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Calming Signals: Canine Life Insurance

By Terry Ryan

The occasion was "Animals and Us", the Sixth International Conference on Human-Animal Interactions in Montreal. A quiet, polite seminar attendee, Turid Rugaas sat a couple of rows ahead of me during the canine behavior sessions. Turid should never play poker. I couldn't help but notice her shoulders tensing up or relaxing depending on the speaker. Funny thing was, her body language was directly reflecting my own opinion of the various speakers' presentations.

Networking! That's what symposiums are all about! I wanted to meet this stranger from overseas who's response to behavior issues seemed to so closely mirror my own. Realizing that English was not her native tongue, it took me until the end of the day to gather the nerve to approach the blue-eyed woman with flaxen braids.

Since that meeting a year and a half ago, I have come to realize that Turid Rugaas is on the cutting edge of understanding canine behavior. With twenty five years of experience in many different aspects of dogs and their training, Turid is currently concentrating her talents on pet dogs and their people.

Turid's farm, Hagan Hundeskole, is located on a heavily forested mountaintop overlooking scenic fjords of Norway. People from all over the country bring their dogs for her instruction in basic manners and rehabilitation of problem behaviors.

Dogs are nonverbal communicators. How often have we wished to know what was in their thoughts, what they were trying to tell us? Turid Rugaas has found a way. Turid has a special insight to canine body language. To date she has identified numerous distinct body postures which, alone or in combination, can provide us with vast quantities of useful information about our pet.

Of special interest to me is Turid's recognition and use of instinctual canine calming signals. With the support of miles and miles of video documentation, Turid is studying how, with various body postures, dogs calm themselves and other dogs in situations of stress. With a handle on dog-to-dog calming signals, Turid is now working on human-to-dog signals. Can humans imitate canine signals and use them to better communicate with dogs?

The Key To Understanding

The following overview, in Turid's own words, gives the essence of her theory on calming signals.

"Dogs, being flock animals, have a language for communication with each other. Canine language in general consists of a large variety of signals using body, face, ears, tail, sounds, movement, and expression. The dog's innate ability to signal is easily lost or reinforced through life's experience. If we study the signals dogs use with each other and use them ourselves, we increase our ability to communicate with our dogs. Most noteworthy of all canine signals are the calming signals which are used to maintain a healthy social hierarchy and resolution of conflict within the flock. These are skills which, when carried over to our own interactions with dogs can be highly beneficial to our relationship. Dogs have the ability to calm themselves in the face of a shock (fearful or stressful situation) and to calm each other as well. As an example let's consider the manner in which dogs meet each other. Dogs which are worried in a social situation can communicate concepts such as: 'I know you are the boss around



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here and I won't make trouble'. Furthermore, the boss dog is very apt to want the worried dog to realize that no trouble is intended. 'Don't worry, I'm in charge around here and I mean you no harm.' Dogs which do not signal properly can be the cause of problems."

Canine Calming Signals, The Foundation of Communication?

For a moment, let's take ourselves away from established ideas and labels concerning subordination displays, displacement activities, rituals, drives and for a few moments think about canine body language as Turid Rugaas does.

Those of us which have the opportunity to observe a group of well-socialized dogs interacting freely may see the following calming signals:

MOVING SLOWLY

A dog intending to use signals, upon seeing another dog in the distance, will start to move slowly. This exaggerated slow motion is a calming signal, and one which can be used early and effectively when meeting. Joggers, cars and bicycles may approach quickly and may appear as a threat.

Example: Carl and his dog Sheena were walking down a narrow city sidewalk. A young boy ran along the sidewalk in the opposite direction. Sheena was worried about this quick motion and immediately attempted, as best she could while on a tight leash, to display calming signals with her body language. Sheena was ignored by the child who was intent on other things. Sheena's signals were of no use, so she resorted to threats such as barking a "get away from me" warning.

MOVING IN AN ARC

Rarely upon first meetings will dogs approach each other nose to nose. Only dogs which are very sure of the outcome of a situation will attempt to meet head on. More frequently dogs approach each other in curving lines, walk beyond each other's nose to sniff rear ends while standing side to side.

Perhaps Carl could have been more attentive, recognized a troublesome situation for his dog and helped Sheena by leading her in an arc past the oncoming child.

This curving theory has been proven time and time again. Ask any groomer or veterinarian. Most apprehensive dogs are more easily approached if not confronted head on. When approached from the side, one can gain the dog's confidence more readily. Unfortunately dogs are constantly put into situations where they must accept confrontation. It's wise to eventually condition dogs to accept this gracefully.

