

Both Ends of the Leash

Beyond Words: The light and dark side of a relationship without speech

Patricia B. McConnell

A woman I'll call Jennifer told me recently that she would give a million dollars to be able to talk to her dog. "I'm sorry," she wants to say. "I'm sorry, so very, very sorry, that I believed the trainer who said I had to hit you with a stick to 'tell you who's boss' even though you hadn't done anything wrong. I didn't want to, but I did, and you looked at me like the bottom dropped out of your world and then you ran away into the woods and it took us forever to find you there, cowering under a tree. I am overwhelmed with sorrow and regret. I'll spend the rest of my life trying to make it up to you."

I got tears in my eyes as I listened to her story. She's a good person who loves her dog, and who was talked into doing something she felt was terribly wrong because of the persuasive power of words. And now she can't use words to apologize because, although we can teach dogs that the sounds we make refer to objects or actions, we can't really talk to our dogs, not the way we talk to other people. We can express joy and sorrow and fear, we can tell dogs to go get their squeaky toy or ask if they want to go on a walk, but we can't apologize and try to explain our actions. We can't tell dogs not to worry – that the radiation treatments are almost over, or that the suitcase we're packing is only for a short trip and we'll be back soon.

The truth is, there's a great cost to the lack of a mutual language between people and dogs. Think of all the things you'd like to say to your dog if you could. I'd tell two-year-old Will that I know it makes him uncomfortable when the chiropractor engulfs him in a hug and adjusts his neck – but surely it's worth it so he can play Frisbee and work sheep every day. I'd tell 15-year-old Lassie that I know her front legs hurt her and I'm sorry and I'm doing everything I can to try to make the pain go away. I'd tell



Jennifer's dog that he doesn't have to worry that she will ever hit him again; she didn't want to and she made a mistake and we humans do that sometimes even though it seems like we're omniscient because we can miraculously produce food out of nowhere and open doors as if we were magicians.

Let me ask you: What do you wish you could tell your dog? I suspect many dog lovers would say, "I love you" right off the bat, although to be honest, we'd probably add "and it drives me crazy when you..." But seriously, take a minute and write a list of things you wish you could tell your dog. You might even put it in the form of a letter. I guarantee you that it will be an interesting process.

After you've written it out, and stopped laughing or crying (or more likely, laughing and crying simultaneously), I have another question: How can your behavior around your dog make up for the lack of language between you? Because, although we can't talk to our dogs, we can communicate with them. We can tell them we love them by sitting down with them even for just a few minutes, quieting our minds and our bodies and focusing our love and our energy in their direction. That's a far cry from absently rubbing their tummy while we watch television. Using the tools of patience and positive reinforcement that any good teacher employs to help her students, we can learn how to train our dogs to run get a toy when they see another dog out the window. We can be aware that every move we make and every word we utter is interpreted in some way by our dogs, because our actions and the sounds we make are the only things our dogs have to bridge the gap between canine and human.

There's something else we can do about the lack of language between people and dogs, and that's to revel in it. In one of life's lovely ironies, the flip side of being unable to talk to dogs is, well...being unable to talk to dogs. Speech enriches our lives in innumerable ways, but it comes at a cost. We're told by experts in happiness and emotional transcendence to talk less, not more; to turn off our brains and stop the endless internal conversations we hold with ourselves day in and day out. I once spent a wordless day during a retreat that started out miserably (how incredibly awkward to eat lunch with a group of people and be unable to speak to them) and ended in a peaceful kind of joy I'd never experience before.

The connection we feel with our dogs can be like that – a connection beyond speech, born of primal emotions and a deep-seated understanding shared by two mammals living together in a cacophony of sights and sounds and smells.

This lack of language between people and dogs is like so many other things that exist on opposite sides of the same coin: We can't have night without day, we can't have heat without cold, and we can't have the peace of a nonverbal relationship with our dogs without suffering its dark side. Just remember: Through actions and emotions, you “talk” to your dog all the time. Don't forget that your dog is part of the conversation – a silent partner in a miraculous relationship between two species, forged over time, and bound together with love – an endless gift to us dog lovers, bound together with the shiny ribbon of nonverbal communication.

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