

Both Ends of the Leash

Tales of Two Species Bridging the Communication Gap

Patricia B. McConnell

The Bark is delighted to introduce a new feature by world renowned animal behaviorist and ethologist, Patricia McConnell, Ph.D. She is the author of several books on dog behavior and training, Assistant Adjunct Professor in Zoology at the University of Wisconsin, co-host of the nationally syndicated Wisconsin Public Radio's "Calling All Pets," and star advisor on Petline, that airs on the Animal Planet. She is currently working on a new book, *The Other End of the Leash*.

In *The Bark* she will share her expertise on how dogs think, communicate and learn while focusing on human behavior as it compares to that of dogs.

Welcome to *The Bark*, Trisha!

It was springtime, and Tulip was entranced. Every ounce of her hundred pounds was quivering over the dead squirrel, drinking in the smells rising from one of nature's recycling projects. Drowning in a pool of scent, Tulip must have heard me calling her to come, because she turned her head ever so briefly in my direction, and then returned to what was more important in life—attaching some of this marvelous odor to her own long, white coat. Tulip treasures a good roll in a decaying animal, much like I cherish a long soak in a lavender bubble bath. How many times have I watched her, sprawled in languorous joy on her back, an expansive grin on her face, grinding the essence of dead squirrel (or cow pie, or dead fish or fox poop) into her fur?

"Tulip," I yelled again, stepping closer to her now. This time not an ear twitched. She showed no acknowledgement of my existence. My call was louder this time, because now I was getting mad, irritated at standing in the pouring rain, at being late, at the inevitable result of my huge, soggy Great Pyrenees blowing me off. In about an hour, I was expecting company for an elaborate dinner party. It



looked like we'd be accompanied by a huge, wet dog who smelled like old death. But she didn't roll in the squishy mess under her, because I came to my senses and stopped being just a human and started being an animal trainer. "No," I said, this time quietly, but with a pitch as low as the ground. Tulip stopped her sniffing and turned her huge, square head to look straight at me. "Tulip, come!" the "come" came out like a cheery greeting to a neighbor you'd ask over for coffee. With a brief look at the treasurer below her, Tulip turned like a dancer and ran to me. I responded with a chase to the house, and let my poor, long-suffering floors get muddy yet one more time, while we tore to the refrigerator for Tulip's favorite cheese.

Tulip had done exactly what I had asked from the beginning. "Tulip," I had said at first, meaning "come," but simply saying her name and expecting her, human that I am, to read my mind about what I wanted her to do. She had acknowledged my presence politely, expressed some doggy version of "Hi Trisha, look what I found! It's a dead squirrel and IT HAS MAGGOTS IN IT!" and returned to what she'd been doing when I interrupted her. (Ever said, "Just a minute! when someone called your name?") My saying her name again had given her no information than before. But when I clearly communicated what I wanted, she did exactly what I asked. Tulip has learned that "no" means: "Don't do what you're doing"; and "Tulip, come" means: "I want you to stop what you're doing and come here right now." She did, as soon as I got my act together and told her what I wanted. I'm a professional dog trainer. My Ph.D. dissertation was on the acoustic communication between professional animal

handlers and their working animals. You'd think I'd have this down by now. But there's a catch. I'm human.

Dog training is not just about dogs. It's also about humans. Most professional dog trainers spend more of their time training dog owners than they do dogs. Hang around after dog training class one night and listen to the instructors. You'll hear about that sweet little English Cocker and that dubious Labrador cross, but mostly you'll hear about Bob, Martha and Elizabeth. I won't belabor what gets said about Bob, Martha and Elizabeth—professional courtesy and all; let's just say that it can be a tad frustrating training people to train their dogs. Beyond the statement, "Most dogs have four paws," there's only one thing I can imagine a larger group of dog trainers agreeing on: Humans are harder to train than dogs.

Why might that be? Our tendency to repeat ourselves nonsensically, to get loud for no reason and to have little awareness of our body language doesn't help our dogs understand us, but we seem to keep doing it anyway. Perhaps you agree with my friend who in answer to my question of why we behave the way we do said: "Give it up, Trisha, we're just idiots." That's one answer, with its own panache of compelling simplicity. But I like humans. I like humans as much as I like dogs. We can be brilliant, generous, joyful and endlessly amusing. But we are not blank slates who come to dog training without baggage. We are animals too, and our biological suitcases can't be left behind at the train station. Both dogs and dog lovers have been shaped by our separate evolutionary backgrounds, and what each of us brings to the relationship starts with our evolutionary heritage. Although our similarities create a bond that's remarkable, we are each speaking our own native "language." A lot gets lost in the translation. Just as we've learned a great deal about dogs from studying their progenitors, the wolves, we have much to gain by looking at ourselves as the touchy, playful and drama-loving primates that we are.

