

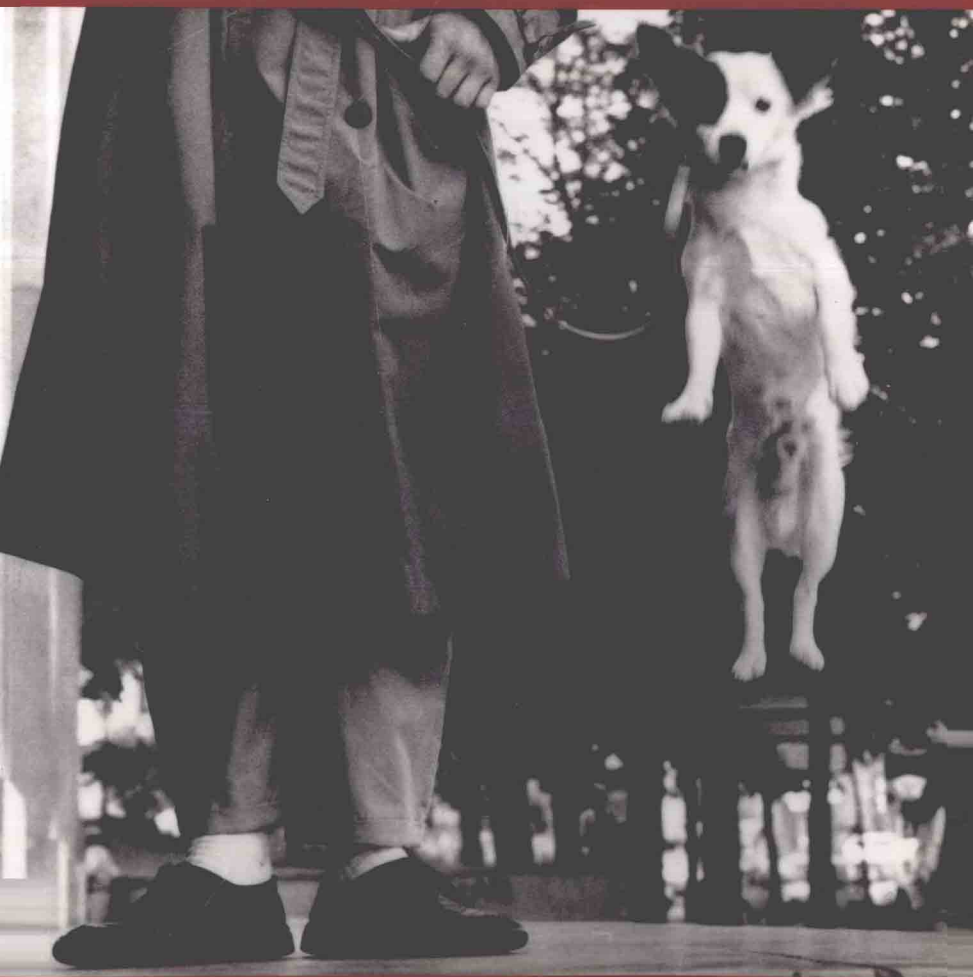
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Author of *Dogs Never Lie About Love*

THE OTHER END OF THE LEASH

Why We Do What We Do Around Dogs



ATRICIA B. MCCONNELL, PH.D.

THE OTHER END OF THE LEASH

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PATRICIA B. MCCONNELL, PH.D.

BALLANTINE BOOKS
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To my Mom and Dad

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NOTES FROM THE AUTHOR

All of the people and dogs that are described in this book are based on real people and real dogs. But family problems are very intimate things, whether they relate to dogs or people or both, so in order to protect people's privacy I have changed the names of all the dogs (except mine) and all the clients that I mention in this book. In some cases, I changed the breed of the dog or the sex of the client. Many of my clients will no doubt relate to some of the cases that I describe, because so many of the problems that I see are shared by hundreds, if not thousands, of dog owners. If you think you recognize yourself or your own dog, know that you're not alone—I probably saw dozens or hundreds of people and dogs with the same issues. Unless, by chance, you're bursting with pride about being mentioned in the book—in that case, *of course* it's about you!

A word of caution and supportive advice: if you have a serious or potentially serious behavioral problem with your dog, don't hesitate to find good, professional assistance. There's actually very little that's intuitive about handling and training a dog, especially one with a serious behavioral problem, and there's no substitute for getting a helpful coach who can help you one-on-one. You wouldn't try to learn basketball just by reading a book, so if you need to play the game, do what any parent would do for their child, and find a good, knowledgeable coach. Don't be

embarrassed, as people often are about coming to see me for help with their dog. I don't know anyone who finds it humiliating to take his car to a mechanic. But as with mechanics, there's a huge range of expertise and ethics out there. Be sure to find someone who is well-versed in using positive reinforcement and who is just as kind to you as they are to your dog. See the References in the back of the book for more direction about how to locate qualified assistance. And don't hesitate to talk to your vet about your dog's health. Sometimes behavioral problems derive from physical ones.

