

# Waking Up from My Dream Dog

*Sometimes, what you get is better than what you wished for*

By Laurel Saville



I DIDN'T WANT A BORDER COLLIE. IN FACT, I WASN'T convinced that I wanted a dog of any kind. I'd had two wonderful Australian Shepherds who filled my days with all the joys of walking, working and playing with them. Not to mention with the worries and frustrations of their injuries and misbehaviors. Once they were gone, I was ready to try a dog-free life.

Or so I thought.

Instead, every morning I woke up with a profound sense of loss. I didn't know how to take a walk without a four-legged companion. My hands kept reaching for an absent furry head and damp nose. My husband said I seemed lost. But I resisted. Because I didn't want just another dog; I wanted a certain *kind* of dog: one with all the benefits of a herder (intelligence, connection, focus, trainability) and none of the drawbacks (intensity, hyperactivity, aggression).

I fostered a few candidates. This one was too dim, that one,

too unpredictable. Then I saw an adorable Border Collie mix on a rescue site and wondered if she might be the one. I wrote a candid letter saying that I honestly didn't think the dog I wanted existed. The woman at the rescue group said the dog pictured didn't fit my ideal, but sometimes—rarely—the type I described did appear. She said I would have to be patient.

But, as it turned out, not for very long. Soon enough, she called and asked me to come see and, she hoped, foster a dog who had been found living under the porch of an abandoned hunting camp; the dog was floundering in rescue, overwhelmed by the general Border Collie insanity that surrounded her.

It was a fairy-tale meeting. She threw herself directly into my husband's lap. Though she was gimpy from what we later discovered was a broken leg that had healed without being set, half-blind and full of birdshot, she was also sweet, self-contained, thoughtful, calm, smart. It took 48 hours

for fostering to turn into adopting. We named her Ainsley, Scottish for a hermitage in the woods.

She had perfect off-leash manners, was obedient but not obsequious, enjoyed learning new things and was deferential to our cat and other dogs we met on walks. She learned the great pleasures of rawhides, bones and toys, and that getting towed off was perfect compensation for a walk in the rain. When unleashed, she returned to our front doorstep like a homing pigeon.

Well, at least for the first couple of years. Then she started the “Sorry I disappeared into the woods while you cried and called for me, but the chipmunks needed organizing” stuff. Along with “Other dogs are evil and must be chased away” and “Cars, trains, joggers, bikers and any other moving object must be pursued.” At first, I was kind of, sort of, pleased with her newfound confidence, thinking that this behavior was the result of delayed-onset adolescence and would soon fade away. But as her self-assertiveness turned into explosive moving object/dog aggression, I became confused, embarrassed, flummoxed and overwhelmed. Where had my Border Collie Lite gone? And who was this snarling, barking creature lunging at the end of my leash?

Even more important, what was I to do?

I spent hours reading articles and books and watching videos on aggression. I worked with trainers and behaviorists who prescribed everything from hard corrections with prong collars or tying her to a post and walking away to operant- and counterconditioning combined with a head collar and clicker training. I contacted the rescue group and begged for insight and advice. I took her to the vet for a blood workup and complete physical. I changed my walk schedule and locations to avoid other living or moving things. In my darkest hours, I even considered returning her to rescue, as though she were a piece of merchandise that had not performed as advertised. I lost my temper, I cried, I wrung my hands. I looked into my dog’s eyes and asked what was wrong.

Eventually, I realized the truth: nothing was wrong. Ainsley was just being a whole lot more of Ainsley. As one trainer explained, after months or even years, some rescue dogs come out of depression or repression and “blossom.” As my husband more succinctly said, “She’s just being a dog.” And Ainsley’s behavior told me, “I’m having a blast.” She was still sweet and soft, affectionate and trainable—she was just a whole lot of other things as well.

I knew that ignoring or accepting her aggression would be irresponsible and dangerous. But even armed with all this new knowledge, I still balked. As I hoped for improvement rather than helped her improve, it became clear that I was the biggest barrier to progress. The truth is, I was reluctant to confront Ainsley’s behavior because I was reluctant to admit that she was something other than my dream dog come true.

So I swallowed hard and gave up my fantasy of an off-leash dog. She chases everything that moves and therefore risks injuring herself as well as other critters, so now she never goes

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out without a leash, six feet long in town and 30 or 50 feet long when we’re in the woods.

Then I gave up my fantasy of a dog-friendly dog. I would like to walk around my town with a calm, tail-wagging canine who puts all the other ill-behaved dogs to shame. Instead, I have a dog who is perfectly behaved as long as no squirrels, other dogs or trucks are in close proximity. In which case I have a Cujo. (Fortunately, more frequently these days, I have a dog who is trying very hard to sit still and look at me for treats, even though she really *wants* to be a Cujo.)

The next fantasy to go was that of having the perfect dog and therefore being seen as the perfect dog owner. Instead, I throw myself into situations that ensure bad behavior on her part and embarrassment on mine so I can do all those strange and counterintuitive training things that will help her work through that bad behavior.

I also gave up my fantasy of having an ideal walking companion, and accepted that her behavior could be managed, but perhaps not changed; could be improved, but probably not eradicated; that working through it and around it would continue on each and every walk we shared, for the rest of her life. And I embraced the notion that our walks, and the training itself, could be, should be, lots and lots of fun.

Here’s what I found helps: A head halter to humanely control her physical behavior, along with months of patient and regular counterconditioning sessions that incrementally reset her trigger threshold. Carefully observing her to determine whether she wants to move away from or toward the trigger, and using that movement as part of the reward. Working with sympathetic friends, trainers and dog kennels with the other dogs on-leash or behind fences so we can practice the abovementioned counterconditioning/proximity-controlling sessions. Having the jogger, biker, person wearing a large hat and/or driver of the big white truck who share our walking trail stop and give her treats instead of racing by at full speed. Acting like a complete goofball when a trigger comes by in order to distract her and defuse us both. Swallowing my annoyance and embracing her with joy and snacks when she suddenly reappears dragging all 50 feet of yellow nylon lead with the handle that broke when she bolted and chased deer for an hour and a half through the snow-filled woods.

But what helps most? Realizing that in fact I have something infinitely better, more interesting, complex, nuanced, challenging, rewarding, entertaining, enjoyable and authentic than a dream dog. I have a real dog. 🐾