

FURTHER THOUGHTS ON THE DOG TALK® SHOW ABOUT CESAR MILLAN'S TRAINING TECHNIQUES

(For a description of those who participated in this show on February 28th, please go the bulletin board of TracieHotchner.com)

It's been a little while since the broadcast of the DOG TALK show in which I led a discussion about some of Cesar Millan's (CM) training techniques on his television show "The Dog Whisperer." I've wanted to address issues raised in a small flurry of intense emails I received almost immediately after the broadcast from a handful of listeners. I thought there might be many listeners who were confused or had opinions about the show that I needed to clarify. Some of the letter-writers identified themselves as (self – appointed?) "Cesar ambassadors." On the website of one who wrote, there were links to Cesar Millan's online dog training sessions for \$99, which was a commercial CM venture which I wasn't aware of, but which I now realize does pop up as a Google ad whenever CM's name is in an email. These letters arrived so immediately after the broadcast that they appeared coordinated by some sort of watch group and to have a somewhat cult-like quality. I contacted one of the friendlier letter writers for an explanation, and she replied with an answer that seemed to confirm that: "A Cesar Millan Ambassador is a volunteer advocate endorsing Cesar's methodology in our adoptive homes, community, and in our own lives. To remain calm-assertive in any situation, whether it be at work, in a debate, or with your dog. The lessons from Cesar impact the way we react, to be positive, and to believe in yourself."

Some of the letters were quite angry about the ideas that had been discussed and they were cross with me, personally. Most of the writers seemed not to have listened carefully to the show – or their understanding became clouded by their emotional response to the topic. Each letter had numerous complaints about comments made

during the hour – except that the points they believed had been made were NOT. Misperceptions can be cleared up by listening to the show again - the beauty of pod casting DOG TALK® is that people can listen to a show a second time or hear it weeks later by going to www.DogTalkTheRadioShow.com and clicking on the show, which is identified.

Just for the record, my concerns and those of some of my guests have already been officially declared by major humane groups. We are not voices in the wilderness, so to speak. The American Humane Association (AHA) actually issued a press statement in 2006 asking the National Geographic channel to cancel “The Dog Whisperer” because of abusive techniques CM was using; the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) also stated their concerns.

But what was almost amusing about the letters I received was a common “alpha dog assertiveness” of the writers who told me how I should have run my show. They criticized how I organized the show, who got to speak and for how long, saying it was “unfair” because they felt I didn’t “do my job” which *they* deemed should have been as an objective moderator – despite the fact that I said right up front that I had an opinion (although I reached it objectively). Some letters were indignant about the “unfairness” of having several people speaking against CM’s techniques and only Martin Deeley to defend or explain him. Some pro-Cesar letter-writers went so far as to give me directions about how much I should talk (or not) and whether I should have interrupted a guest, or in what order I should have had them talk – and a couple of them even told me to whom I owed an apology. I will get to the “fairness” issue in a just a moment.

So let me clear up a few things about DOG TALK®: I am in charge of every aspect of my show: what happens on the air is my choice and responsibility (up to a point, obviously, given that it’s a

live show that is unscripted, unplanned, uncontrolled, without even a time delay). While I obviously do not have control over things that may be said or opinions voiced, I am in full control of the intention of what information and philosophies I want to get out to the public. I plan the show, produce it, choose guests, and pick topics; all based on what interests me to learn about and also to offer to my listeners. “Fairness” is for teachers overseeing schoolyards – “fairness” has nothing to do with giving listeners new perspectives on old facts about commercial pet foods, routine vaccination, medical diets, hoarding, declawing, tail docking, ear cropping, puppy mills, etc. I do have an agenda, always. My constituents are the dogs and cats – that’s why I say I am their best friend “out there” – along with the people who share their lives. That audience expects nothing less from me than to question the status quo – to shake it up - to give them different ways of looking at things that impact their pets’ lives. Is it “fair” to the many products or services that I expose as what I see as a danger to our animals? “Fair” to whom? It’s the quality of life for the animals that interests me, first and foremost. People can speak up and speak for themselves.

My voice, attitude and opinions are the connective thread for those who are my listeners (or readers, followers, however they may identify themselves). Given that I am an expert in the field of dogs and cats - whether about nutrition, behavior, medical treatments and ethics, etc. – I am not a passive participant who sits back and gives free rein to guests or to callers. So unlike interviewers who make a list of questions and remain silent while a guest speaks his mind, I interact: on my show, it is always a dialogue. It’s part of what makes DOG TALK® unique and gained me a devoted following. I take that trust seriously, and will never compromise it for my convenience, comfort or personal gain. Sometimes it means raising prickly topics but I do that fortified by facts and the advice and opinion of trusted experts in every field.

