

Both Ends of the Leash

Caution

Your dog is watching.

Patricia B. McConnell

It was twilight, and so it was hard to tell exactly what the two dark lumps on the road were. Cruising at 70 miles an hour on the Interstate, tucked between a station wagon and a semi, I was contently driving home from a herding dog trial. But as the black shapes got closer, my state of serenity shifted. They were dogs. Live dogs, at least for the moment. Straight out of a Walt Disney movie, an old Golden Retriever and an adolescent Heeler cross were trotting in and out of the highway, oblivious to the danger. Years ago I had watched a dog hit head-on by a car. I'd give a lot to get the image out of my head. It seemed inevitable that it was going to happen again.

I pulled off the road and parked behind another truck. Friends from the trial who were driving ahead of me had also seen the dogs. We exchanged terrified looks and ran back toward the dogs on our bank of the stream of traffic, dogs across the lanes as if across a flooding river. They looked friendly, used to people, perhaps even happy to see something with legs instead of tires. Traffic was moving fast across all four lanes. Visibility was poor. The traffic noise was deafening, there was no way the dogs could have heard us speak to them. At just the wrong time, the dogs started ambling across the road to us. We threw out our arms and ran forward to stop them. They stopped, a microsecond before a Miller Beer truck would have hit them. For a moment we stood there frozen, terrified. The responsibility of doing just the right thing, of somehow interfering in a way that saved their lives rather than ensuring their deaths, weighed like a stone in our bellies.

We “called” to them at a break in the traffic, bending over in a play bow and turning our bodies away to encourage them to come to us. Then we would turn and stop them like traffic cops when the traffic in the next lane loomed over the hill, coming so fast I was sure they'd be killed. This silent dance of life and



death continued, our bodies turning back and forth, our only means of communicating through the noise of the traffic. It all seemed to happen at the speed of light, the dogs oblivious to the danger, moving forward toward us, then stopping, then backing up as we moved our own bodies to thread them through the traffic.

But that, plus a lot of good luck, was enough. Just by shifting forward with our arms out we could stop the dogs, and by shifting backward and turning away we could get them to move toward us. No leash, no collars, no control but the effect of our bodies, communicating “come” and “stop” with just the turn of a torso. I still don't understand quite how they made it. But they did. I will forever be grateful for the responsiveness of a dog to the right visual signals.

All dogs are brilliant at perceiving the slightest movement that we make, and they assume that each tiny motion has meaning. So do we humans, if you think about it. Remember that minuscule turn of the head that caught your attention when you were dating? Think about how little someone's lips have to move to change their sweet smile into a smirk. How far does an eyebrow have to rise to change the message we read from the face it's on? One-tenth of an inch? The impact of tiny movements is equally powerful in sports. We all know that minute changes in your body's position can mean the difference between an ace or a double fault in tennis, a birdie or shanking the ball into the woods in golf. But we don't automatically generalize this common knowledge to our interactions with dogs. For the life of me, I don't know why not.

But we don't. We are often oblivious of how we're moving around our dogs. It seems to be very human to not know what we're doing with our body, unconscious of where our hands are or that we just tilted our head.

Good animal trainers become good partly because they learn an awareness of how they're moving their body while they're interacting with their animal. Until dog lovers learn this, we radiate random signals like some crazed semaphore flag while our dogs watch in confusion, their eyes rolling around in circles like cartoon dogs. I swear there are times that I can almost see smoke coming out of dogs' ears, from the strain of trying to process multiple movements from their oblivious owners. Because whether we humans are aware of our bodies or not, our dogs are tuned to us like lasers. You're "talking" to your dog with your body whether you know it or not – better be careful what you're saying. Standing straight with your shoulders squared rather than slumped can make the difference in whether your dog sits or not. Shifting your weight forward or backward less than a half an inch can lure a frightened dog toward you or chase her away. Whether you breathe regularly or hold your breath can prevent a dog fight, or cause one. I saw about ten serious aggression cases every week for 12 years, and I learned early on that a tiny movement can change a charging Cujo into a sweetheart. Or it can get me bitten.

You might recall that I'm the woman whose Ph.D. research was on how certain sounds have inherent effects on the animals who hear them. I was primed to focus on acoustics when I moved from research to applied ethology. And all my practical hands-on work has supported what I learned: if you learn to use sound correctly you can radically improve your ability to communicate with your dog. But still, primed to listen as I was, one of the first things that hit me when I started professionally training dogs and their humans was how the humans listened to the sounds that they made to their dogs, while the dogs appeared to respond preferentially to visual signals. This observation became so compelling that two undergraduate students, Susan Murray and Jon Hensersky, and I did an experiment to see if dogs paid more attention to sound or vision when learning a simple exercise. The students taught six-and-on-half-week old puppies (four each from a litter of

Beagles, Cavalier King Charles Spaniels, Border Collies, Australian Shepherds, Miniature Schnauzers and Dalmatians) to "sit" to both a sound and a motion. The pups heard a soft "beep" (replicating a spoken "sit" signal, but more consistent than if we had used our voices), which came from a tiny watch held inside the trainer's hand. Simultaneously the pups saw the trainer's same hand rise in an upward sweep above the pup's head. We wanted to replicate typical training, in which most people give both a sound signal and a visual one.