And finally, a note to the readers: Rather than using "he" exclusively or awkwardly using "he and she" when I refer to generic dogs, I have alternated between "he" and "she" throughout the book. It's just simpler, and in writing and dog training, simpler is almost always a good thing.

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This book was cultivated with my mother's love of dogs and my father's love of literature. I am filled with gratitude for all that my father, G. Clarke Bean, was able to give me, and for all that my mother, Pamela Bean, continues to provide.

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ways, and I am a lucky woman to have them as friends. I'm equally lucky to have two profoundly supportive and amazing sisters Wendy Barker and Liza Piatt who, even though we live far apart, are always close to my heart.

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up Dog's Best Friend Training, Ltd., in 1988, at a time when Applied Animal Behaviorists were practically unknown. Looking back, I'm still amazed that two Ph.D.s, knowing virtually nothing about business but a lot about behavior, managed to launch what is now a thriving enterprise. Thanks for riding the whitewater with me, I could never have done it alone.

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And finally, I declare my love and admiration for Luke, Tulip, Pip, and Lassie—four remarkable individuals who have enhanced and enriched my life beyond description.

INTRODUCTION

It was twilight, so it was hard to tell exactly what the two dark lumps on the road were. Cruising at seventy miles an hour on the interstate, tucked between a station wagon and a semi, I was contentedly 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 mix 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, and I'd give a lot to get the image out of my mind. 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, the 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 like traffic cops and lunged forward to stop them. They stopped, a second 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 would save their lives rather than ensure their deaths weighed like a stone in our beliefs.

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 cars 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 the turn of a torso. I still don’t understand 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 a 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—a tenth of an inch?

You’d think that we would automatically generalize this common knowledge to our interactions with our dogs. But we don’t. We are often oblivious to how we’re moving around our dogs. It seems to be very human not to know what we’re doing with our body, unconscious of where our hands are or that we just tilted our head. We radiate random signals like some crazed semaphore flag, while our dogs watch in confusion, their eyes rolling around in circles like cartoon dogs.

These visual signals, like all the rest of our actions, have a profound influence on what our dogs do. Who dogs are and how they behave are partly defined by who we humans are and how we ourselves behave. Domestic dogs, by definition, share their lives with another species: us. And so this is a book for dog lovers, but it's not only a book about dogs. It's also a book about people. It's a book about how we're the same as our dogs and how we're different from them.

Our species shares so much with dogs. If you look across the vast range of all animal life, from beetles to bears, humans and dogs are more alike than we are different. Like dogs, we make milk for our young and raise them in a pack. Our babies have lots to learn while growing up; we hunt cooperatively; we play silly games even as adults; we snore; we scratch and blink and yawn on sunny afternoons. Look at what Pam Brown, a New Zealand poet, had to say about people and dogs in the book *Bond for Life*:

Humankind is drawn to dogs because they are so like ourselves—
bumbling, affectionate, confused, easily disappointed, eager to be
amused, grateful for kindness and the least attention.

These similarities allow the members of two different species to live together intimately, sharing food, recreation, and even bearing young together.¹ Lots of animals live closely linked to others, but our level of connection with dogs is profound. Most of us exercise with our dogs, play with our dogs, eat at the same time as our dogs (and sometimes the same food), and sleep with our dogs. Some of us still depend on our dogs for our work. Sheep ranchers in Wyoming and dairy farmers in Wisconsin need their dogs as much as or more than they do machinery or high-tech feeding systems. We know that dogs enrich the lives of many of us, providing comfort and joy to millions around the world. Studies even show that they decrease the probability of a second heart attack. We don't put up

1. That may sound extreme, but ask any breeder who's paced the floor waiting for puppies how closely connected she felt to her dog and how clingy her dog gets right before delivery.

with shedding and barking and carrying pooper-scoopers on walks for nothing.

And look what we've done for dogs. *Canis lupus familiaris*, the domestic dog, is now one of the most successful mammals on earth, thanks to hitching his star to ours. It's been estimated that there are about four hundred million dogs in the world. Many American dogs are eating organic food, going to canine chiropractors and doggy day-care centers, and chewing on millions of dollars a year in toys. Now that's a successful species.

