

The Joys of Untraining

► By Michael Mountain

Our work for the animals is a work of the soul.

“A wild, unbounded, loopy joy in life that we can all learn quite a lot from.”

Barbara Woodhouse would not approve.

You may remember the famous English dog trainer from a piece that Morley Safer once did about her on *60 Minutes*. It begins with an unruly dog whirling and twirling, and dragging his helpless person down the street, while she tries hilariously to maintain some level of dignity. Person and pooch are then taken to Ms. Woodhouse's somewhat Dickensian training school, where everyone learns “*Walk-ies!*” (delivered with chilling, schoolmarmish authority), along with “*Sit-t-t!*” (later parodied by Roger Moore in a James Bond movie). And by the end, person and dog have been bowed (cowed) into submission and reduced to polite British citizenship as they walk together down the street in a manner worthy of the *Stepford Wives*.

I find myself at the opposite end of the spectrum from all this. A secret part of me takes exception to all training, which is admittedly impractical if the dog you've rescued is going to survive in civilized society. But here in the wilds of Angel Canyon, where Best Friends has its home, I can get away with it – although I would still fail a Best Friends adoption application hands down. I don't do “*Sit!*” – let alone “*Sit-t-t!*” And the basic dog rule at home is: “I won't tell you what to do as long you don't tell me what to do, either.”

Nonetheless, even knowing that I'm a substandard adoption prospect, our Dogtown staff called me last week anyway. They must have realized that Louie would never work out in a proper home.

Louie is a sheltie mix who spent seven years at the end of a chain. (The chain had to be surgically removed from his neck



here.) He'd also been debarked. Left helpless and powerless, his only recourse was to snap at anyone who came near. (He sent Mike in the office, who offered a friendly hand, to the local hospital!)

So, the staff decided Louie and I might be a match for each other. I'd had a sheltie once before, and Barbara Woodhouse would have thrown a very British fit and gone into shock if she'd seen us. A visitor to the sanctuary once watched me trying to get her into my Jeep. “Oh, Michael,” she called to me. “One word from you, and she does exactly what she wants!”

On our first outing with my other dogs, Louie hung back at first. He seemed intimidated by the great outdoors. (Remember, he'd never been off a leash.) But a few minutes into the expedition, he suddenly went crazy, racing around in huge figures of eight, crashing into trees, dogs, me, and everything in sight. He was so excited, he blew his own mind, and when we got home, he slept round the clock.

Next day, he did the same thing again, and then spotted a herd of deer, who led him off on a merry dance, and I didn't see him for the next 24 hours. “Don't worry,” said Vicky, our chief dog trainer. “He's just getting used to being a real dog again.” (Vicky is no Barbara Woodhouse, and the dogs appreciate that!)

Louie settled in very quickly – and very happily. And as he unlearns everything he's ever learned, he's bringing new life and fun to my two old dogs, and even the cats, too.

Sure, some basic training is obviously important, and it can be lots of fun. But dogs don't just offer unconditional love; they offer unconditional doghood, which is a wild, unbounded, loopy joy in life that we can all learn quite a lot from. 🐾