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Power, Peace, and Puppies: Common Sense and Nonviolence



by [Meryl Ann Butler](#)



Photo: Brian Stemmler, Stemmler Photography

How humankind chooses to train and care for man's best friend exposes deeper convictions about war and peace, dominance and submission, and joy and compassion.

The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated. ~ [Mohandas Gandhi](#)

A Yelp for Help

Bill Smith, founder of Main Line Animal Rescue (www.mlar.org) wanted to get Oprah Winfrey's attention. So he put up a billboard in Chicago several months ago that read, "*Oprah: Do a show on puppy mills. The dogs need you.*"



Billboard designed by Paul Harlacher

It worked! Oprah Winfrey did an exposé on puppy mills with internationally recognized investigator, Lisa Ling.^[1] It gave the American public an unobstructed view of the canine concentration camps, breeding grounds of tragedy that dog world professionals have warned about for decades.^[2]

Puppy mill dogs are continuously bred, typically spending their entire lives locked up in tiny, wire cages, undernourished, and plagued by flies, their coats matted with urine and feces. By the time they are rescued, some are just the tattered remnants of the misuse of power. And like humans and other animals, they can suffer from symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)[[3](#)] such as exaggerated startle response, aggression, regressive housetraining behaviors, hyper-vigilance, difficulty relaxing or sleeping, difficulty adapting to new situations, and repetitive behaviors such as pacing,[[4](#)] among other symptoms.[[5](#)]

Surprisingly, many puppy mills are nestled in Amish country, where a successful raid was conducted by the Pennsylvania SPCA on July 17th. A Pennsylvania Dutch farmer was arrested on multiple charges of animal cruelty, filmed live by the reality show *Animal Cops*, which will be continuing to trail the Pennsylvania SPCA for several more weeks.[[6](#)] Obscured by the picture-perfect façade of the simple life,[[7](#)] the exploitation has been protected, in part, by some of the local governments' unwillingness to upset the tourist-trade apple cart.

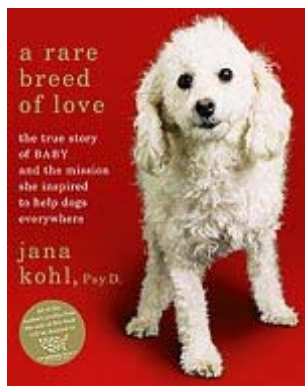


Photo: www.susanweingartner.com

According to The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), there may be as many as 10,000 puppy mills across the country. Public outcry has encouraged puppy mill raids, but even those dogs who are lucky enough to be rescued are just beginning their journey toward health and a happy home.

Rehabilitating the System by Telling the Tails

One canine concentration camp survivor has an inspiring story. She spent nine years imprisoned in a wire cage, continuously pumping out offspring, her vocal cords cut so she couldn't bark or whine. Her tale is told by psychologist Jana Kohl in "*A Rare Breed of Love: The True Story of Baby and the Mission She Inspired to Help Dogs Everywhere.*" (<http://ararebreedoflove.com/>)



When she was too old to breed, and therefore deemed useless, “Breeder #94” was scheduled to be put down. She was rescued in the nick of time—although not soon enough to save her left front leg, which had to be amputated as a result of her mistreatment. In spite of everything, “Baby” is now a happy, perky, unofficial spokesdog for the HSUS. She romps around the country as an animal rights activist, accompanied by her human. Kohl’s book features photos of Baby with celebrity supporters, from sports icons and actors to Barack Obama.

I am in favor of animal rights as well as human rights. That is the way of a whole human being. ~Abraham Lincoln

Shelters and rescue organizations all around the country have stepped up to the plate to offer asylum to puppy mill rescues—which include the adult breeding dogs as well as puppies

In early May, a Lancaster, California, puppy mill was exposed by undercover TV investigator, David Goldstein. When Animal Control moved in to remove hundreds of dogs,^[8] a number of local shelters agreed to take some of the rescued animals, including the Glendale Humane Society (GHS), a private, “no kill” facility.^[9] When a GHS volunteer went to pick up five Yorkshire Terrier rescues, they were so cute, she came back with six!

