

Studying to Improve the Human-Canine Partnership

By Pamela S. Hogle



I first encountered Bergin University of Canine Studies (then called the Assistance Dog Institute) in 2002 when I participated in their associate degree program. I learned all aspects of raising and training mobility assistance dogs in a jam-packed, intense nine-month course. After working as a service dog trainer and puppy trainer for a few years, I returned to the university to start the master's program, which I completed in July 2010.

Initially, I intended to focus narrowly on working dog partnerships, specifically partnerships between service dogs and people with mobility impairments. I soon realized, however, that the elements of a successful service dog

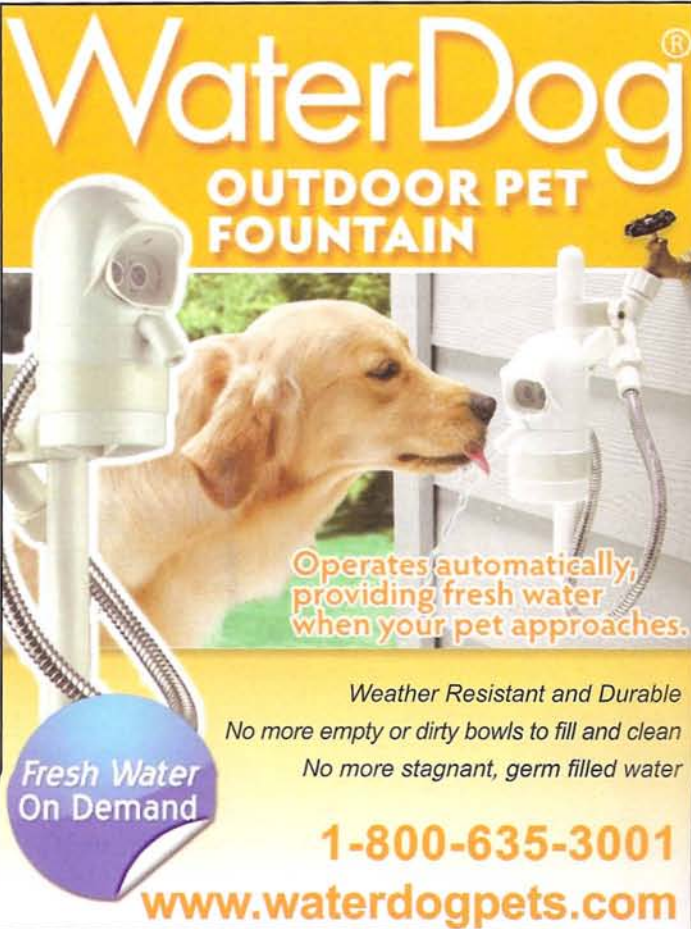
partnership were equally essential in any human-canine relationship. As I worked my way through the master's program, I began to focus more broadly on human-dog interactions and explore ways to improve the relationship between people and dogs. One idea that came up over and over was that people completely underestimate dogs. Dogs are capable of **so** much more than we usually give them credit for! Many trainers focus on getting the dog to offer a specific response to a cue or command, for example, when truly teaching the dogs would entail developing their innate skills and allowing them to make choices. As a student in the associate degree program, I worked with puppies as young as four weeks old, puppies who barely

had their eyes open. As I watched these puppies learn and grow, I began to appreciate the dogs' intelligence, eagerness to learn, and ability to figure things out and come up with their own solutions to problems. Later, working as a trainer, I decided to try to teach dogs concepts such as "open the door" rather than use more action-oriented commands such as "tug" or "push." Thus, once the dog understood the idea of getting the door open, she could decide on her own whether to push it with her paws, nudge it with her nose, tug a rope on the door handle, slide it using her paws, or use any other method that worked. Dogs I worked with learned on their own to adjust the amount of force or pressure they applied, gently nudging drawers or cabinet doors and pushing with their full weight against heavier glass doors.

