

## The Joy of Dog Training by Cathy Toft

Reprinted from the Collie Club of America Bulletin April 2004



Training a dog is about far more than teaching a dog a bunch of things to do. “Training” has brought me and my dogs immeasurable joy and a deepening of our relationship that was unimaginable when I started in this wonderful realm of the Collie fancy. Probably many people think about dog training as I did at first: you take your dog to a class; you get instructions on what and how to teach your dog; you are supposed to do homework, training a certain number of minutes per day and per week; and you are expected to show up at weekly classes.

If you are like me, that experience was often an exercise in guilt (well, OK, we heeled once for 5 minutes since last week) or frustration (she does it at *home!!!*).

I’ve been fortunate to have a number of epiphanies in my journey with dogs, but one that comes to mind here is a Sylvia Bishop seminar that I attended several years ago. I was honored to be in the presence of one of the world’s greatest dog trainers, ever. A member of her audience asked her a simple question: “How often do you train?” I remember expecting an answer like “three times a day for 5 minutes.” Instead, Sylvia just stood there, for the first time in the weekend unable to speak. After an uncomfortably long silence, she began to stammer. In total disbelief, I realized that she did not understand the question. Train? How long? She began to ramble on about being in the kitchen, and while she was cooking asking her dogs to do things. I realized at that moment that truly great dog trainers are *never* not training. Every interaction they have with their dogs, every breath they take, they are thinking about what their dogs are learning.

At first, this realization oppressed me. Surely normal people have to relax and be human beings at least some of the time. Lately, I’ve settled into another viewpoint. Dog training is no longer “training” for me and my dogs—it’s simply how we interact and relate to one another. Most importantly, it’s how we communicate with one another. Training has become like a

comfortable old sweater that I wear all the time. I no longer confine my training to once a day, for fifteen minutes (although we do that too—a daily training session that my dogs will *not* let me forget). Gone is the guilt and frustration.

I was asked to share with you how training opened up the world of several “rescue Collies” that I adopted. After all, if training can transform the most damaged and oppressed dogs, imagine what it can do for our normal dogs. That too, is a lesson that I learned in another epiphanic moment. My world, at least my dog training world and perhaps more, turned upside down when I adopted a Collie that was so damaged that no one could reach her. She would have been euthanized by normal standards of animal shelter triage. Yet, rescuers are motivated by compassion and hope, so there she was in my good friend Lisa King’s Colorado Collie Rescue. I found her, the dog I named Babe, in a fit of grief when another of my rescue Collies died suddenly. I asked around for the worst of the worst—a dog that everyone else had given up on, and Lisa had just the dog for me in Babe. Lisa had had Babe for eight months, yet Babe could not walk on a leash nor let anyone approach her. She remained trapped in a prison of fear. Lisa had no choice but to carry Babe when she needed to move her, which caused Babe to lose control of her bladder and bowels in the process—a habit that she continued when she came to live with me. When Babe arrived at my house, the enormity of what I had taken on truly sunk in. Babe spent her first week with me tightly coiled into a fetal position in a corner of my bedroom. It was an ordeal simply to get her outside two or three times a day to relieve herself. I seriously researched autism to understand how to deal with her.

Babe gave me another of my epiphanies when I learned that dog “training” is really about communicating with another individual and finding a common language and a common understanding of how the world works. On her first night with me, I had decided to feed her by hand, clucking softly with my tongue against the roof of my mouth as she ate each piece of food that I offered her. My plan was to use operant conditioning and positive reinforcement with a marker (a clicker) to reach her. There seemed to be no other way, as I took my lead from a study on autistic children.

The second night I began to “train.” We call this operant conditioning “clicker training,” but it is really a powerful way to communicate with another individual. My plan was to shape and reinforce any behaviors that Babe offered me toward the goal of giving Babe her life back. She didn’t offer me much. She had pulled her head out of the tight coil of her body because she

was expecting to eat. I got very close, forcing her to confront me. She reacted by swinging her head back and forth in an arc to try to avoid frontal contact with me. During this arc, however, she faced me directly for a brief instant. When that happened, just the instant that her head faced me, I clicked. Right after a click, I gave her a piece of food.

Then I watched a miracle unfold. After only 4 clicks, Babe's head had stopped swinging. Instead, she faced me. Once her head stopped swinging, her eyes took over. They flicked back and forth in their sockets, once again trying to avoid me. I clicked that brief instant that her eyes were aligned with her nose, looking straight at me. Her eyes stopped moving in only a few more clicks. She was still looking downward, probably seeing only my crossed legs as I sat in front of her. I went for more. No one was more astonished than I when I had her staring me straight in the eye within the first 15 minutes.

Anyone who knows anything about animal behavior appreciates how incredibly difficult staring me in the eye would be for Babe. In dog language, as it is for most mammals, direct eye contact can be a threat, especially between strangers as Babe and I were. In addition, Babe had had only the most unpleasant interactions with humans, including the well-meaning people who were trying to help her. Babe had no idea why they were forcing her to do things and trying to catch her and move her around. But this evening, when Babe's eyes locked with mine, they were tentative, yes, but they had an expression of curiosity, maybe even trust, but not fear.

What would you call what had just happened between Babe and me? Would you call it *training*? In the terminology of familiar dog training, did I make Babe do what I wanted, showing her who was boss? Certainly, I had modified her behavior, replacing her avoidance behaviors with unbelievably bold direct eye contact. How could I *make* a terrified animal do that, out of the blue, on the second night she was with me? Instead, what I learned that night was that *training* is really about communicating and about a relationship between two individuals who strive to understand each other. I had asked Babe to look me in the eye as if she were not terrified of me, using a simple language based on scientific principles of animal behavior.

I tell Babe's story and what I learned from her in essays published in the Collie Connection and archived on the American Working Collie Association web site (New URL: <http://r-plusdogtraining.info/Babe/index.htm>). Babe has been with me for five years now and has become indistinguishable from a normal dog. She has even competed in the marvelous sport of dog agility, earning advanced titles and competing against the best agility dogs in the country.

Best of all, she lives a fearless life full of joys and pleasures and companionship. Babe's legacy is not simply that the most damaged dog is still worth saving. Rather, what I learned from her was that training at its best is an utterly honest communication between a human and a dog, two different species that share an ancient relationship. To be at its best, this training, this communication, should use tools based on scientific principles of animal behavior, specifically, operant conditioning using positive reinforcement. Using those rules, training is truly communication, with understanding moving both ways between the canine and human partners of this relationship.

This lesson that Babe taught me has carried over and enriched the lives of my other dogs, my normal dogs who came to me as well socialized puppies, never knowing a bad moment. No longer is training a matter of guilt about making time for class or homework. Training instead is our special time together, that we all look forward to each day, and what we learn in a few minutes of structured lesson enhances the rest of our lives together.

To learn more about the latest and wonderful new methods of dog training, you can find many resources on the web. My web site <http://R-PlusDogTraining.info> provides a simple guide to this method of training and includes my favorite references: Melissa Alexander's fantastic new book, *Click for Joy*, and her web site, Clicker Solutions: <http://www.clickersolutions.com>, and the classics by Karen Pryor, *Don't Shoot the Dog*, Jean Donaldson's *The Culture Clash*, and Morgan Spector's *Clicker Training for Obedience*, and more, to be found on Pryor's web site <http://www.clickertraining.com>. No dog is too young or too old to start this method of training—and the same is true of the human member of the team! I urge you to give it a try. Your life, and your dog's, will never be the same.