Where dog and cat welfare is concerned, over years of dedication and immersing myself in all aspects of the field, I have drawn conclusions and formed opinions based on facts and research - I let everybody know where I stand, about everything. And I also make it clear that I am eager for and open to new information and perspectives about everything that affects the lives of our companion animals.

Just as I do with topics as diverse (and controversial) as nutrition, vaccination, surgical procedures, or medical management of diseases, I organized the CM debate to focus on what I saw as a general misunderstanding of the theories behind some of the techniques CM uses - like the alpha roll and flooding (overwhelming a frightened dog with the thing that scares him). As I said in my introduction to the DOG TALK® in question, while I do not know CM or have any personal antipathy towards him, there are some techniques that he has used on his TV show that disturb me and I believe set a poor example of how to handle those issues with a dog. As an “influencer” and a popular personality, CM has to be held to the highest standards of what is known in the dog training community. He has an amazing opportunity to educate and inspire people to manage their dogs’ lives better – and in many cases he has done just that. However, that also means that he has to keep learning and growing and educating himself about behavior theory and practice. He holds the welfare of many dogs in his hands. It is a responsibility that demands personal growth from him so that he moves beyond what has worked for him in the past and evolves as a practitioner and teacher along with the dogs and their guardians.

I have also said that CM appears to be a charming man and one with a great personal gift in working with people as well as with dogs. I have had enthusiastic second-hand feedback about him ever since I was writing THE DOG BIBLE. My friend and dog trainer, who was the training advisor on my book, thinks the world of CM,

having watched him work in person. Martin Deeley and many fine trainers are understandably enthusiastic about CM's inspiration to the general public. I hear that and applaud that effect, too, which I think is needed by dog owners who are often ignorant and lazy about teaching their dogs manners and giving them boundaries.

What does worry me – and those vet behaviorists who belong to AVSAB and many other fine dog trainers - are some of CM's attitudes and techniques on his TV show. The issue is not whether CM is talented or how he conducts himself working with a dog in "real life" - trainers I respect tell me CM's innate gift with dogs is such that he can work with a dog like a dancing partner. My misgivings are about the example he sets in some episodes on TV where he overpowered or intimidated dogs, sometimes pushing them past a tolerance level so they were provoked to bite him, to be more frightened of a situation or even to distrust people. Please listen to DOG TALK® on April 25th when I discuss specific examples of these training problems.

I stated my intention about the CM show clearly on the show – which was to provoke people to stop and think for themselves when they watch "The Dog Whisperer" and really see what is going on in some of CM's interchanges with dogs. I also hope that stimulating this sort of dialogues would reach CM – and those who would follow his techniques – and have them *think twice* about some of what they do. That's all it's about – asking you to just stop and see things from a different perspective. In fact, on his show CM has made continual changes and shifts in how he handles dogs – whether it's in very hot weather or pushing dogs to physical limits - and he now sometimes praises a dog or even gives a reward where in the initial years he never or rarely did so. So it would seem that the commentary and criticism his show has received has had demonstrably changed the way he does some things.

The idea for this particular DOG TALK® show came about when I saw that the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior (AVSAB) had made a public statement speaking out against television dog trainers who use punishment-based techniques. The article quoted Dr. Sophie Yin, one of the AVSAB board members, about CM, and quoted trainer Martin Deeley defending his friend's techniques. I had already had Martin on my show before and had scheduled him to return – so I put a notice on the AVSAB listserv asking whether Dr. Yin or anyone else would like to discuss the topic on the air. She replied, along with two other vet behaviorists, and I let Martin Deeley know this ahead of time. I was concerned about there being enough time for everyone to speak their piece, and decided to even the playing field by letting Martin listen and then speak last, since the final speaker in a debate has the advantage.

I have made clear that there are fundamentals in some of CM's techniques which I have consistently pointed out to listeners are not a good example to set for people to follow – based on what I know about the theories of dog training, about how learning takes place in any species, and in setting up artificial expectations that serious or long-standing problem behaviors can be fixed in dramatic TV moments rather than with the slow, patient techniques that generally bring a lasting solution. My intention was for the participants to deal with training theory – and learning theory – and what techniques are effective and ultimately work. This was not about targeting an individual, but exposing some of the actions of the individual who has a devoted following – it was about the danger of a widely watched television personality recommending force-based techniques and attitudes towards dogs which are outdated and can backfire.