SNIFFING THE GROUND

Dogs use their noses to explore their environment, but at times sniffing seems to have a different significance. Owners have attributed out of context sniffing to lack of concentration or stalling. Some say it's a displacement activity. Turid categorizes sniffing during times of stress as a calming signal.



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Example: You and your dog Spot are patiently waiting in the veterinarian's reception room. Spot is thinking, "Wow! that human in the long white coat keeps walking in and out. She looks and smells strangely. This is scary! I'd better sniff the floor of the waiting room now to show that I mean no harm and maybe she'll leave me alone."

Granted, the floor of the waiting room probably has many intriguing smells, but it could be Spot's way to calm himself and others around him.

Example: Ken allowed his dog Ginger off leash. "Ginger, COME" thunders Ken. Ginger approached Ken slowly, in a curve, then paused to sniff. Is she being spiteful or could it be conflict resolution? Has her past experience taught her that "Come" is often followed by an unpleasant state of affairs - time to go home, time to come away from something more interesting, time to receive a punishment? What tone of voice, body posture and facial expressions does Ken use when calling Ginger? Is Ginger untrained, bad, distracted or is she trying to explain something to Ken?

SITTING, LYING

These positions are probably the most graphic calming signals of all. You can see them being used in active play sessions. A dog will spontaneously drop when things get out of control.

How many dogs, when receiving a reprimand from the owner will sit or lie down? Turid sees this as a signal that the dog is anxious and is trying to calm the owner down.

LIP LICKING

This quick little flick of the tongue is language which often goes unnoticed because it is shadowed by more overt signals. It is yet another way for a dog to convey the same message, for everybody to calm down.

Go back through some photos of your dogs. Frequently lip licking can be seen in photographs. Posing for a photo can be a problem for some dogs. Many are worried about the camera which has a staring eye following their every move!

BLINKING, AVERTING EYES, TURNING AWAY

When a dog approaches another, it's a very interesting moment in time for those individuals. Why then, do we see dogs looking away, exaggerating an eye blink or turning their heads away from approaching dogs? Is it disinterest, distraction or a calming signal?

People who work with dogs realize early in their careers that they can gain the confidence of a worried dog more quickly by avoiding direct eye contact, or even better, by turning away with their backs or sides to the dog.

YAWNING

Perhaps the most intriguing of all signals is yawning.

Jane and her dog Fido are at the neighborhood barbecue. The volleyball players are smacking the ball with gusto, the music is playing with a resounding beat and people are animated and noisy. With all of this fun going on Fido still gives



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an occasional yawn. Can he be sleepy? Perhaps. Or is Fido yawning to reduce his stress and to calm down the others present. If Jane were to turn her own head away from the noisy people and yawn, would this reassure Fido?

DOES SIGNALING WORK FOR ALL DOGS?

Some dogs don't play by the rules. There are numerous reasons a dog might lose the inborn ability to use calming signals properly. Puppies learn valuable lessons from their environment. One must be very careful about the company a puppy keeps or the pup might learn that calming signals are of no use. If a pup, while displaying calming signals, encounters a dog lacking respect for appropriate body language, is attacked, much ground has been lost. This pup might learn to use threatening actions as a life insurance policy instead of calming signals. Luckily, with most dogs it takes more than one or two unfortunate incidents to extinguish signaling. Calming is a very dominant instinct in dogs. However it's a good idea to protect young dogs from interacting with unnatural, angry dogs. Safe, friendly dogs with good signals are the best teachers a young dog can have. Puppy classes are helpful in teaching these lessons, but can do more harm than good if inappropriate dogs are allowed to interact.

Some owners hamper a dog's attempt to communicate with other dogs or humans by inhibiting them with leashes. Yes, by all means dogs should be on leash. No, it is not safe to turn your dog loose to "communicate freely" with an unknown dog. But be aware that you could be helping your dog get into trouble by preventing appropriate body language. A more prudent plan is for you and your pet to keep your distance from an unknown entity.

Whether on purpose or unintentionally, some dogs have been taught to ignore signals. Many responsible owners seek dog obedience classes as an opportunity to train their dogs. Here's a typical obedience class exercise: Owners command their dogs to Sit and Stay. Dogs happily comply. The class instructor now asks owners and dogs to take turns weaving among the sitting dogs. This is fine in an advanced class of dogs with well-know temperaments. But in a beginner's class a handler might be asked to prevent a fearful dog from signaling. For example, Brownie is trying her best to maintain the sit-stay while the other dogs in class weave around her. She may be a little worried about the next dog approaching, so she wants to use her calming signals and tries to lie down. She is prevented from breaking her sit-stay by her owner pulling up on the lead. Next she tries to slowly move away, another common calming signal. Brownie's owner forces her back into position. What about King, the approaching dog? King is made to stay in heel position and cannot move slowly either. Nor can King curve and certainly he is not allowed to sniff.

