, get the van, and come back for me because I could hardly walk. I still have the scars from that event. My pain and frustration motivated me to action.

I watched the Dog Whisperer...maybe there was hope for my "red zone" dog after all. I bought a prong collar, read his book, watched episodes of his show, even went to his seminar, introduced myself and sat down to talk with him about my experiences with Monte over a glass of wine. I tried diligently to be a calm and assertive pack leader, and to make sure that I corrected Monte's "dominant" behavior to reestablish my position within the pack.

My understanding of dominance theory led me to believe that my dog's aims and my own were diametrically opposed.

I was reminded of a children’s cartoon called Pinky and the Brain. Wikipedia summarizes the show as follows, “Pinky and Brain are genetically enhanced laboratory mice...In each episode, Brain devises a new plan for the two mice ... to take over the world, which ultimately ends in failure.”

The tagline:

**Pinky:** “Gee Brain, what do you want to do tonight?”  
**The Brain:** “The same thing we do every night, Pinky—try to take over the world.”

Was my dog trying to take over the world? The canine equivalent of “The Brain?” Genetically predisposed by his canine heritage for thoughts of global takeovers? Did he really see me as a follower, he as my leader? Did he really think I was a dog?

The common thread seemed to be that both teams, Monte and I, Pinky and The Brain, were doomed for failure in every episode.

Despite my best efforts at pack leadership, his aggression intensified. I saw my friend’s skull in his mouth. I panicked. I began to consider my options. Returning him to the rescue would be a death sentence for him. My choices at that point were: take him to the vet for euthanization myself or lay that responsibility on the rescue. I felt as though I had failed Monte and that he had failed me. I would no longer walk him; I was too afraid. I recall thinking I’d gotten myself in way over my head.

If I wasn’t willing to work with him, what would make me think anyone else would be? Millions of dogs wait, die in rescues each year without the severity of issues he presented.

After some soul searching, I concluded that it would not be fair to consider the option of euthanization unless I had actually tried working with a professional trainer, as obviously, the “whispering” I had been doing was not improving the situation.

I searched and searched and found a local clicker trainer. I was skeptical a silly toy noisemaker and some treats would work for my dog. I scoffed at the cookie pushers, imagined them to be low ranking pack members, with dogs running slipshod over their human followers.

I wanted results. Relationships were, I supposed, a nice side effect, but not if they came at the expense of the all-important goal – “control” and quick results.

Despite my skepticism, this was my last hope, what did I have to lose? My trainer impressed upon me the huge responsibility and undertaking that Monte would be. His aggressive response easily placed him in the record book for the Click to Calm program. My trainer also emphasized the fact that Monte’s rehabilitation would require much hard work, patience, and dedication on my part – it would be a commitment.

Initially, I was uninspired to put forth the effort. I was already discouraged, because I really put my all into learning to be a “calm and assertive leader,” and felt like my efforts only led to dismal failure. Aside from my skepticism regarding the clicker, I continued to internalize feelings of frustration, fear, and resentment; and these feelings were reflected in the suffering training relationship I had with my dog. Instead of a strong relationship, we shared a history of bad experiences. We had no

place to go but up, if I could manage to jump these mental hurdles.

I had to stop thinking of my dog as the enemy and start focusing on the team we needed to become to increase his chances for success. The terms frustration, fear, and resentment which characterized my current perspective toward Monte were not conducive to a healthy relationship or successful training. It was an eye-opening experience indeed when I realized that the very same emotions I felt toward my dog were likely emblematic and representative of the emotions which were underlying his aggressive behavior.

I contemplated the dynamics I associate with the best of relationships – compassion, empathy, understanding, patience, support, all of which are what trainers call “mutually incompatible” with emotions like frustration, fear, and resentment.

A significant change would be necessary in order for us to progress as a team.

At first working with Monte was very forced and unnatural. I didn't do it because I wanted to but because I had to, I had an obligation to him. As Monte's behavior improved, so did our relationship.

The transformation was impressive. We developed a previously unimaginable enthusiasm for each other's company. We looked forward to our time working together. Where once I had dreaded returning home from work and taking him for a walk, our excursions into the world together became shared adventures,

opportunities to learn with and from each other, one of the best parts of every day.

I no longer regarded Monte's aggressive displays as a personal insult; those behaviors were simply his way of communicating to me his feelings and comfort level related to environmental stimuli. He was giving me all the information I needed to ensure his success and ultimately, trust.

It was exciting to engage with him in a way that was not oppositional. Removing the dominance-tinted lenses was so liberating for us and opened the door to honest, effective communication and growth. Instead of trying to outrank each other, we began dancing together.

When two individuals dance together, it is for mutual enjoyment. A good dance leader will make the act of following or "cooperating" nearly effortless for his partner. There is no dominance between the leader and the follower in a dance, there is only a joyful shared experience that both partners want to engage in. While one individual may lead the dance, both dancers immerse themselves in the experience because it is inherently pleasurable to do so. They are learning, dancing because it makes them happy to do so together, it is mutually beneficial to both.

This should be the nature and heart of successful dog training. Play both parts – leader and follower, you learn more that way. Did I teach Monte to dance, or did he teach me? I believe the answer is both. We take turns being leader and follower, student and teacher, we alternate between ebb and flow.

I began to generalize the principals of positive reinforcement to my larger worldview. Compassion, empathy, understanding, patience, and support are powerful social reinforcers and function to cement bonds in all relationships you may have, with any creature on the planet.

Those positive characteristics which define the deepest and most meaningful of bonds began to become a bigger part of my personality in all sorts of situations, expected and unexpected; transcending the defined and specific confines of training sessions into every daily interaction with my husband, cats, coworkers, family, friends, clients, checkout cashiers, fish, community members - everyone and every being I encountered. Each of them responded positively to a high rate of reinforcement, each of them wanted to dance.

I realized then how stingy I had been dispensing these powerful reinforcers previously; even to those I loved the most. The majority of these reinforcers are free, readily available, and universally appreciated...why not be more liberal with their distribution? Why was I such a Scrooge?

This revelation was so powerful for me, I changed my career. While I had always considered dogs to be some of my greatest friends, I was so moved by my clicker training experience that my hobby became my job. I am a dog trainer, but more importantly, I coach my canine and human students in the dance. Despite the fact that I am no great dancer, I consider myself a dance instructor - teaching humans and dogs to fully engage one another in training so it is pleasurable for both.

The relationship resulting from this approach speaks for itself and is a powerful reinforcer to both two and four-legged clients.

What a novel paradigm shift! In retrospect, I am impressed at how much that “silly toy noisemaker” changed my dog, my interactions with every creature I encounter, myself.

Tonight, before I go to bed, I will say to Monte, “Gee, Monte, what do you want to do tomorrow?” His response will be, as it always is, “Same thing we do every adventure, mom, try to take over the world – TOGETHER!” Unlike Pinky and The Brain, I believe we are now destined for success.

The world is our ballroom, and we intend to dance.