Through my work at Bergin University and afterward, I learned that most "failures" were my own fault. If I asked a dog to jump onto a table, but I was standing too close or the table was too high and the dog refused, the dog was telling me that I was asking the impossible — he was not being "disobedient" or refusing to cooperate. Once I understood that, I was more able to step back and analyze any situation, fix the problem, and set the dog up to succeed. I became more aware of and willing to watch for other communication cues from the dogs — their body language and their vocalizations often were sincere attempts to explain their viewpoint or point out a problem. Recognizing this made it possible to develop a working partnership based on two-way communication — which was easier and much more fun than always trying to be in charge.

A course I took early on in the master's program looked at ethical, legal, and moral perspective of human-dog relationships. Beginning with this class, I developed two themes: a study of the way people **do** and **should** treat dogs; and a study of the dog's point of view — cynomorphism — and its implications for humans' relationships with dogs.

An early project that looked at the way we treat dogs was a study of the use of force in training assistance dogs. While my initial research focused on examples from the service dog training field, where I have worked for several years, the issues I found and the conclusions I drew apply to anyone teaching skills to dogs for any purpose. A discussion of force-based vs. motivational training is equally applicable to handlers who are preparing dogs to work as herding or search and rescue dogs, to compete in agility or freestyle, or for any other partnership where the dog truly has to be a willing partner. Where the human cannot compel the dog to perform, the dog must work "at liberty" in the words of philosopher Vicki Hearne — that is, the dog must willingly engage in two-way communication with the handler. Just as many individuals with disabilities are not physically able to compel performance of a task or obedience from their dogs, an agility handler, on a course with an off-leash dog, cannot compel the dog to do something. If the dog



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is unwilling or unable to communicate effectively with the handler, all is lost.

My study of force training and my conversations with service dog partners led me to deeper analysis of training or teaching methods and their ramifications. What underlying assumptions about dogs and their roles in our lives form the foundation of a training method? What limitations do we impose on dogs by our choice of training or teaching method, and how does that affect the dog and our connection with that dog? While we focus on teaching dogs to do things that benefit us or bring us happiness or blue ribbons, are we being respectful of the dog's needs and desires? Is our relationship with dogs beneficial for them, as it so clearly is for us?

With these and many other questions in mind, I focused on analyzing our relationship with and treatment of dogs and attempting to understand the zynomorphic perspective. I defined my own theory and approach to teaching (not training) dogs and puppies. My "educational philosophy" for dogs strives to consider their viewpoint and to make training relevant and interesting to them. It acknowledges their considerable cognitive abilities and teaches dogs and puppies how to learn, how to think for themselves, and how to problem solve, pushing dogs to the limits of their cognitive abilities. It emphasizes two-way communication and encourages dogs to express their wants and their displeasure, while encouraging handlers to watch and listen to their dogs and try to understand the dog's point of view. It seems self-evident that a successful partnership requires clear communication and that each team member — dog or human — must learn to read the other's body language and understand even the most subtle cues from the other.

As I studied the ways dogs learn and process information and gained an understanding of their emotional and cognitive worlds, I realized how important it is for dog handlers to **teach their dogs to learn** and enable their dogs to think and problem solve, whether the dogs

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dogs. I'm putting these ideas into print in a book tentatively titled **No Bad Dogma**. When it is completed, **No Bad Dogma** will encourage dog owners to recognize and respect their dogs' viewpoint and ability to make considered choices and teach them how to develop the dogs' innate abilities to think and problem solve. The book will end with

a discussion of the ramifications of acknowledging dogs' true abilities. What do we owe these intelligent, sensitive, thoughtful, thinking beings? How must our relationships with our own dogs and with all dogs change as we integrate our new and growing understanding of their abilities and their viewpoint into our thought processes? I believe that simple recognition of the amazing abilities of dogs to think, strategize, empathize, and even deceive us forces us to look at dogs differently, to consider their wants and needs in our interactions with them and, ultimately, to treat them with

greater respect and without force and cruelty.

Bergin University of Canine Studies, whose mission is to advance the human-canine partnership, is the only accredited university offering undergraduate and graduate degrees in canine studies. The university offers full-time associate and bachelor's degree programs, and a flexible master's program designed for students who work and live anywhere. Find out more at the university's website: www.berginu.edu.