(<http://www.glendalehumane.org>) The Yorkies, ranging in age from 4–7 years old, had been bred nonstop their entire lives.



Jelly Belly, Taffy and Gummy Bear: Rescued Breeding Dogs

Do the Math

Every time people buy puppy mill dogs from pet shops or through ads on the Internet or in newspapers, they inadvertently contribute to canine misery and to the puppy mill coffers. Most of these sellers insist that their puppies were raised in bucolic family settings, but authorities estimate that at least 90 percent come from mills.

Anyone who adopts from a shelter becomes the hero in the joyful salvation of a deserving dog. Wayne Pacelle, President of the HSUS notes that, "... we have 10,000 puppy mills churning out two to four million dogs a year, [while we] have three to four million euthanized in shelters ... and most are healthy animals who would make great companions."[\[10\]](#)

When we factor in the greater incidence of degenerative conditions resulting from inbreeding—causing numerous health challenges, ranging from hip dysplasia to eye diseases—it all adds up to shelters and rescue organizations being the best places to find a furry friend. And the HSUS estimates that 25 percent of shelter dogs are purebreds.[\[11\]](#) (For more info see the ASPCA's Policies and Positions on Responsible Breeding.[\[12\]](#))

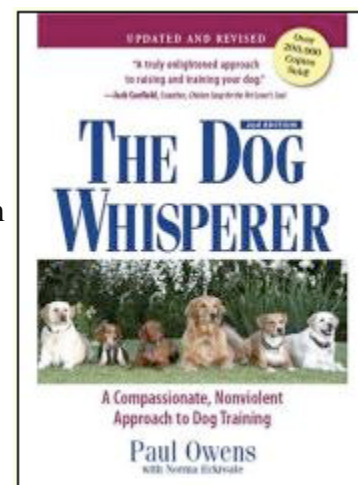
The GHS shelter gave the rescued Yorkies their first chance for a happy life. Alyce Russell, Director of the GHS, says that all their rescued dogs—whether from puppy mills or not—go through the same intake process to prepare for adoption: they are quarantined for two weeks to make sure they are not contagious, then it's off to the vet for spaying/neutering, and dental and medical attention. And the rescued dogs receive names, often for the first time in their lives. Russell said the Yorkies were so sweet, they were named Jelly Belly, Taffy, Peppermint Patty, Lollipop, Sugar Baby and Gummy Bear. Then they were ready for their training.

Nonviolence Unleashed

I interviewed the Director of Behavior Programs at the GHS, Paul Owens. He is the author of *The Dog Whisperer: A Compassionate, Nonviolent Approach to Dog Training* and *The Puppy Whisperer: A Compassionate, Nonviolent Guide to Early Training and Care*, and is the featured trainer on two DVDs. (www.DogWhispererDVD.com).

The Christian Science Monitor calls Owens, "A cheerful bear of a man with a sunny, Zen-like attitude, [who has] specialized in 'compassionate, nonviolent' dog training [for decades] ...

He relies on treats, play, and affection as rewards, and never so much as raises his voice."



Owens explained that under his direction, GHS head trainer Jenina Schutter evaluates every furry guest of the GHS, like the Yorkies. Then she designs a specific socialization and behavior modification program for each, which other trainers implement. Owens notes that the very first concerns are always for the dogs' safety and health. Then the trainers and volunteers work on developing trust through nonviolent, force-free training methods, while teaching basic canine etiquette and addressing any problem behaviors.

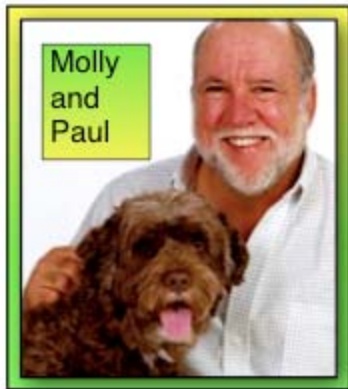


Photo: Photography as an Art, Burbank, CA

As a yogi, Owens has studied, practiced, and taught meditation for the last 30 years, in both the U.S. and in India. He employed standard dog training methods for nearly 15 years before his “nonviolent light bulb” went off in 1989.

