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The Phoebe Chronicles

By Gale Pryor

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About the author:

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The Phoebe Chronicles: Letter from America

Our small New England town is 10 miles from downtown Boston, Massachusetts, five miles from Harvard Square, and 100 miles from the nearest flock of sheep. The homes sit on one-eighth acre lots of perfect green lawns and tidy flowerbeds. The town's canine control laws are strict and enforced: every dog must wear a leash, all dog droppings must be picked up and disposed of properly, dogs are not allowed on town fields, and no dog is allowed to bark for more than 10 minutes. If the town had its way, dogs might be banned altogether—certainly anything larger and more active than a pug or a dachshund.



It's a wonderful town, however, in which to raise children—good schools, a nearby library, safe streets, and a public pool. Our three sons—Max, 15, Wylie, 11, and Nathaniel, 5 years old—hop on their bikes to ride to the pizza place and the candy store, and can always find enough friends for a baseball game.

In 1992, when my older boys were still quite little, the clamoring for a dog began. My mother, savvy grandmother and animal behaviorist that she is, said, “You don't need to take care of one more living thing. You need something that will help you take care of them. Get a Border collie.”

A Border collie? Here, in Tidy Lawn, USA? A Border collie? Those frighteningly brilliant creatures that drive themselves and everyone around them mad if not provided with the mental and physical challenge of sheep herding or mountain rescue on a daily basis? Surely, mother, you can't be serious. “Oh, yes,” she said, “a collie would be perfect. In fact, I just met a lovely dog in Michigan. Let's see if we can get a puppy from her breeder.”

Esme, a 10-week-old white collie puppy, was soon put on a plane to Boston. Ten years later, she's nanny, pal, bedwarmer, kitchen-floor and baby-face cleaner, ace football goalie and baseball outfielder. In short, the world's best family dog. “Ez” employs herself by gently nudging the neighborhood toddlers off the street and on the sidewalk, visiting (and snacking with) lonely elders, letting the grownups know if the 10-year-olds are doing something risky, and generally being a contributing member of the community. Ez doesn't need a flock of sheep. She's got a flock of humans to watch over, and she takes her work seriously. Sometimes she wears a leash, and sometimes not. The animal control officer tends to turn a blind eye to Ez—perhaps because he's an ex-army sergeant, and appreciates that I've clicker trained her to salute him.

While healthy at 10, Ez is slowing down. The ripe old age of 15 or 16 suddenly seems right around the corner. It's become a burning question: How could we ever manage without her? Could any Border collie adapt to the suburban life of a busy family so happily—or is our Ezzie unique?

Or, is the real question whether suburban family life can be adapted to the needs of a collie. After all, shouldn't life be stimulating and purposeful for every dog, whether on an eighth of an acre or on 100 acres?

On a trip to the Cotswolds in March 2002, I posed these questions to Kay Laurence. Her wicked response was to introduce me to the Genabacab collies, including Quiz and her two-week-old pups. Thirteen weeks later, young Genabacab Quick Step, aka Phoebe, arrived in Boston, accompanied by Kay herself. And so our experiment in collie-raising in an American suburb begins.

Phoebe joined our family long before she arrived. Kay sent pictures of her as she grew, and as each adorable image went up on the refrigerator, she worked her way into my three sons' affections. Since they remembered little about Esme's puppyhood years ago, I prepared them by talking about what life with the puppy would be like, knowing that unchecked imaginations could be in for a surprising reality. By the day Phoebe arrived, the boys knew:

- Puppies are babies. They need to be loved, there's a lot they don't understand, and they need to be treated gently.
- Puppies need toys. On a trip to the local pet shop, the boys chose a range of things that rattle and squeak. I selected a few additional Kongs and other chewable items. I also pulled a box of the boys' own well-gnawed baby toys out of storage.
- Unwanted behaviors are not funny. Everyone in the family would be responsible for teaching the puppy what is okay and what is not okay. What is cute in a 15-week-old pup would not be as sweet in a one-year-old dog. Laughing and dancing around in response to ankle-biting only means more ankle-biting; walking away and ending the game means less.
- Puppies do not learn by punishment. Punishment has never been a discipline tool in our household so this rule was obvious to our boys. The neighborhood children, however, required some education: "Yes, I know your dog was taught not to jump by kneeing him in the chest, but we will not teach our puppy that way—and neither will you."
- Only Mom uses the clicker. The boys of course found the clicker an irresistible toy. Without a firm rule, Phoebe would have had to endure an endless cacophony of meaningless click-click-click-clicks in her ear.

