

New Beginnings

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My husband and I stared at each other across the table. We were in agreement that we had three options. Our first option was to pack up our belongings and move to a rural area with no neighbors and build a stockade fence to ensure limited human contact. Our second selection was to contact my mother, who conveniently lived in a rural area with no neighbors, and beg her to take our problem. The final choice was to continue hiding our dog from all of humanity for fear that she would be euthanized and we would be exposed as the failures that we were.

To some, our plight may seem overly dramatic. For us it was all too real. While I can't recall when it went from bad to worse, there was no doubt that our Doberman Pinscher was out of control.

We calculated that in the past ten months we had spent over \$2,000 on dog training and a canine behaviorist. Our closets were stocked with long leashes, short leashes, harnesses, a weird head halter thing, a box that clicked, various gourmet dog treats and even a muzzle. Yet, the only thing I had to show for my collection of canine training apparatus was a dog that was so unpredictable we avoided taking her into public.

At the advice of a trainer we tried to find an outlet for her "nervous" energy. We arrived at the agility field with high hopes and pockets full of roast beef. Before long we were chasing her around with a spray bottle full of water and a loud horn that the agility instructor explained would teach her not to act aggressively toward the other dogs. When she lunged at a small child with a golden retriever that was as old a fossil, my husband and I quietly walked off of the field and took her home. We knew that someone was going to get hurt. No roast beef or squirt bottle would prevent her behavior.

We accepted that we just were not trying hard enough and that we could never measure up to the instructions of our behaviorist, who later scolded us for squirting water at our dog. She explained that positive reinforcement training was the only way to humanely train our dog. Furthermore, our "aggressive" actions were making our dog's behavior worse. We just couldn't keep her in line. We felt like terrible dog owners, and on some levels we were. During our daily walks, our trainer directed me to tie my dog to a light post or telephone pole when a strange dog came near. That way when our dog turned into the spawn of hell with hair standing up straight and foam dripping from her snarling teeth I knew she couldn't get away from me. I was to distract her with food so that in time she would understand that when strange dogs came near, good things happened. Roast beef happened.

For a few days I agonized over walking her. Each day the walk ended in a disaster of horrified joggers, other dog walkers passing us in terror, and my dog dining on lots of roast beef. The more I thought about the scenario the more uncomfortable I became. When I was a girl I had a grumpy pony that liked to buck. When we went to take a test ride before we bought her the owner wouldn't let me mount. He was certain I'd get hurt and explained she had thrown his granddaughter every time she had ridden the mare. My mother bought the pony on the spot. I was scared to death and was sure my mother had lost all rational thought process. Mom explained that the man had soured the pony. Each time she threw her rider the rider didn't get back on. Instead the mare was always brought back to the barn and given hay and grain. The pony learned that propelling her rider meant a clean stall and ample food. It was right about then I knew my dog was sour. What I didn't know was how to fix it.

I told you that story so that I could tell you this story. Our serenity came in the form of a mere mortal with raven black hair and nerves of steel. When we first met Julia, I showed her all of our failed training aids, told her of our failures, and admitted that we had lost hope. Julia smiled, fit my dog with a shiny metal collar, and calmly began to walk her around the room. In only a few minutes our unpredictable dog was marching confidently around the room in near perfect heel position. Soon another dog was brought into the room by an assistant and with no hesitation our dog was up to her old tricks. Julia gave her a swift tug and continued to walk around the room as though it were just she and my Doberman.

Julia explained that the firm tug she had given a correction. If dog owners never correct their dogs, life will correct them. The disobedient dog that runs into traffic and is killed by a passing car is corrected. The dog that bites a child's out stretched hand, who then is euthanized, is corrected. Julia would teach us that by only praising good behavior and not correcting bad behavior, our dog would never really understand what is expected of her. It was our responsibility to teach her what behavior is allowed and to inform her when the line has been crossed.

It has been nearly two years since that first day we met Julia. Our dog has earned a Canine Good Citizen, attends dog daycare, and vacations with us. She has ridden on trains, ski lifts, and stayed in countless hotels. People remark at her good behavior. We've learned what situations are stressful for her and know how to handle our dog's persona when those situations arise. Julia exceeded our expectations and provided hope and encouragement. Most importantly, Julia provided a level of guidance and professionalism when others in her industry were ill-equipped and fearful to even handle my dog. To say that Julia gave us our life back is an under statement. When I think back to the time when we were actually considering getting rid of our dog it makes me terribly sad. My Doberman is a terrific, once in a lifetime, wonderful pet. She just needed some sound handling and basic manners to bring that out. By putting away our devices that only manage poor behavior, learning to correct bad behavior, and actually training our Doberman we have a dog that we are proud to take out in public. We thought nothing could help us, luckily we were wrong.