Put Your Best Paw Forward

Owens told me that since then, he has rejected training methods that use pain, fear, or intimidation. Owens' philosophy of training utilizes his five-pronged holistic approach for the “*happiest, healthiest relationship, possible*”: 1) prevention, 2) management, 3) fun, 4) safety, and 5) positive reinforcement through reward-based training.

Owens explains the effectiveness of reward-based training with a glint in his eye, “Let’s say every time you came to my house, I gave you \$10,000 whenever you sat on a particular chair. Where would you want to sit? And how often would you be visiting me? ... And after a while, even if I only gave you something really great every second or third time you came over, just the anticipation of a possible reward would keep you coming back to that chair! That’s why people play the slot machines—ultimately just the possibility of a reward is all the encouragement that’s needed.”

Owens and a long list of the most respected animal behaviorists and master trainers concur that nonviolent training methods are the most effective and the most long-lasting—but most importantly, they are safe for both humans and dogs. And Owens says that if people do their part, then his methods work every time. Nonviolence, it turns out, is not only the most peaceful answer, but also the most practical and economical solution in dog training.



Owens and Grady. Photo: Brian Stemmler, Stemmler Photography

Until man extends his circle of compassion to all living things, man himself will not find peace. ~Albert Schweitzer

Once the dogs at GHS have received their socialization and nonviolent behavioral training, they are ready for adoption, and humans can apply for the happy privilege of inviting a furry friend to join their family. The prospective human companions and any pets they might already own are evaluated, in order to find the best match. Then the humans attend a Pet Parenting Program with Russell, and an hour-long, private training session with Owens, where they learn nonviolent training methods and how to speak “Dog.” Like a canine version of match.com, GHS invests heavily in crafting a perfect match, so the dogs they place will stay placed.

Will the REAL Dog Whisperer Please Stand Up?

The title *The Dog Whisperer* has caused some confusion, since it has been applied to two very different approaches. The Annandale Radio News notes that, “The more famous dog whisperer, National Geographic television’s Cesar Millan, displays a training philosophy that is much more aggressive and warlike than Owens’s.”[\[13\]](#)

FOX-owned *National Geographic*’s use of the “*Dog Whisperer*” moniker as the title of Cesar Millan’s[\[14\]](#) TV show seems incongruous. Millan’s confrontational methods couldn’t be further from whispering. His techniques include jerking, leash and scruff hanging, and the use of choke collars—labeled “*medieval torture devices*” by Tamar Geller, author of *The Loved Dog*—and which can cause neck and spinal damage from even a “mild” jerk.

According to *Newsday*, “Owens was the first to use the Dog Whisperer moniker in both books and DVDs. A yoga practitioner and staunch believer in nonviolent training for dogs, he is about as diametrically opposed to Millan as you can get.”[\[15\]](#)

Pay No Attention to the Man Behind the Curtain

Aversive training methods were universally accepted until a couple of decades ago when behavioral scientists found they were not as effective as positive-only methods—and could, in fact, be dangerous. However, it's taking time for real-world trainers to catch up with the scientific evidence, and aversive methods are still widely taught today. “Aversives” include pinning dogs to the ground to show dominance, hitting,[\[16\]](#) electrical shocking, and “flooding.”[\[17\]](#) Flooding is physically forcing dogs into situations they deeply fear, and is accomplished by physically holding dogs next to the feared object or dragging them with leash and choke collar into the situation they fear.

The application of the word “whisperer” to these inhumane training methods is just one more example of the nomenclature spin that has been so popular lately, such as in the labeling of the *Patriot Act* and the *No Child Left Behind Act*. From my perspective, these names are carefully crafted to convince Americans that up is really down, and wrong is really right.

As E.B. White's title character in “*Charlotte's Web*” pointed out, “*People believe almost anything they see in print.*” Today, Charlotte would surely add, “... *or anything they see on television.*”

The Seduction of Violence and Abuse

In dog training, jerk is a noun, not a verb. ~Dr. Dennis Fetko

What “traditional” trainers call “discipline,” many behavioral scientists call “force” or “physical punishment,” and if applied to humans, some of these techniques could be labeled “torture.” Aversive training methods shut down a dog's responses, rather than repattern unwanted behaviors.