More preparation for Phoebe's arrival, however, took place in my mind than in conversations with my sons. Families so often run into problems when they bring home a puppy because it never occurs to the adults that real commitment—just short of opening a college savings account—to this new family member is required. I prepared for Phoebe's arrival in much the same way I have for any of my babies. I recognized that both my mind and my heart would be busy caring for this new collie-child, and that consequently I would get less done in every other area of my life. I prepared myself to bond, and that would make all the difference.

Can a lass from sheep country adjust and prosper in Tidy Lawn, USA? Can three boisterous boys be taught to be sensible collie handlers? Find out what it takes for a busy family to keep a collie happy and occupied (thank God for Canadian geese), how clicker training a collie affects child development, husband development, and neighborly relations—and what Ez thinks of all this.

The Phoebe Chronicles II: The Lass Has Landed

Genabacab Quick Step, aka “Phoebe,” now 15 weeks old, has been duly socialized to a multitude of experiences: cars and trucks, streets and fields, college students and elderly neighbors, and any other stimulating encounter Kay Laurence could produce for her and her littermates.



Just two out-of-the-ordinary experiences await her. How will young Phoebe respond to nine hours alone in a crate on a jet 30,000 feet in the sky, only to land in place so far away that every smell and even the sounds will be new and different? And how, after she arrives and pees a puddle the size of Lake Michigan, will she endure the loving attentions of a crowd of children, a variant of human she has never encountered?

Having learned since her first weeks that new and different means fun and rewarding—and with her built-in steady Genabacab temperament—Phoebe proves well prepared for anything from plane rides to two-year-olds.

Phoebe, still in her crate, is carried like an Indian princess into her new home. The crate is opened and Phoebe is enveloped in kisses and hugs. She seems to like it.

Clicker training and careful management keep her liking it. The next several weeks require constant surveillance. Not only do I watch the puppy for signals of a full bladder, but also for signs of stress. Like housetraining, the key to teaching a puppy to become a solid family dog is to stop accidents before they happen.

The first behavior I want to capture with clicks and treats is placid reactions to surprising events. A ball bounces near her head, and she jumps toward it, ears up, rather than away, tail down. Click. She watches calmly as a pack of 10-year-old boys storm through the front door flinging 20-pound backpacks in random directions as they go. Click. While Phoebe dozes on the rug, my 5-year-old son suddenly swoops her belly-side-up into his arms and kisses her on the nose. She kisses him back. Click. Now she is learning that the boisterous and unpredictable can be fun and rewarding.

And if Phoebe does appear fatigued and on her way to being stressed, it’s time for the baby to go to bed. Frequent rest spells in her cozy crate with a bone to chew keep her ready for anything.

When she is full of energy and ready to play, appropriate amusement must be provided. A basket of tug toys keeps both puppy and a boy (two birds with one stone!) happy and busy for a few minutes. The resident guinea pigs, safely caged and oblivious to the ferocious beast at their borders, keep the puppy happily running in circles for an hour or more. A new best friend just her age, Lilly the poodle, lives around the corner, and frequent puppy play dates are arranged.

Phoebe is a working sheep dog, so work must be found. Clicker training sessions exercise her brain as we both learn fundamental freestyle moves. And, fortunately, Tidy Lawn, USA, has a terrible infestation of Canadian geese polluting its smooth green playing fields. Esme, our elderly collie, has been doing her best to chase them off. Now she has an apprentice, and Phoebe's deep-rooted herding instincts find a most satisfying outlet.



The Phoebe Chronicles III: Phoebe Learns the Ropes

At 10 ½ months old, Phoebe, aka Feebes, the Feebinator, and Fubilation, is pure high-octane adolescent Border collie energy and zoom.

Luckily, this household of three boys is accustomed to adolescent zoom, and with a little planning we can meet her needs, even in Tidy Lawn, USA. Phoebe is a cooperative and gentle member of our family *if* she exercises at least three times a day and solves a puzzle at least once a day.