But we also have our differences. We humans don't relish rolling in cow pies. Nor do we, for the most part, eat the placentas of our newborns. We don't greet one another, thank heaven, by sniffing one another's rumps. While dogs live in a world of scents, we think of ourselves as chemically illiterate. Partly because of those differences, humans and dogs often miscommunicate, and the consequences range from mildly irritating to life-threatening. Some of this miscommunication stems from an owner's not understanding dog behavior and how animals learn, and I encourage all dog lovers to read lots of good books about dog training. Training dogs turns out not to be intuitively obvious, and the more you learn, the easier and more fun it will be.

Some of this miscommunication, though, results not just from ignorance about how to train a dog but from fundamental differences between the behavior of two species. After all, dogs aren't the only animal in the relationship. We humans at the other end of the leash are animals, too, with our own biological baggage of behavior that came along on our evolutionary train ride. We don't come to dog training as blank slates, any more than dogs do. Dogs and dog lovers alike have been shaped by our separate evolutionary backgrounds, and what each of us bring to the relationship starts with the heritage of our natural history. Although our similarities create a bond that's remarkable, we are each speaking our own native "language," and a lot gets lost in the translation.

Dogs are canids, the taxonomic family that includes wolves, foxes, and coyotes. Genetically dogs are wolves, pure and simple. Wolves and dogs share so much of their DNA that they are almost impossible to distin-

guish genetically. Wolves and dogs interbreed freely, and their offspring are just as fertile as their parents.² By studying wolf behavior, we learned what it means when our dogs flatten their ears or lick our faces. Wolves and dogs communicate to members of their pack with the same set of postures that convey submission, confidence, or threat. If you saw either a wolf or a dog standing still and erect, growling deeply, and looking directly into your eyes, you'd correctly conclude that the same message was being sent from each of them. So dogs, in one sense, are wolves, and there's much to learn about a dog by studying a wolf and its pack.

But in another sense, a very important one, dogs aren't wolves at all. Domestic dogs are not as shy as wolves, they are less aggressive than wolves, they are less likely to roam, and they are far more trainable. You don't see a lot of people herding sheep with wolf/dog hybrids. Take it from me as a biologist and a sheep farmer, it wouldn't be pretty. Dogs actually behave most like juvenile wolves, Peter Pan wolves who never grew up, and in Chapter 5 we'll talk about how that might have occurred. Regrettably, in the last several decades, popular conceptions of wolves and dogs have oversimplified their similarities. Perhaps that is what motivated Raymond and Lorna Coppinger, in their book *Dogs*, to emphasize the differences between dogs and wolves. They say in their introduction: "Dogs may well be closely related to wolves but that does not mean they behave like wolves. People are closely related to chimps but that doesn't make us a subspecies of chimpanzee, nor does it mean we behave like chimps."

I'm reminded of the saying about describing a glass as either half full or half empty. Each observation is correct; it just emphasizes a different perspective. My own bias is that *both* perspectives are essential, and so I'd argue that it's valuable to look at what's shared *and* what's different between wolves and dogs. And that is true of our own behavior as well. We *do* behave like chimps in many ways, and of course, in other ways we don't.

For years scientists have found it valuable to "compare and contrast" human behavior with that of other primates. From popular books like

2. Breeding dogs to wolves can cause a host of biological problems and is a practice that I strongly discourage.

The Naked Ape and *The Third Chimpanzee* to academic ones like *Tools, Language, and Cognition in Human Evolution*, scientists have been looking at humans as primates for many decades. It's a key issue in the fields of physical anthropology, cultural anthropology, ethology, and comparative psychology. And it's not just academia: the Oubi tribe of the Ivory Coast saw humans and chimpanzees as the descendants of two brothers, which would make us cousins. It's not at all a bad biological analogy, given that we humans and chimps share about 98 percent of our genes. In a lovely irony the tribe envisioned the "handsome" brother as being the father of humanity but the "smart" brother as the father of chimps.

We have much to gain by looking at ourselves as the touchy, playful, and drama-loving primates that we are. We may be an animal like no other, with intellectual abilities that are nothing less than amazing, but we are still bound by many of the laws of nature. Our species and species close to us like chimpanzees, bonobos,³ gorillas, and baboons have inherent tendencies to behave in certain ways. Chimpanzees and bonobos don't build stadiums, use Post-it notes, or write books about themselves, but for all our differences, we are more alike than not. For instance, there are striking similarities among the postures and gestures of chimpanzees, bonobos, and humans, each of whom relate to their kin with kisses, embraces, and even hand-holding.