Each pup got four days of training to both signals given together, but on the fifth day the trainer only presented one signal at a time. In a randomized order, the pup either saw the trainer's hand move, or heard the beep-like sit signal. We wanted to see whether one type of signal, acoustic or visual, resulted in more correct responses. And it did. Twenty-three of the 24 puppies performed better to the hand motion than to the sound, while one puppy sat equally well to either. The Border Collies and Aussies, as you might predict, were stars at visual signals, getting 27 right out of 40 possible (and only 6 out of 40 right to acoustic signals). The Dalmatian litter sat to 16 of 20 visual signals, but only 4 of the acoustic ones. The Cavalier King Charles Spaniels showed the smallest difference between visual and acoustic signals, with 18 right of 20 possible visual signals and 10 of 20 acoustic ones. Those of you with Beagles or Miniature Schnauzers will not be shocked to learn that these puppies sat, in total, for 32 of the 40 times that they saw the "sit" visual signal, and exactly zero of the 40 times that they heard the acoustic signal. That'll teach you to call your Beagle to come when she's chasing a rabbit in the woods.

I'm playing fast and loose with numbers here, because one litter can't possibly represent an entire breed. But the results are statistically significant when you look at the pups as individuals, and they complement the experience of dog trainers everywhere: while you're chatting, your dog is watching.

This difference in focus leads to a multitude of miscommunications. First of all, as I've mentioned, many of us are downright dense about the visual signals that we send to our dogs. Even if you're a professional trainer, there are probably several that

you give to your dog without even being aware of it. One of my favorite exercises is to go mute for a few hours and communicate with my dogs exclusively with my body. If you're as verbal as I am, this may require duct tape. Who knows how your dogs will respond, but I'll guess that a lot of them will be downright grateful. Of course, your dog will be more obedient if you've consciously trained with visual signals, but what matters is that *you'll* learn something. I discovered that I tend to cock my head after all my dogs came running to me. Usually I am thinking about what I'll ask them to do next. Apparently, it's usually "Sit," because that's what they do when I cock my head on purpose. Once I realized it, I could cock my head in the middle of a jumble of other signals, and plop, every doggy butt hit the ground. Funny that our dogs have known these gestures all along. As Brian Kilcommons, a noted dog trainer said once, "What else do they have to do all day long but watch you?" The ultimate in co-dependents, dogs have every reason to watch us obsessively. After all, their very lives depend on it. Besides, they're dogs, and that's what dogs do.

But even when we talkative primates are aware of what we're doing with our body, we're watching through a primate filter while they're tuned to the canine channel. This leads to no small number of translation troubles. Imagine that you see someone walking toward you with a smiling face and an outstretched hand. They're looking deep into your eyes. How polite. How engaging. As you get close enough to touch, you might reach out your hand to shake theirs, or wrap both arms around their neck and chest in a warm hug. Perhaps you move your face directly to theirs and kiss their cheek. The ultimate in friendliness is to look deep into their eyes, and kiss them directly on the mouth. Ummmmm. We all want someone that we feel so good about that we greet them like that, don't we? Not if you're a dog you don't. That oh-so-polite primate approach is appallingly rude in canine society. You might as well urinate on a dog's head. Of course many dogs learn to tolerate and maybe even enjoy hugs, but they don't come hard-wired to love them.

There are several signals that turn human greetings into a bad day for a dog. Besides the threat of direct eye contact and the appalling social gaffe of an outstretched paw, whatever must they think of us leaning in toward them? Even the slightest shift

forward is meaningful to a dog. So is a barely perceptible lean backwards. When dogs jump up on us, we humans tend to pull away, just as you would to avoid that unwelcome hug from the guy with gold chains in the bar. But in dog language, your "withdrawal" really means "come forward." While you're speaking NO your body is yelling YES. Surely that's one of the reasons that our dogs continue to jump up on us. Dogs stop other dogs with "body blocks," moving forward toward them and taking ownership of the space before the other dog can. When I want to block a leaping dog, I'm careful to avoid leaning or stepping back. Rather, I ensure that my torso (the relevant body part) moves forward, into the dog. Move forward, most dogs stop; move back, they approach closer. We humans do it in reverse. Would you try to squelch that guy at the bar by moving closer to him? I don't think so. Move forward to a friendly human and they mirror your motion. Back away and (if you're lucky) they cease and desist.

So we need to do more than become aware of our body and how we move it. We need to be aware of how dogs interpret it. And we need to never forget that if a signal is relevant, it only takes the slightest hint of it to have a powerful effect. We share that with dogs, this responsiveness to meaningful movements, and it's both a blessing and a curse in our relationship with them.

It was a blessing that dim evening on the highway. After the dogs successfully made it across the lanes of traffic, we held on to their collars like vise grips, laughing and crying in adrenaline-charged relief. I used my car phone to call the vet clinic number on their tags. The country vet, driving back on the same highway from a dairy herd crisis, drove up in less than ten minutes. The dogs were back home within the hour. Seems the young Heeler cross had seduced the elderly Golden into no-man's land. I called the owner the next day. We both cried, grieving over what might have happened, overjoyed with what really did.

The dogs are alive because we were lucky, because the goddess of dog love was looking over us and because we knew how to talk to them with our bodies. Pay attention to yours. Your dog is.

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