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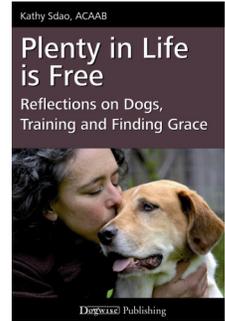
Plenty in Life is Free. Reflections on Dogs, Training and Finding Grace

Introduction

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You've surely heard the purported Chinese curse, "May you live in interesting times." I've been supremely blessed to have lived in interesting jobs for thirty years. As a contractor for the United States Department of Defense, I trained bottlenosed dolphins to locate and neutralize deep-moored mines in the open ocean. As a research assistant at the University of Hawaii's Kewalo Basin Marine Mammal Laboratory, I helped teach sign-language to other dolphins. As a zookeeper in my current hometown of Tacoma, Washington, I cared for rarely-seen harbor porpoises, gentle beluga whales and a magnificent two-ton walrus named E.T. I crewed on a large motorsailer during a week-long dolphin collecting trip in the waters off the Big Island of Hawaii. I even traveled to Paris, just after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, for a dog-sitting gig. My first job, however, was as a Hooker. Sort of. More on this in the next chapter.

I'm now nearly 50 years old. If I squint, I can see the half-century milestone anchored around the next bend, forever casting me out of anyone's notion of "young adult." Along with plenty of character lines around my eyes and mental voids into which acquaintances' names and common English words slip with alarming frequency, I've developed a profusion of gray hair. For now, I'm keeping the salt in my pepper-colored locks, mostly because I've earned it (and, less dramatically, because my last dye job was ghastly).

Shades of grays

I've come to realize that I'm more willing to accommodate other gray areas, too. Instead of clinging to certainty about, well, everything, I've started pitching a few philosophical tents on slippery slopes. I've also found some secure ledges. For example, I, a proud liberal in almost every way, now empathize with at least one concern of National Rifle Association (NRA) members. One day, years ago, reflecting on how foolish it was that my city had outlawed off-leash dog parks, I realized that NRA folks feel about guns the way I feel about dogs: for my own peace of mind I need them in my life, despite the fact that some are dangerous and may, especially in the hands of uneducated owners, occasionally injure innocent people. (I haven't fallen completely over the NRA cliff; bans on assault rifles are irrefutable, in my opinion.) My black-or-white viewpoint

that "guns are bad" has developed into a more slate-toned stance. And yes, perching on this slippery slope, working to maintain balance, embracing the murky middle-ground, is a whole lot less comfortable than sitting securely on the top of the hill.

Now, in many other ways, I hang on to fewer absolutes, though this change has been fitful and fraught. I agree with writer Anne Lamott's admission: "Everything I let go of has claw marks on it." Yet, over time, the bravado and arrogance of knowing damn near everything when I was 25 years old has morphed into a willingness to admit just how much I'm unsure of. Twice as old, half as certain. But, with five decades of living in the rear-view mirror, perhaps a bit wiser as well.

Growing older has changed the way I train dogs and view my relationship with them. While I always have been associated with a training philosophy that avoids coercion and physical force (force is not much of an option when your animal weighs 10 times more than you and swims 1,000 times better than you), there is one particular tenet of positive-training philosophy that I've wrestled with: Nothing in Life Is Free (NILIF). This is the dictum that dogs should be required to earn all privileges and rewards by first performing a behavior (e.g., "Sit") requested by a human. It turns out that my concerns with NILIF have at least as much to do with my own spirituality and personal view of relationships as with the pros and cons of NILIF as a training regimen.

I'm entirely aware how odd it is to discuss spirituality in a book about dog training. And though I suspect there are other animal trainers and veterinary professionals concerned with the issues I'll discuss, this is not a book which focuses on the intersection of faith and training. Instead, it offers a critique of NILIF and suggests alternative frameworks for dog training. First, let me explain why this is so important to me.

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