A cold nose nudges my hand at 5:30 every morning. Phoebe's first task is to get me up and out. Elderly Esme would rather sleep in, but she hoists herself up to join us. Tidy Lawn forbids dogs to be off-leash anywhere except their own yards, so we practice virtual leash walking under the cover of darkness.

Feebes trots at my heel because the cue "with me" rather than a leash holds her there. We walk to the schoolyard, halting and sitting, doing inside and outside turns, all on heel. A click and a treat reinforce particularly well-executed moves. At the schoolyard, "Go play" releases her to run, sniff, and chase squirrels. Her pals Jessie and Jazz may even show up on their morning walk for some pre-dawn puppy play. Sometimes we stop by the playground, with clicks and treats, practice walking along a four-inch wide beam or zig-zagging around poles. (In her youth, Esme loved to skid down the slide, with all the neighborhood children behind her. Soon, we'll add that to Phoebe's repertoire as well.)

Back home, waking the boys for school is a responsibility Phoebe takes seriously, planting four feet on all sides of a boy and licking him awake. (Those who want to sleep in have learned to

sleep on the top bunk.) After the boys head to school, I'll sit down to work and she must follow Esme's example and wait quietly for several hours for me to finish.

The end of my work is rewarded with the beginning of Phoebe's work. While the house is still quiet, we stretch her brain with clicker training. She is learning to put her toys away, take a bow, weave through my legs, play the maracas, and a few fundamental freestyle moves. Lessons end with a mid-day walk, this time to Tidy Lawn's high school field to see if the Canadian geese are in residence. The geese graze the field, leaving small unpleasant presents for the after-school sports teams as they go. Esme lumbers directly toward the flock, efficiently flushing it into the air. Phoebe drops into classic collie herding position, and creeps wide around them, urging them toward an unseen pen. On other days, we head instead over to her best buddy Lily's house, where a fenced-in backyard allows the two young dogs to wrestle and run until they're reduced to staring side-by-side at passing traffic.

Phoebe is learning other tasks and behaviors, all assisted by clicker training and Esme's experienced model: to wait calmly on the sidewalk for me to reappear from the bookshop; to let strange children hug and kiss her while I dash into the school; to drop to her belly when a fearful child reaches out a tentative hand; to sit for the elderly neighbor; to wear a harness and pull a skateboarder; to guard rather than harass the guinea pigs. A solid family dog is no slouch. Her job is a 24-hour, week-in-and-week-out responsibility, with no time off when nothing is happening on the farm. On this tiny, sheepless farm, there's always something happening—and Feebes is almost always right in the middle of it.

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The Phoebe Chronicles IV: Phoebe Goes to School

Winter stretches on in Tidy Lawn, USA. The temperature on this early March morning is -15 C, and may rise to -5 C by noon. The first day of spring, just 14 days away, sends no harbingers this year.

Dog walks this winter require snow pants, boots, a down vest topped by a down jacket, muffler, hat, and thick gloves. Phoebe and Esme wait patiently while I prepare for the elements. The cold



doesn't seem to bother them, but the salt spread on the roads burns their feet and the snow packs into their paws. Esme's arthritis flares up in the cold, and some days she would rather wait on the front steps than come along on our walk.

Like my boys, however, Phoebe has no complaints about snow. The deeper the better. I've dug out my cross-country skis from the basement and Phoebe and I hit the local golf course. I follow the tracks of other skiers on a two-mile loop, as Feebes leaps

through the deep snow alongside me. It's a good workout for both of us. When she tires, Phoebe hops into the track behind me and trots along with less effort.

We can't cross-country ski every day, and the geese have left Tidy Lawn for grassier fields farther south. The lack of exercise imposed by this extreme winter has made us both a little stir crazy.

As an adolescent, Feebes not only needs more exercise, she also requires more structure. We've had fun training tricks and socializing her to a busy household of children. Some proper schooling, however, is in order. I sign us up for a Saturday morning obedience class with Israel Meir, owner of Sit & Stay Behavior and Training. Israel expects his clients to understand the science behind the how-to of clicker training. Having learned to clicker train through intuition and osmosis, it's time to find out what I don't know.

