

On Victoria's Dogs
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Is your dog driving you mad? Does he/she bark incessantly, destroy property, have unusual quirky behavior, refuse to be toilet trained, terrorize the neighborhood, take over the house, have eating problems, hump legs or come between you and your partner at bedtime? Is your dog causing a family feud? Any problem, Victoria will tackle it!

So says a web site devoted to an Animal Planet cable television show called "It's Me or the Dog." I've been watching it Friday nights at 9:00, but I noticed today (Friday, November 2, 2007) that it isn't in the listings for tonight, so I'm not sure that it is still on. Too bad for me if that is the case, I was a regular. Anyway, Victoria is Victoria Stilwell, a transplanted Brit—late thirties, attractive, charming—who now lives in Atlanta with her husband and daughter after a few years in Manhattan and New Jersey. She is an ex-actress who got into the dog walking business about fifteen years ago as a sideline when acting parts became scarce and then went into dog training full time.

"It's Me or the Dog" is produced in Britain in half hour segments. Victoria goes into people's homes and teaches them how to manage their unruly dog(s) and then comes back later to check on how things are coming along. The show has the quirky appeal of the last show I can remember making it a point to watch on television, "Iron Chef," a Japanese import cooking show on the Food Network a few years ago. "It's Me or the Dog" is shown in twenty countries around the world, so evidently it is a hit.

The besieged dog owners are decent and, in many cases, hapless souls living their lives anonymously and unpretentiously—no big shots in the episodes I've seen. There's been no sarcasm, ironic detachment, posturing, preening, or forced cleverness on "It's Me or the Dog." These people remind me of my Aunt Beatrice and Uncle Joe, whom I used to visit at their house on Armstrong Avenue in Saint Paul when I was growing up. The people Victoria works with are dealing with the kinds of issues people actually confront in their lives. (Truth be told, my big problem at the moment is not the Iraq war or global warming but rather an infected finger—why in the world did I tear at that cuticle?) Their dog, which they love to

pieces, pees on the kitchen floor and insists on sleeping between them under the covers and impedes their love life.

Besides enjoying the show—the dogs couldn't be more appealing—I think I'm picking up some useful tips even though I don't own a dog. It seems to me the kinds of things Victoria is doing to manage the dogs apply to dealing with people who give me trouble. I'll list a few of the things I'm picking up from the way Victoria works with the dogs (in all of this, even when I'm talking about dogs I'm really talking about people):

- The first thing you have to do when you are getting static from someone is work on yourself: namely, get yourself as close to being an alpha dog as you can in bearing and manner. An alpha dog (person) is calm, confident, in charge, no nonsense, direct, and action-oriented. Victoria points out that if you come on as an omega, so to speak—reactive, whiny, flitty, overly expansive, “bottom dog”—you are inviting trouble. In fact, moving from an omega to an alpha will often end your problem, or a lot of it, right there.
- Even though people—we're talking about people here—are working you over, what they are doing may reflect their own inadequacies, weaknesses, and they may not feel very good about themselves, including in comparison with you. As Victoria puts it in her web site:

It is a widely held belief that if a dog shows behaviors such as guarding toys, food or locations in the home, urinating on beds, responding aggressively toward family and visitors in and out of the house, or bullying other dogs, the animal is trying to exert its authority in an attempt to become the "alpha" or "top dog" of the family. I see it differently. A dog that exhibits these kinds of behaviors is NOT a confident dog, nor is it trying to unleash an evil plan for home domination. This dog feels insecure and copes with life by trying to control the environment around it.

I found it comforting to realize that the crap someone else is dishing out to me very often stems from their deficits, not assets, and that they may well not be as personally together and formidable as they look. In fact, giving me, and perhaps other people, grief may be just

about the only thing they are good at. Realizing that puts the problem with this person in perspective and makes it seem like less of a big deal and more manageable.

- Victoria doesn't try to out-muscle the dogs. Rather, she depends on techniques that she calmly, and all-but-effortlessly, implements. It's about tactics to Victoria, not brute strength, and if one tactic doesn't work for her, she tries another one. Victoria never works up a sweat, never gets her feathers ruffled. Victoria doesn't play tug of war with these dogs; she won't stoop to that level.

- Victoria emphasizes that to figure out what to do you have to stop dwelling on what's going on with you--how much agony you are going through, all the discomfort you are experiencing, what this is costing you, how frustrated you are, how bad the "dog" is, how you wish the other person would see the light and stop doing whatever it is, all the nasty things you are going to do in retaliation, etc.—and look at things from the dog's perspective. As one of her tips for dog training on her web site puts it:

Think dog. Take time to think about how your dog perceives the world, and use this knowledge to make training easier.

