

Both Ends of the Leash

Training Daze

Even a bad example
can have a good influence

Patricia B. McConnell

He was short, only 5'4" or so, but his broad shoulders and thick arms gave an impression of size and strength. He had close-cropped, steely gray hair, and none of us in his dog-training class had any reason to doubt that he was the Marine he claimed to be.

You've never heard of him, but he had as much impact on my life and career as anyone I've ever met.

I encountered him (I'll call him Mark) in 1969, when he stood in the middle of a circle of people and dogs that included me and my adolescent Saint Bernard. This was back when comedian Bill Cosby was young and edgy and the ultimate in cool. And cool my husband and I wanted to be. So cool that, instead of buying silver tableware, we turned my aunt's wedding-present money into a St. Bernard puppy and named him Cosby, oblivious to her thoughts on the matter.

Cosby arrived as a 15-pound, seven-week-old pup, and proceeded to barrel through our lives and hearts like a miniature Mack truck. At 10 weeks, he crawled up onto a table and ate our chocolate wedding cake while I was getting married in a bright gold dress to the strains of "Wear Your Love Like Heaven" and my father's conservative banker friends were rolling their eyes and downing their drinks in shock.

Cosby grew fast, and in short order, we had 100 pounds of furry adolescence on our hands. Determined to be responsible – at least, my 19-year-old version of it – I insisted that we enroll our new dog in a training class. (It is unclear how responsible it was for two impoverished people to get a Saint Bernard in southern California, but that was then – my only excuse.) At the time, training classes were all called "obedience" classes, and were far less common than they are now. It took some digging,



but I found an advertisement that looked good, checked out the references at my vet clinic and signed up my by-then seven-month-old Saint Bernard.

Class was held in a parking lot, and Mark told all the participants to stand in a circle and listen up. He talked to us briefly about the importance of being "alpha," of insisting that our dogs respect us and do what we say, just because we say it. I remember nodding my head in agreement. Surely he was right, this authoritative man who wowed us all with a demonstration of his precisely obedient German Shepherd.

He showed us how to put on a "choke collar" (his words), and how to pop the leash quickly and firmly right after saying "Sit." He cautioned us to use a strong, authoritative voice, lest our dogs think us weaklings who shouldn't be respected. A Golden Retriever was brought from the circle for illustration. "Sit!" shouted Mark, as he jerked up on the leash. She sat, her face befuddled but friendly.

We were then charged as a group to try it ourselves. I had already taught Cosby to sit when asked, but I piped out the word with vigor. It was a much less commanding version than the trainer's, but it was my best attempt at saying "Sit!" with authority. Cosby sat, although slowly. His response was good enough for me, but I threw worried glances toward Mark, afraid he'd see my dog's reaction as some sort of canine passive resistance and insist that I pop the leash.

Cosby and I were spared, but not the Basenji and his 20-something owner. It seemed the Basenji hadn't

gotten the memo and was ignoring both verbal and physical commands. Congo, I'll call him, was too busy checking out a dainty Miniature Poodle across the circle. Mark watched with concern, and then brought Congo into the center of the ring to show us how it was done.

“Sit!” he bellowed, and snapped the leash so hard the Congo's front feet left the ground. Instead of sitting Congo planted his feet more firmly and looked directly into Mark's eyes. If I'd known then what I know now, I would've seen the hard, cold look in Congo's eyes and not been so surprised when he lunged at Mark right after he was leash-popped again. To a person, everyone in the circle gasped.

Mark raised his arm, lifting all four of Congo's feet off the ground. The dog had on a “training” collar, the kind that tightens without stopping until it simply can't tighten anymore. What happened next was a bit of a blur. I remember Mark yelling, and I remember Congo yowling and screaming and somehow climbing up the leash, almost managing to sink his teeth into the trainer's arm.

And then, in an image imprinted on my brain like a lithograph, Cosby let out a whimper and turned 180 degrees away from the drama in the center of the ring. He lay down, placing his huge, sappy head flat on the dirty asphalt. Meanwhile, I remained motionless, frozen by the scene unfolding in front of me. The Basenji was still hanging in midair. He was running out of oxygen, turning blue in the lips, but still screaming and frothing at the mouth. By now Mark looked equally desperate, angry and out of control – eyes wild and spittle flying from his mouth as he continued to yell.

I took one look at Cosby, saw the wisdom in his choice, and walked away, shaking; I shook until I got home. I called Mark the next day and asked for my money back. I never got it, but here's what I did get: an invaluable lesson in how never to train a dog. That day was a perfect illustration of everything that is wrong with compulsion training. It only works some of the time, and when it doesn't, people and animals can get hurt. It forces animals to be defensive, and it creates defensive aggression in many of them. It never tells the animal what we want him to do, but rather, waits to punish him for not doing it. It teaches an animal not to think for himself, but to avoid doing anything until told, and to

be afraid of trying out something new. Most importantly, it destroys the relationship we should be striving for with our best friends. Friends don't try to strangle each other, and they don't punch each other in the face when they don't cooperate.

After leaving the class, I did my best to train Cosby on my own. He wasn't the best of dogs, but he wasn't the worst either. Years after Cosby died, I saw Ian Dunbar talk about “Lure/Reward” training and champion the effectiveness and benevolence of positive reinforcement. I didn't have a dog of my own then; I was studying communication between handlers and working animals for my graduate research, and had attended his seminar to add to my data. I expected to get information that I could use for my research, but I didn't expect the weekend to solidify and expand my understanding of what a relationship between a person and a dog could be. As I watched Dunbar teaching happy and exuberant puppies to sit and lie down, I replayed the scene of Mark and the Basenji over and over again in my mind.

I began to watch the handlers I was working with (over a hundred of them, from race-horse jockeys to drug-dog trainers) and noticed how cheerful and encouraging some were, and how others were loud and forceful. I observed how quickly the animals learned when they were trained with positive methods, and how consistently they responded. I saw how many dogs and horses looked nervous and afraid around their trainers, and how the anger in the trainer's voices overwhelmed everything else.

Although I never would have predicted it, those lessons led to a life dedicated to improving relationships between people and animals. It's a life that owes a tremendous debt to all the special people who have taught me so much about animal behavior, from Ian Dunbar and my major professor, Jeffrey Baylis, to many of the people highlighted in this issue. But most of all, this is a column for Mark, whoever and wherever he is, because it was he who burned into my soul the dark side of our relationship with dogs and, irony of ironies, made the bright side so much sweeter.

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