

LOOK AT ME

By Laurel Saville



I HAVE A BORDER COLLIE. WHICH MEANS I HAVE A DOG especially alert to motion of any kind. My Border Collie, Ainsley, is one of those who sometimes—well, okay, frequently—has rather explosive reactions to the motion of trucks, dogs, bikers and squirrels, to mention just a few. Which means I also need to be Border Collie-alert to motion so I can coach her on more, shall we say, appropriate responses.

Fortunately, I have a lovely path just outside my front door that wends between a river and canal, and curves in such a way that I can see almost anything coming or going for about half a mile in either direction. Even better, it's traveled just enough to give us opportunities to practice self-control, but not so much that we can't relax and enjoy our walk.

It is not unusual to see fishermen along this path. While they don't move much, they do wave their poles back and

forth, an activity that can easily set off my dog. One day, as we walked, I saw a man on the bank of the canal about a quarter-mile ahead. I let Ainsley continue sniffing and scampering at the end of her 30-foot lead, worked on controlling my own breathing and, as we got closer, called her cheerfully to my side. Taking up the slack in the leash, I got a treat in hand, and together, we walked calmly by the man with the freaky stick.

This activity may seem absurdly straightforward to most dog owners, but it is actually hard-won for me and Ainsley. She is a rescue with a mostly unknown past, found wandering the woods, living under the porch of an abandoned hunting camp, gimpy from a broken leg that was never set and healed crooked, pregnant, full of bird shot, and blind in one eye. She is, true to her breed and in spite of her rough start, sweet, smart and trainable. She was, unlike her breed, very

low-energy and cautious. Or so I thought. It turns out she was mostly just deeply inhibited.

After a couple of years, as she became healthier, happier and more confident, she also became much more reactive. With a lot of help, advice, reading, consistent counterconditioning work and her ability to forgive my many mistakes, we found ways to manage this behavior. We never leave the house without a pocketful of treats. I taught her tricks to use as playful distractions. We work diligently at recalls. She is no longer an off-leash dog.

But one of the most fundamental building blocks of training remained elusive. As anyone who has dogs knows, you can't teach them much until you teach them to pay attention to you. As anyone who has tried to manage reactivity knows, teaching a dog to make direct eye contact is the first step to effective counterconditioning. Ainsley is indeed very focused on me. However, she somehow learned shake, spin, down, come, leave it, enough, high-five, wait and so much more while simultaneously avoiding direct eye contact. She'd look at my face, but not into my eyes. If I insisted, she'd turn her muzzle askance and squint at me, blinking uncomfortably. I know that direct eye contact, while intimate among humans, is confrontational among dogs, so I accepted her oblique gaze.

For a long time, Ainsley also did not know how to play—with me, with a toy, with a rawhide or with another dog—so it was clear that she had missed some pretty fundamental experiences. But slowly, over the course of several years, she has become engaged and responsive. Less hypervigilant. Goofy even. And from time to time, instead of looking at my

eyebrows or cheekbones or chin, she will look steadily into my eyes. For a few moments, at least.

So having her trot at my side, glancing up at me, relaxed and unconcerned about the strange man with the weird appendage, was a not insignificant victory. In fact, I was so relieved and proud that I immediately let the leash unloop in my hand and told her to “go play,” which she happily did, sniffing along both sides of the trail as it took a sharp turn around an outcropping of rock. I rounded the bend behind her and saw a big blue bucket, net and tool bag lying in the grass just ahead. Ainsley was already there, nose to the ground. I quickly called “leave it” and began to take up the slack in the leash. But I was too late. By the time I'd crossed the distance from my end of the leash to hers, she'd found a pole hidden in the grass. Both her lip and tongue were pierced with two separate, four-barbed hooks.

The look on her face was confusion more than pain. The look on mine must have been much worse. I held her jaw and spoke every comforting word I could think of as I tried to figure out how to keep her from getting more entangled. Fortunately, the barb in her lip came free. But the one in her tongue was completely set. I took hold of the hook, attached to 45 pounds of dog through a millimeter of skin, and tried to shove the miniature torture device back through the small hole it had made in the edge of her tongue. She squirmed and danced. Now her four and my two legs were also getting entangled in 30 feet of bright pink leash and several feet of invisible fishing line.

I said “easy, easy, easy,” my usual cue for getting her to slow

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her gait, and “wait, wait, wait,” my cue for getting her to stop moving, and blinked away the hot tears of fear. I tried fighting the hook without fighting my dog, but her tongue slipped in and out of my trembling fingers and the barbs pricked me instead of her. I tugged and pushed and twisted; the hook would not budge. I yelled for help. The fisherman was too far away and out of view. Blood, hers and mine, dripped off my fingertips.

I couldn't back out the lure, so I had to snip it. With my free hand, I fumbled in the tool bag, looking for wire cutters—didn't fishermen always have a pair for just this sort of eventuality? No luck. The only tool I could find was a knife. She'd recovered from so many much worse injuries in her life, I told myself she'd easily recover from a tiny slice in her tongue. I unsheathed the knife, set it against the hook, and pushed hard and fast into that sliver of flesh that held her. Suddenly, she was free.

She trotted off, shaking her head and spraying drops of blood into the landscape. I reordered the fisherman's gear and tried to regulate my shallow breathing and pounding heart. Slowly, my panic was replaced with gratitude for Ainsley's calmness during our little ordeal. She is, fortunately, a naturally sensible dog. But what struck me was that she had struggled against the hook, but not against me. She had listened. She had let me help her.

I watched her return immediately to sniffing for feral cats and rabbit poop, and I was reminded, again, why it is so profoundly important that we train our dogs. Yes, we train because tricks are fun to show off to family members. Because

a dog who doesn't void in the house or jump on guests is easier to live with. But even more important, we train them to wait at an open door and walk on a leash to keep them safe. Dogs are, in many ways, human creations. We have domesticated them to live with us. And in doing so, we have brought them into immediate contact with things they might more naturally avoid: roads, cars, toddlers, garbage cans, toxic substances and so much more. We've bred them to be our best friends; training is the most essential thing we can do to be *their* best friends.

This small yet very stressful incident with the fishing hooks could have been much worse. Part of the reason it wasn't is because of all the painstaking, frequently embarrassing and often frustrating but ultimately rewarding work I put into my relationship with Ainsley. I showed her what to do with a stuffed toy that squeaks when she bites on it, a dried-up piece of cowhide, a regal cat who refuses to be herded, a big white truck barreling towards us.

In the process, I suddenly realized, I was also showing her what to do with *me*. She learned I was good not only for putting kibble in a bowl and a leash around her neck, but also for introducing her to agility obstacles, playing “get it” games, removing snowballs from her paws and helping her sort through what to do about the strange things that pop up out of the landscape on our walks. This day, on this walk, she let me help her sort through a fishy, thorny problem with her tongue. More than teaching Ainsley to look *at* me, I realized I had finally, and much more importantly, taught her to look *to* me. **B**

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