At the group obedience class—an assembly of golden retrievers, Labradors, an Airedale, and a poodle (Phoebe's best pal Lily)—I remember what it means to be a Border collie. We're accustomed to Phoebe's zoom-y approach to life, but her energy and alertness against the background of the other dogs amazes even me. At the first class, she's electrified—and barks and barks. By the next class, she settles down and we can get to work.

Israel teaches me to teach Phoebe. He shapes my handling technique: "Treat her in heeling position, not out front." He checks my timing. Then, as this is a Level II class, he runs us through the basics to see what we've covered on our own. Phoebe heels beautifully. She retrieves a dumbbell like a pro. Her understanding, however, of the difference between "sit" and "lie down" is a little muddly. And, oops, we forgot all about "stay."

While Phoebe can learn a trick in three or four clicks, learning to do nothing is an awful challenge. Boredom is punishment. She can't bear it, and I can hardly bear to ask it of her. Israel is teaching me that my expectations for Phoebe are as important as well-timed clicks. I know staying still is hard for her. That doesn't mean she can't or doesn't need to learn to do it. She is capable of anything. It's only a matter of what I expect from her.

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The Phoebe Chronicles V: Learning amid Skateboards



Three-ring circus. Grand Central Station. Fort Chaos. All synonyms for “my house.” Three high-energy boys with assorted friends carrying skateboards and tossing balls and leaping off the living room couch, plus one high-energy Border collie (and another highly tolerant collie of ebbing energy) make the place buzz.

I've long since found a meditative zone within the frenzy.

It's all just white noise while I write or cook or talk on the phone. Perhaps I've just been worn to a nub and there is nothing left to rattle, but I can focus in the midst of chaos. (I'd like to offer you the metaphor of a ringmaster here. Honestly, however, a waitress at a busy diner is closer to the mark. An air traffic controller simply sitting back and watching the planes land—or not—is right on the button.)

The question is, can a young Border collie learn to focus in the midst of chaos? Can Phoebe learn anything during a clicker training session in course of which someone repeatedly asks me what's for dinner, and another person passes through the room with several friends who want to pet the dog, and a third person begs to try the clicker?

The extraordinary fact is that she can. Phoebe and I have just accomplished a new trick that's been on my wish list for a while: circle me tail-first. It isn't an easy trick to learn or teach, but we managed it whenever I found five minutes to bring out the clicker and treats. The breakthrough, Phoebe's "aha!" moment, came one day while Nathaniel, my five-year-old, joined us for the training session to tell me all about turtles. (He's been interested in reptiles and amphibians lately, and we've all heard a lot about frogs. A lot. Now turtles will have their turn.) As I gave him my ears and Phoebe my eyes, she made a full backward circle three times in a row! Time to name the behavior. The cue? "Turtle."

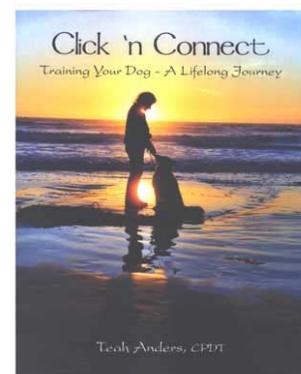
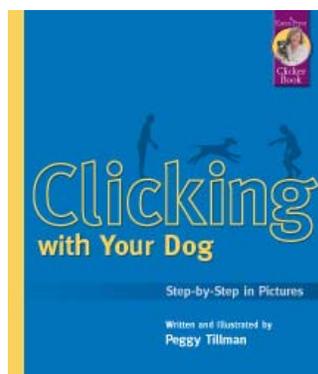
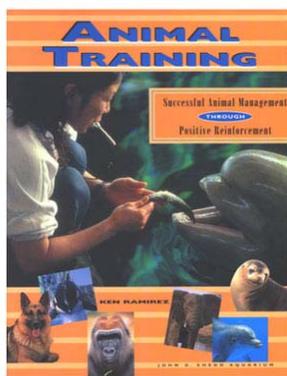
I feel certain that traditional training or even lure-and-reward training would fail in these conditions. The dog must be thinking, and thinking hard, to tune out any and all distractions. The dog must be more motivated to earn the reward than to join in any surrounding activity. To be sure, Phoebe's willing temperament is the right one for this environment. Excitement is innately stimulating rather than stressful for her. However, focusing in spite of excitement is a skill she is learning through clicker training.