If you have men who will exclude any of God's creatures from the shelter of compassion and pity, you will have men who will deal likewise with their fellow men. ~St. Francis of Assisi

Dogmatic Domination

In the realm of “aversive” training, the admonition is to “be dominant over your dog so he will submit to you.” Aversive-based trainers say they are simply following the “alpha-male” and wolf dominance theories, in spite of the fact that those theories have been declared invalid by the experts.[\[20\]](#) In the *Journal of Veterinary Behavior*,[\[21\]](#) Angelica Steinker says that the “social dominance [theory] is being misused in relation to interpreting dog behavior ... Labeling a dog ‘dominant’ is potentially destructive [and] can provoke a human to be aggressive with their dog. If the dog is aggressive, this can cause the aggression to escalate ... [and] each party is reinforced negatively for their counter-controlling behavior,” which initiates the cycle of violence.

Steinker cites further studies debunking the results of the original research that spawned the alpha male/dominance theories. That research was done with *captive* packs—not with wolves in the wild, who *choose* the members of their pack. She goes on to discount the theories behind the “alpha roll” and muzzle grabbing, along with other domination and punitive techniques.



Howling wolf. Photo courtesy wiki.

Not only is the “dominator of the pack” theory based on faulty premises, but both wolves and monkeys in the wild have been known to banish a member that tries to dominate by brute force.[\[22\]](#) (Now those are some pretty smart animals. We need to elect some of them to Congress, and get them on the Judicial Committee, fast.)

Outer Behaviors Mirror Our Deepest Selves

What is most staggering is that a TV show promoting such archaic and abusive methods has enjoyed such unbridled popularity. Is this offering us a clue about the wounded soul of America? Does it provide insight as to why so many citizens of this country are comfortable with our government’s domination-focused international policy?

The allure of domination, for people who feel fearful and disempowered, can be dangerously seductive. Ordinarily well-meaning people can be hypnotized by charisma if they are wildly grasping for the false sense of safety provided by dominance and aggression.

It seems to me that whereas power usually means "power-over,—the power of some person or group over some other person or group—it is possible to develop the conception of "power-with," a jointly developed power, a co-active, not a coercive, power. Coercive power is the curse of the universe; coactive power, the enrichment and advancement of every human soul. ~ Mary Parker Follett

Owens said, “How we treat our animals is directly linked to how we treat each other. Studies have shown[\[24\]](#) that humans who are violent toward animals often extend that behavior and become violent toward other humans.” And one study showed that animals were abused in 88 percent of the homes in which a child was abused.[\[25\]](#) Owens continued, “Fortunately, the reverse is also true. People who are kind to animals often have a more positive outlook on life and visit nursing homes, schools and hospitals, nurturing the world with a little more kindness and compassion.”

Toward A Peaceable Kingdom

"Teaching a child not to step on a caterpillar is as valuable to the child, as it is to the caterpillar." ~Bradley Miller



How we treat animals says everything about who we are.

In a recent New York Times article, science reporter Donald G. McNeil, Jr.[\[27\]](#) asks, “If you caught your son burning ants with a magnifying glass, would it bother you less than if you found him torturing a mouse with a soldering iron? How about a snake? How about his sister?”

Ashley Montague says, “The indifference, callousness and contempt that so many people exhibit toward animals is evil, first, because it results in great suffering in animals, and, second, because it results in an incalculably great impoverishment of the human spirit. All education should be directed toward the refinement of the individual's sensibilities in relation not only to one's fellow humans everywhere, but to all things whatsoever.”

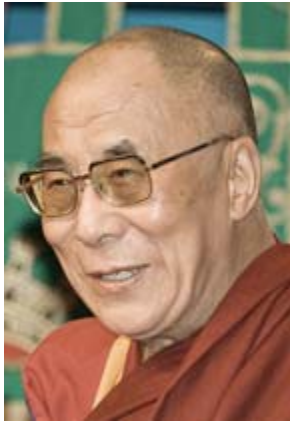


Find rescue dogs by breed at www.gotpetsonline.com

Kicking a puppy, shaking a baby, or bombing a third world nation are all knee jerk reactions, requiring only a dip in the shallow end of the intelligence pool, and no kindness whatsoever. It takes a compassionate heart, a balanced psyche, and a moral depth of understanding to craft a healthy, win-win situation. (Um, I think that's OUR job—humans, after all, are supposed to be the intelligent ones.)