What about the enthusiastic trainer who gives overly sharp commands or pushes the dog too far too fast in an exercise? The dog may try to signal the owner to let up a little. Here we see yawning on the sit-stay, sniffing on the heeling, curving slowly on the recall, turning away on the sit in front.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

"Some time this winter I passed dog number five hundred. I cannot recall one single troubled dog that did not respond or learn to respond positively in some way through the use of calming signals."

Let's take a look at some of Turid's case histories as told in her own words. We'll see just how she applies the knowledge she gained from her observation of dogs.

"Trixie...I still remember Trixie from many years ago. She was the first dog I tried using signals with, the dog which gave me confidence to further my study and application of canine calming signals. Trixie was seven years old,



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a small hunting dog and she had been hysterically afraid of people all of her life, running under the sofa, barking frantically every time someone came close to the house or even looked at her. The owner wanted to know if there was anything I could do about it and I said I was willing to try, but there were no guarantees. Trixie and her family came to my farm and we started with the dog outside in the training ground. I approached her from a distance, showing very clear calming signals, moving very slowly, yawning, looking away from her. The owner was told to ignore all her signals of fear. If Trixie kept calm, or moved in my direction, she was to receive praise. I moved around but kept my distance. Trixie was interested in the signals I gave her, but they were new to her, so it took some time before she responded. After three sessions of this type of signaling, Trixie took contact. She came all the way up to me, sniffing. She gradually began to accept people in the training grounds. We would allow a stranger to approach and finally pass her, at first with rather slow movements, curving slightly, looking away. Then the owner would stop to greet the stranger. Trixie would show slight interest, wanting to sniff, which she was allowed to do. There was no fear reaction now and very soon she accepted touching as well. Trixie stopped barking. She was not upset if given eye contact. Now we had to be sure Trixie was trained to accept people in all situations, particularly at her own house. At first she still ran under the sofa, but with more training she eventually became a quiet, pleasant dog with strangers in the home.”

“Mee...Mee was a ten-month-old puppy scared out of her wits of trains - and her family lived thirty feet from the railroad! When I was contacted she was a shivering bundle of nerves, had stopped eating and was quite thin. The owners were desperate. When I visited the family in their home I recommended that the owners ignore Mee when trains approach, looking away, yawning. When Trixie heard the next train, she jumped to her feet began to pant and was in obvious distress. She looked around her and suddenly observed our signals. Mee looked at me, at the owners, and back again. She had seen the signals, we had gotten through to her. I left the owners to their homework and came back three weeks later. Mee was happy to see me, and after greetings, she laid down to sleep beside me. When the first train came, she looked up with one eye, then went to sleep again. She had overcome her fear. She had put on fourteen pounds. She was a different dog. She still could be a little frightened at night, but that also went away in time. It took Mee three weeks to overcome her fear and the medicine was yawning, one of the best calming signals we have.”

Turid Rugaas: "To be able to communicate, to be actually understood by dogs, that is a wonderful feeling for people and dogs alike. Calming signals are the key and seeing through that opened door has been looking into a childhood dream of talking to the animals."

SIDEBAR: Terry Ryan: “ I have visited Hagan Hundeskole to observe Turid's work and have been favorably impressed with her rehabilitation of troubled dogs. She is among the first in her country to take a special interest in "street mixes" - the common Norwegian term for random bred dogs. In Scandinavia she is championing the move away from, to again use Norwegian terms, the "frying pan" method of dog training and advocating "contact training". The dog is taught to "take contact" (makes eye contact with) the owner and follow the owner's lead in situations where the dog could be making a mistake. Taking contact is useful, for instance, when the owner and dog have a difference of opinion in which direction to take the evening walk. “

SIDEBAR: Turid Rugaas: "In many cases dogs become hysterical when I answer them in their own language. It is like someone long lost in the jungle and suddenly at the edge of despair, hears his native tongue being spoken. Maybe that is why rehabilitated dogs remember me years after they have been here."

SIDEBAR: “Over the years Turid has had help - the four-legged variety. Once in a while a very special dog comes along with the ability to safely help convey, with signals, reassuring messages in the face of a problem situation.

Terry Ryan, Legacy



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