I have observed, however, that Phoebe has another skill, one that I suspect comes from neither temperament nor clicker training, but directly from the fact that she is trained in an erratic environment. She generalizes her trained behaviors astonishingly well. A trick trained in my living room, "turtle" for example, can be cued and performed within days on the sidelines of a soccer game or anywhere else. She does not seem to need re-training from step 1 in every new setting in order to achieve reliability. She has learned to focus in the midst of distractions, whether they are noisy children or sidewalks and trees. (I make no promises, however, when squirrels are in the vicinity.)

I have no higher ambition for Phoebe than to be a solid family dog (who knows a few tricks and can herd a few sheep). Yet, if I were training her for something more universally impressive—search and rescue or championship-level agility—I would still desensitize her to environmental stimuli and establish stimulus control in the most effective way possible: right here in Fort Chaos.

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The Phoebe Chronicles VI: Phoebe Meets Some Sheep



Esme, the senior collie in my house, has been my partner through 11 years of chasing and rounding up little boys. Years ago, she assessed the task in front of her—help Gale to keep wandering toddlers in tidy groups and children on wheels off the road—and got to work. She always keeps an eye on where I am, what I am doing, what I am saying, and springs to action if needed.

One of the pleasures of the partnership for me is that I am unaware of most of the cues I give her. I just bumble through my day, dog at my heels, and she takes care of the rest. Recently, my mother pointed out that when I say “On second thought—” Esme pauses and sits expectantly. “Oh, hang on a minute, Ez, I forgot something in the house,” works just as well. Most likely, her cue isn’t my words at all, but a shift of shoulders or a change in tone that tell my dog loud and clear, “Cancel that, new orders to follow.”

With the boys no longer toddlers, young Phoebe does not have as clear a task in front of her as Ez has had over the last decade. Yet a working partnership is what Phoebe built for, and what I’ve come to value most in my dogs. Feebes already keeps a close eye on me, and is ready to jump to whatever task I ask of her. The problem is that I haven’t quite figured out what that task will be.

In early spring, Dee Ganley of the Upper Valley Humane Society in New Hampshire asked if Phoebe and I would like to try out sheepherding. Brenda Buja, a USDAA Grand Prix National agility champion and trainer, also competes in herding trials. She would be giving once-a-month herding workshops through the summer up at Dee’s place, and they would welcome a pair of newbies like me and Feebes. A day with my dog in a field of sheep couldn’t take me farther from carpooling and grocery shopping in Tidy Lawn; I couldn’t wait to get started.

We drove up for our first workshop in mid-May and joined five other dogs and handlers in Dee’s backyard, which offers several acres of field and paddock, a barn, agility course, and a cooling-off pond for the dogs. The other teams were at various levels of experience, the most accomplished being a 19-year-old boy, Mike, and his nine-month-old Border collie, Rod, who had never been on sheep but had spent a lot of time working ducks. Rod was awesome. Still half-grown, he controlled our three sheep like a dog twice his size and many years older.

Then it was Phoebe’s turn to have a go. High on her toes, barking madly, biting at the flanks of the sheep, she lost control of herself and never had any over the sheep. Of course, I didn’t know what I was doing either, except being dumped in the dust by sheep scurrying to escape the mad wolf.

Then Brenda sent each handler in to work the sheep without our dogs. As I moved the sheep around the paddock, keeping them bunched but calm, my understanding leaped. Sheepherding is all about pressure, how much and where from. The shepherd’s job is to control the pressure, the

dog's job is to apply it. A talented and experienced dog will know how to control the pressure as well or better than the shepherd.

After lunch, we took turns taking our dogs back into the paddock. This time something in Phoebe's brain, an impulse fueled by her bloodlines, clicked on. Instead of lunging toward and leaping back from the sheep, she began circling. I spun at the center of her circle, sheep bunched around my legs. Then, with Brenda's guidance, I reached out with a staff into Feebes's path and reversed the direction of her circle. I reached out with the opposite hand, and she reversed again. "Back up! Walk backwards now," Brenda called. I did, and Feebes turned on the diameter of her circle to drive the sheep toward me, weaving from side to side. She knew what to do.