Look at what I originally communicated to Tulip: First, I said her name and she responded exactly as you might if someone said your name right now while you're busy reading this column. A brief look up, perhaps a quick comment ("Just a minute, I'm almost done reading this..."). Who knows what

Tulip "said" in dog signals to me when she returned her attention to the more interesting alternative. Tulip didn't do anything wrong. Her response was socially quite reasonable. But we dog owners consistently say our dogs' names as a substitute for what we want them to do, assuming then that they can read our minds about what we really want. We don't just do this with our dogs—ask my marriage counselor how good most couples are at telling each other what they want. Just like dogs tend to chew and are mouthy as puppies, we humans tend to say a dog's name instead of telling our dog what we want.

Add on our very primate-like tendency to repeat ourselves, and it's a miracle that dogs put up with us at all. Every dog training book advises us never to repeat a command, and every dog owner does it, no matter how good a trainer she is. Great trainers just do it less often. We shouldn't be surprised—listen to a troop of chimpanzees and you'll hear a string of notes that sound like: "Who." "Who Who." "Who Who WHO WHO WHO." When many species of animals get aroused, they start to repeat the same note over and over again, and we are no exception.

But saying it again isn't enough. Research in linguistics found that when talking to someone who doesn't understand what we say, we humans tend to repeat exactly what we said the first time, but louder. Not surprisingly, an undergraduate student, Susan Murray, and I found that humans do the same things to dogs. A "sit" command that's ignored by the dog results in "sit" said again, but louder. We behave as if amplitude itself could somehow create the energy we need to stimulate our dog to do something. Is there anyone in the world who hasn't, just once, yelled at his dog to "SHUT UP"? The irony of this usually escapes us during the heat of the moment: Barking is contagious, and all rational thought suggests that yelling loudly at your dog will be perceived as you joining in. Our poor dogs must think we're maniacs when we get mad at them for not getting quiet when we get loud. But we do it anyway, because that's what agitated primates do: They get loud.

This tendency to get louder seems to be an integral part of our primate heritage, where an ability to make a racket can move you up the social scale faster than buying a BMW. Unlike dogs, one of the ways chimps get status in the troop is to make more noise

than their competitors. But who's the dog with the most authority? It's not the dog who's barking and lunging that impresses me with his confidence, it's the one who gets still and silent. Whatever must dogs think of us trying to get control by doing a canine version of losing it? The difficulty in teaching people to stop shouting and learn other ways of getting their dogs' attention has good trainers shaking their heads in one collective sigh of frustration.

But the way we use sound isn't the only challenge we have in communicating with another species. Primate that I am, when I wanted Tulip to come closer, I moved toward her. This is a lovely thing to do to another primate: Moving forward a step or two, perhaps with your hand outstretched, is a friendly, non-threatening way of signaling good intentions. But to a canid? All trainers know that a direct, face-on approach is simply not done in doggy etiquette. Striding forward, head-on, with a paw outstretched? The Miss Manners of dogdom would be appalled. So in primate speak my body said, "Hi! I'd like to make closer social contact with you." In dog speak, it said, "Stop! Don't proceed forward!"

When I switched from "distracted-human-thinking-about-her-dinner-party" to "dog trainer," it was trivial to get Tulip to do what I had asked. I told her to stop doing what she was doing, and then clearly let her know what I did want her to go. Besides saying the word I'd taught her, I also said "come" in dog language by turning AWAY from her and moving in the direction that I wanted her to do. (Listen to any top agility instructor or good herding dog trainer coach: "Where are you're feet?" they all say. They know that your dog wants to go the way your feet are pointed, while primates that we are, we foolishly point with our paws.) So while I said "come" in a friendly rather than threatening voice, I leaned slightly forward in a canine play bow, turned my body away from Tulip and started moving away from her as I clapped my hands. Irresistible? Well it was that night to Tulip, but if it hadn't worked, I would have stopped calling, gone over to her with something smelly and wonderful (most dog trainers can be identified by the presence of strange odors rising from their pockets) and lured her way by waving it in front of her nose. "Come," and "good girl," I'd have purred as she followed my stinky treat, only giving it to her once she'd left the squirrel and followed me for several yards. Calling "come" and

then running away from a dog as both incentive and reinforcement can lead to some pretty impressive recalls. My advanced class just succeeded in calling their dogs away from running sheep, sheep poop (oh so edible!) and other dogs getting liver snacks. The dogs had ball. The humans got a workout. We all smiled like fools.

A good recall is just one example of what distinguishes professional dog trainers from dog owners; another is the ability to stop doing what's natural to our species, and start doing what dogs can understand. We can train our dogs to understand a multitude of signals that we give them, but why not help them out by learning how our own natural communication system differs from theirs? International business travelers take seminars to learn how their body language, tonality and American customs are interpreted in other countries. Doesn't it make sense to do that with an entirely different species? So remember that "training your dog" isn't just about your dog. And just as any enlightened dog trainer is generous and forgiving while her dog is learning new things, perhaps it also makes sense to give yourself a break when you find yourself being human. After all, most people who love dogs love lots of animal species, and we're animals too. The next time you catch yourself assuming that your dog can read your mind, repeating a command like an aroused chimp or stopping your dog from coming over to you when you call to come, just imagine you're watching a nature special on TV about an interesting species--you. After all, dogs seem to like us as much as we like them. I have the utmost respect for their opinion.

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