When you "think dog," one of the things you're looking for are the payoffs the other person is getting from giving you trouble. They wouldn't be doing whatever it is if it weren't rewarding to them in some way. A big part of what Victoria does to bring the dogs in line is take away whatever rewards they are getting out of the bad things they are doing. I've "thought dog" about some people who have pushed my buttons recently trying to figure out what rewards they might be getting out of giving me static. I won't go into details about who these people are or what they are doing, but I will say they include relatives, love interests, students (I teach), colleagues and administrators at work, medical care providers, and business representatives (when I'm buying something or getting a service from them). When I started to go through this list of people, I was taken by how many are on it—no wonder I live with a strong desire to hide out in my house and read, at the moment, Edward Abbey's journals. As I thought about these people, I identified four categories of rewards that they might be getting from giving me

trouble:

1. *Attention.* They do something that annoys me, disconfirms me, diminishes me, whatever it is, and I attend to them in one way or another. I complain, beseech, moralize, explain, negotiate with them, and so on. All that is attention, and even if it is negative attention, it can be rewarding to the other person.

2. *Power.* If I am changed at all in what I do or say by what someone does, that person has power over me; and it can be rewarding to have power.

3. *Hurt.* Sadly, it is often rewarding to hurt other people, make them experience discomfort, distress, grief.

4. *Diminishment.* People find it rewarding to take other people down a peg, make them less. Perhaps they have doubts about their own capability and bringing others down closer to their level makes them feel better about themselves.

Playing by Victoria's system, my challenge is to take away these rewards, as least as far as my involvement with that person is involved. Don't give them attention; crapping over me is not a way to get my time and energy. And don't give away any of my power; whatever they are doing doesn't take me off my course in life in the least. And don't show hurt or unhappiness. And don't come down off being the best version of myself in the least.

I think people can have one or more of these four motives and not consciously know it much more than a dog would. If you ask them, "Are you trying to hurt me (or diminish me, whatever), they would likely say "No" and mean it. Although I suspect that the "No" will be accompanied by a slight smile, because deep down they know what they are doing and why. But that's just speculation based on limited observation.

One of the things Victoria does when a dog is acting out of line is fold her arms and silently turn away, which is both effortless and very powerful. Both dogs and people most often would rather fight with you than have you fold your arms and silently turn away and thus be negated, dismissed. At least when they fight with you they are getting your attention, and, thereby, validation as counting for

something. No technique always works, and sometimes it isn't possible—but the silent-turn-away is a good weapon to have in one's arsenal.

- Victoria makes sure to reward a dog when something happens that she wants to happen. If the dog is doing right by Victoria, right away she lets the dog know she likes what went on. Victoria isn't effusive about it—just “good dog” and that's it, no big production number, no fawning and over-reacting (unbecoming behavior in an alpha dog). With people, it might be just “Thanks” or “I appreciated that” when someone does well by you.

- Victoria is not above using punishment. Basically, it comes down to her discerning what the dog finds aversive and giving them that when they get out of line. Again, though, Victoria doesn't get down and dirty with these dogs, so it will be something she can implement pretty easily, like clanging together metal pots or blowing a whistle or hitting the dog with a puff of air. With people, it comes down to asking yourself, what is it the other person doesn't like that I can do without expending too much energy? This is a creative challenge, as the answers differ from one person to another. I've noted that a lot of people find it very aversive not to be respected or liked, even by their adversaries. It can be very powerful to send the message, “I don't like you” and/or “I don't respect you.” It's not a verbal message, not overt, not acted out—rather, it's a bearing, a posture toward this other person. It's method acting: it needs to pervade your being; it is who you are with reference to this other person. Often it is enough simply not to smile at someone when you take them into your awareness—that can be very aversive to people. A last example, in the writing “When They Attack” I speculated that a lot of the people who persecute those who are politically incorrect want to keep their actions hidden from the public and find it very aversive to think that you are not going to let them play that game.

- Obviously, Victoria doesn't have any heart-to-heart talks with these dogs she is trying to straighten out. On the face of it, that would seem to distinguish Victoria's situation from your and my conflicts with people. It is an important difference, but at the same time I think we can make it out to be bigger than it is. Verbal communication can indeed be helpful at times, but my experience

tells me not to count too much on it solving the problem. Talk's overrated. Don't count on your arguments winning the day. Regardless of the merits of your position, if there are payoffs to the other person in what they are doing, you can bet they'll keep on doing it. People respond more to what you are and what you do than what you say. So get clear on where you stand—your limits, your boundaries, your actions-- and stick with it; usually, that is the most powerful thing you can do. People quickly get the idea that you are playing your game, not theirs. Talk's cheap too; it is best to respond to what other people do rather than what they say. Respond to conduct, not promises.

The biggest difference I see between what Victoria is doing with the dogs and your and my situations is that Victoria by and large controls the consequences of dogs' behavior. She is just about their whole world, and if these dogs are going to get something it is going to have to come from Victoria; and so she can control what the dogs get and don't get and thereby manage them. People, on the other hand, most often get rewards from somebody and something other than you or me. In a work situation, say, someone could be dumping on us and getting rewards from others in the setting or from the system: social and professional affirmation and inclusion, opportunities and promotions, and so on. Someone's friends or family may be stroking them for getting on your case, as they ally with them and invite them to dinner and not you. But at least you and I can stop contributing to the problem, and that could ultimately win the day, or at least help matters. We have to keep in mind, however, that there could come the time when we survey the situation and realize that no matter what we do with this other person the forces working against us are bigger than we are—either the other person is more that we can handle (I suspect Victoria keeps her failures to herself) or the context is, and that the best thing we can do is bear up with the situation with as much dignity as we can muster or hit the road.