It was exhilarating to see my flirty Phoebe become, in an instant, a working sheepdog. A month later, we drove up to Dee's place again for a second workshop with Brenda. I fretted that a month without practice would erase the progress we had made that first day. Feebes was also in the midst of her first season, and had been lethargic and spacey all month.

Apparently, she had been practicing without telling me. Jumping out of the van, she saw the sheep, shook off her lethargy, and rolled up her sleeves. This time her circles were wide and steady. She was so sensitive to the pressure I applied to her with a thrust of the staff that Brenda took it away and said to just flick my hat at her. "You could trial this dog," Brenda told me.

When we managed to do several figure eights around our sheep in the paddock, Brenda moved us into a small field to give more space for Phoebe's graceful circles. I thought, too, that if we had a direction in which to move the sheep, from barn to gate and back, I would better understand the balance between dog, handler, and sheep. In the larger space, we fell apart. Phoebe's month of being lazy and leash-walked while in season began to show as she flopped in the shade letting the sheep trot past. I felt as though I was always standing in the wrong place, and the whole business would be a lot easier if we could just get the sheep out of the way. It was time to stop.

But we'll be back. Brenda's next workshop is in two weeks, and I can't wait.



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The Phoebe Chronicles VII: Illness Strikes



Ten days ago, early in the morning before my family woke, Phoebe and I snuck out to see if the Canada geese were around. A hundred or more were peacefully grazing on the high school field. Phoebe knows about herding now, and crept wide around the flock, keeping sufficient air space to prevent the flock from flushing. Her body was low, tense, and focused and, when the geese finally rose honking into the sky, she broke into a long, joyful gallop after them.

We came home and Phoebe jumped out of the car and went to lay under the piano, where she rested while I hustled the boys off to summer camp and settled down for my morning work. A few hours later, while my son Wylie and I ate lunch, I heard Phoebe stand up, and fall down.

I went to look and saw Phoebe propped on her front legs, her back legs splayed on the floor, her face distressed and confused. I felt her legs and feet. Had she sprained an ankle or injured her spine herding the geese? What had happened to my dog?

A few minutes later, my friend and dog-walking partner Kristin stopped by to see if Phoebe wanted to play with her buddy Lily the poodle. Kristin stayed with Phoebe while I ran to call our vet and my mother. My vet was on vacation and the substitute vet did not seem up to this challenge. By the time my mother arrived at the house, Phoebe's front legs had gone too. We put her in the car and drove directly to Angell Memorial Hospital, Boston's top research animal hospital.

The emergency room vet, Michelle Davis, didn't know exactly what was happening to Phoebe, yet felt it was serious and admitted her for the night. We came home to wait.

Later that night, Dr. Davis called. The staff neurologist had examined Phoebe and felt there were four possible diagnoses: coonhound paralysis, botulism, tick paralysis, or myasthenia gravis. Dr. Davis gave me an update on Phoebe's condition. The paralysis had extended as far as her face. Now she couldn't even blink.

The vets gave her a high dose of steroids to halt the progress of the paralysis before it reached her respiratory muscles. She kept breathing, although every breath was a desperate pant.

By the next day, the vets had settled on coonhound paralysis as the most likely diagnosis. Rare and not well understood, the disease is seen mainly in hunting dogs, often those who have recently come in contact with a raccoon. Fifty percent of cases, however, have no clear etiology. In coonhound, the dog's immune system overreacts to a foreign protein, virus, or other agent, inflaming the peripheral nerve and creating total flaccid temporary paralysis. The canine equivalent of Guillan-Barre, the disease is highly variable. Sometimes the paralysis lasts just a few days, sometimes months. The average period before the paralysis recedes is 10 days. If a dog can keep breathing, eating, and drinking until the paralysis wears off, however, recovery is usually swift and complete.

I brought Phoebe home two days later to provide supportive care as long as she needed it: feeding and watering her by hand, carrying her outside and holding her in position to eliminate, cleaning her up when I didn't get her out in time, flexing her joints and massaging her muscles, putting drops in her eyes, and turning her every three hours to prevent bed sores. My husband organized her bedding and ran to the store for more supplies, the boys helped massage and feed her, and our neighbors pitched in by carrying her whenever I asked to save my back.