I don't mean to diminish our unique status as human beings by recalling our primate heritage. We *are* unique, so much so that it is reasonable to talk about "humans and animals" instead of "humans and other animals." Whether you believe that it's God-given or driven by natural selection (or both), we are so different from all other animals that we deserve to be in our own category. But as different as we are, we are still linked with other animals in important ways. The more we learn about biology, the more we discover how close to other species we really are. We

3. There are two species of primates that used to be called chimps. Common chimpanzees (*Pan troglodytes*) are the larger of the two and are the best known; this is the species that Jane Goodall studied. As is convention, I'll refer to them as "chimpanzees." The other species, sometimes called the pygmy chimpanzee, is now called the bonobo (*Pan paniscus*). Bonobos are smaller, more likely to walk bipedally than chimps, and so sexual that much of their behavior can't be shown on TV nature shows. That's saying a lot, given what our species does on television.

are so closely related to chimpanzees, bonobos, and gorillas that some taxonomists have reclassified all of us into our own subfamily, the Homininae. Chimps, bonobos, and humans, the most closely related apes, are intelligent animals with complex social systems who have long periods of learning and development, who require a tremendous amount of parental investment, and who tend to behave in certain ways in certain contexts, even when we humans aren't aware of it. For example, all three species have a tendency to repeat notes when we're excited, to use loud noises to impress others, and to thrash around whatever is in our paw if we're frustrated. This behavior has no small effect on our interactions with dogs, who in spite of some barks and growls, mostly communicate visually, get quiet rather than noisy to impress others, and are too busy standing on their paws to do much else with them.

There are many examples of how this behavioral heritage can create trouble in our relationships with dogs. For example, we humans love to hug. It's called "ventral-ventral" contact in the primate literature, and chimps and bonobos love to do it, too. They hug their babies, and their babies hug them. Adolescent chimps hug each other, and so do adult chimps when they're reconciling from conflict. Gorilla mothers and their babies are great huggers. I'll never forget listening to biologist Amy Vedder telling how she entered a cabin with a baby gorilla huddling in terror in the back of the room.⁴ Amy, who had observed gorillas for years, gave a perfect replica of the "belch" vocalization that gorillas give in greeting. The frightened, sick young gorilla crawled across the room, pulled himself up onto her chest, and threw his long arms around her torso. Just as a lost child would hug his mother, it was natural for the gorilla to hug Amy and for her to hug him back. The tendency to want to hug something that we love or care for is overwhelmingly strong. Try telling an adolescent girl, or any four-year-old, not to hug her beloved dog. Good luck.

But dogs don't hug. Imagine two dogs standing up on their hind legs, forelegs wrapped around each other, chests and muzzles pressed together.

4. A mostly unacknowledged heroine who, along with her husband, Bill Weber, deserves most of the credit for mountain gorilla conservation in Rwanda. You can read their compelling story in the book *In the Kingdom of Gorillas*.

You probably haven't seen that a lot at the dog park. Dogs are just as social as we are, veritable social butterflies who can't live a normal life without a lot of social interaction. But they don't hug. They may paw at another dog as an invitation to play, they may slap a paw over the shoulders of another dog as a display of social status, but they don't hug. And they often don't react kindly to those who do. Your own dog may benevolently put up with it, but I've seen hundreds of dogs who growled or bit when someone hugged them.

The reason that I've seen all those growling dogs is because I'm an Applied Animal Behaviorist, and I consult about serious behavior problems in companion animals. Both my scientific training⁵ and my hands-on experiences with people and dogs have led to the perspective that I advance in this book. For my Ph.D. research I recorded and studied the sounds that animal handlers from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds used to communicate to their working domestic animals. In one sense I was studying our own species as you would any other species of animal, objectively recording and analyzing the sounds made by the trainers, just as other scientists study the notes of a bird's song. That perspective, along with extensive training in the precise observation and description of behavior, has led me to pay attention as much to our own behavior as to that of our dogs. Teaching "The Biology and Philosophy of Human-Animal Relationships" at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and cohosting a national animal behavior and pet advice show, "Calling All Pets," continually remind me how essential our relationships with other animals are and, at the same time, how often our own primatelike tendencies cause us problems.

Just as important, my experiences as a dog trainer,⁶ a breeder and trainer of working Border Collies, a competitor in herding dog trials, and a dog owner who makes no apology for being crazy in love with my dogs have continually reminded me how easy it is for us humans to miscommunicate to our dogs.

5. My Ph.D. is in zoology, my minor is in psychology, and my specialty is ethology, or the study of animal behavior.

6. I've taught dog training classes for more than twelve years.