What About the Monks of New Skete?

As far as outdated training techniques go, my comments on the air about the Monks of New Skete and their original book “How to be

Your Dog's Best Friend: A Training Manual for Owners," elicited a comment in one letter I received from someone outraged at what she received as my "anti-Cesar" show. She was indignant about how wrong I was about the Monks using forced-based training (I said they recommended holding dogs up by the leash, off their front feet). She declared that the Monks loved dogs and would never hurt one and I owed them an apology, too. Martin Deeley himself wrote afterwards to say that Brother Christian of the Monks was his friend and loved dogs and would never hurt them. Once again, I wasn't referring to individuals but to advice given to the public.

The Monks' book was one I read as a young dog enthusiast and used on my own dogs growing up. Years later I discovered that the book was promoting techniques which were confrontational and bullying. There are some aspects of the Monks' style – once revered by me and many others – that now seem to represent the outdated kind of training theories that went out with human teaching attitudes like "spare the rod and spoil the child." I mentioned this on the show and referred to a photo in their book of a Monk holding a dog up by the choke chain. When this letter arrived, indignant at the wrong impression I had given of the Monks training style, I revisited the book. It turns out I was wrong - there was *not* a picture of a dog being held up by the leash – my memory had converted it. What the book actually recommends doing is what they call a "shakedown" – complete with a photo of a monk grabbing one of their home-bred German Shepherds on both sides of the scruff of the neck, lifting him off his feet by these handfuls of fur so that the dog's front paws are off the ground, and the monk stares right into the dog's eyes while shaking him. If that isn't a prescription for being bitten in the face, I don't know what is. The book also recommends a "whop under the chin" as another form of discipline and shows a photo of teaching "heel" to a yellow Lab being startled and jerked hard on a right turn, taking him by surprise. Do I owe the Monks or anyone else an apology

about the tone and attitude of their advice I was talking about? I wish I did, I wish I had misremembered and the book had been revamped and tossed out the old-school harsh, in-your-face training style. While I will certainly concede that I was wrong in the example I used of their force-based, antagonistic training style (hardly the way to treat a “best friend”) what I am sorry about is that even in a 2002 edition of the book they hadn’t removed this “alpha dog, dominating control” attitude that has since been discredited as ineffective and lacking compassion.

Several of the letters said how much Cesar loved dogs – as though anyone had suggested he didn’t! For heaven’s sake, of course these people all love dogs – that goes without saying. We’re not talking about intent or emotions – this was not character assassination, nor a popularity contest – it is about actions, and actions which are intended to teach people things. It’s possible to like CM’s TV show, enjoy his personal style, but be concerned about the general influence of out-dated harsh training techniques that research about training and teaching has shown us do not work as effectively (or kindly) as positive reinforcement techniques (which is not all about food treats, which they seemed to get confused about, too).

I am Hosting this same Discussion Live on the West Coast at U.C. DAVIS VET SCHOOL April 14th

My radio experience with this topic inspired me to take “Is the Dog Whisperer Barking Up the Wrong Tree” right to the source: the Animal Behavior Department of the prestigious U.C. Davis veterinary school in Sacramento. Nordic Naturals, the omega-3 pet oil company that is one of my website sponsors, agreed to underwrite my trip to California as an educational venture. I wanted to moderate a debate between Dr. Sophia Yin, who was the AVSAB spokesperson on my radio show. and Cesar Millan himself. Unfortunately CM’s public relations person responded that he cannot be there - although she did say he would like to come on DOG TALK®, which we will be scheduling. She also

said that he would have liked to come and would participate if I put together a similar round table discussion in the Fall in California.

On April 14 I will be moderating an evening event at U.C. Davis: a conversation between Dr. Yin and Dr. Melissa Bain, who is an associate professor in clinical animal behavior and president-elect of AVSAB. I will be recording and then pod casting this conversation, which should be interesting.

April 25th on DOG TALK®Another Discussion of the Topic
Saturday April 25th I will be covering a lot of the points brought up in defense of CM's techniques – as a conversation about training theory with Parvene Farhody, who is getting her doctorate in animal behavior and a very good dispassionate speaker who has been on the show before. There will be no call-ins that day but a good chance to listen and reflect and try to see all sides of this issue.