Barking Up the Right Tree

The way we treat our furry companions is tightly interwoven with how we interact with others, how we raise our kids, and with building an interconnected world based on kindness and appreciation. When the Dalai Lama was a young man in Tibet, he used to buy animals to save them from the slaughterhouses, and says, “Taking care of animals is essential to developing more happiness in human beings.” [28]



(Detail) Photo credit: Luca Galuzzi - www.galuzzi.it

The Dalai Lama spoke about creating world peace through inner as well as outer disarmament in a presentation in Philadelphia on July 17th. Reporting on the event, Rob Kall wrote, “He explained that to reach a point where nations would outwardly disarm, people must first inwardly disarm, by becoming compassionate, not just with friends, but with all people, including those perceived as enemies.” [29] And one assumes that His Holiness meant for this compassion to extend to the animal kingdom, as well.



Happily rescued!

Several days later,[\[30\]](#) in a stunning breakthrough in consciousness, the Great Apes won legal rights in Spain when the parliament's environmental commission voted to support a proposal to grant our closest nonhuman relatives specific rights to life, liberty, and protection from torture. Peter Singer, professor of bioethics at Princeton University, and Laureate Professor at the University of Melbourne, notes, “Until now it has been assumed that animals are rightly our slaves, to use as we wish ... Recognition by a government that it can be wrong to enslave animals is a significant breach in the wall of exclusive moral significance we have built around our own species.”[\[31\]](#)

In order to really enjoy a dog, one doesn't merely try to train him to be semi-human. The point of it is to open oneself to the possibility of becoming partly a dog. ~Edward Hoagland

Inalienable Rights for All Beings

As a benchmark of the huge leaps in consciousness made in just one generation, abusive childrearing techniques that were laudable when baby boomers were growing up, are now punishable by law. Similarly, the compassion with which we are beginning to treat animals is a measure of the evolution of the collective soul of humanity.



Cicely Alaska was rescued as a puppy.

When we discuss peaceful dog training versus traditional, punitive dog training, we are really having a conversation that reflects our understanding of dominance, peace, and power in the greater global community: Do we believe we must address every behavior problem in terms of dominance and submission? Or do we answer to the higher call of understanding, partnership and love?

The truth is, there is nothing noble in being superior to another being. The only real nobility is in being superior to your former self. ~Whitney Young, Civil Rights Leader

Violence, dominance and submission are signs of an old and worn out model of “win and lose” that no longer serves a compassionate parent, a canine’s kindhearted companion, or an interconnected global community. Humankind is being invited to move along in our evolution from the hierarchy of domination and “power over” others, toward guiding, assisting, and empowering others in the interspecies dance of life.



Paul Owens and Sweet Pea. Photo: Brian Stemmler

The Path to Partnership, Peace and Feeling Good

If peace is our goal, then our means must be peaceful. – MLK

Owens says, "I believe nonviolence fosters nonviolence. Because of the link between dog and human behavior, it's possible that a holistic program of nonviolent dog training, coupled with self-health stress management methods, may play a role in helping build a world of peace for humans and dogs. When people, especially children, are successful using nonviolent methods with animals, they feel good about themselves and they are encouraged to have a kinder, more positive attitude with their friends, family and the environment."

And Owens is quick to add his canine Golden Rule: "Don't treat your dog any differently than you'd treat your child, your grandmother, your best friend, or yourself."

For humankind, it comes down to choosing compassion rather than violence, partnership over domination, and peaceful responses instead of warlike reactions. Whether it's the refrain from a favorite folk song or the greeting inside a Christmas card—peace, joy, and love are all you need.

Owens says his goal is to "promote peace in the world, one dog at a time."

And that is a step forward for all beings.

Properly trained, a man can be dog's best friend. ~Corey Ford