The supportive care was not a terrible thing; I've always loved having a newborn baby in the house, and having Phoebe home was a lot like those days—with the exception that she weighs 40 pounds rather than 8. Her unquenchable thirst, desperate panting and staring, frightened eyes, however, were terrible and kept me awake more than nursing tasks. Over three days, I never saw Phoebe's eyes close.

Then Phoebe's pee turned dark brown. I drove her back to Angell. By the time I arrived, her temperature was 106 F. There, the vets brought her fever down and put an IV in to hydrate her and deliver antibiotics. They gave up the plan to wean her off the steroids and stopped them altogether.

I told the vets that while Phoebe may have slept while I was sleeping, I had been checking her four or five times a night and watching her all day long, and I had never witnessed her sleeping. Dr. Davis instructed the critical care staff to mark on her chart if anyone saw her sleeping. Over the next two days, no one did.

We realized, with awe, that Phoebe had been working so hard to breathe and was so determined to stay alive that she had kept herself awake for five days.

By the evening of day six of the disease, I could feel her breath become shallower and shallower as she lay prone. After 15 or 20 minutes of slowing breath, she would make the Herculean effort of jerking up onto her elbows to shake her head and wake herself up. Then she would lie down and rest until her breath slowed too far again. The vets didn't feel she could manage on her own much longer, and that a ventilator might be necessary very soon.

How long would she need to be on it? Anywhere from three days to three weeks, they told me. It was impossible to predict. She would also be at an increased risk of pneumonia and other complications from the ventilator itself. And how much would it cost? \$300 a day.

Yet, if we could keep her alive—and she wanted to live so much—she would recover and would have a long and healthy life. I asked them to put her on the ventilator for another three days, with the thought that if we could get her past day 10 of the disease, the average duration, she might begin to recover on her own.

After I left the hospital, Dr. Davis had a thought. She called the nearest human pharmacy and asked for a prescription of Xanax for Phoebe. An anti-depressant useful for situational anxiety in people, the drug might ease Phoebe's anxiety and fear just enough to let her rest without depressing her breathing. If she could sleep, thought Dr. Davis, she might just be able to recover without the help of the ventilator.

It worked. With the help of the Xanax, Phoebe relaxed, began breathing through her nose, and slept that night. She dozed the next two days, until they allowed me to bring her home again.

Today, day 10 of the coonhound paralysis, Phoebe stood up on four shaky, bendy legs, pooped, and then walked five feet. Now she's sleeping, utterly exhausted and building up energy for her next amazing feat. While it may take some time before we're herding sheep and geese again, Phoebe is on her way back.

Postscript: Phoebe has, seven weeks later, returned to full capacity. Able to fly two miles without fatigue. In fact, I haven't found anything recently that does fatigue her. She seems once again powered by electrical current rather than muscle and bone; barely touches the ground when she runs. Glossy coat, mischievous eyes, a menace to anyone walking by in white socks. The whole event is dimming into a bizarre memory, although I'll never look at her again and not be thankful that she's still here, lying at my feet and waiting to have some fun.

The Phoebe Chronicles VIII: Excuses, Excuses

While Phoebe couldn't come along, I spent a happy five days last month visiting with her family, the Genabacab clan of collies: mother Quiz, grandmother Kiwi, littermate Tilly, and assorted aunts and great-uncles. We all gathered in the Cotswolds, UK, the second weekend of October for Kay Laurence's Clicker Conference and Challenge.



It was fascinating to pick out traces of my girl's characteristics in her relatives. Both Phoebe and her sister Tilly are long-legged romps compared to her graceful, composed mother and petite, sweet grandmother. Tilly has a serenity that may yet come to Phoebe—or not. Grandma Kiwi has Phoebe's impatience with boredom, yet endless willingness to stick with you as long as you're going somewhere. I could see in Quiz a maturation of Phoebe's fearlessness, the tendency to take the reins if she feels you're not up to the job.

Roger Reed, Tilly's buoyant and smitten owner and trainer, has done an impressive job of giving her a range of behaviors, each sharply on cue. She spins, she does a high high-five, and much more. I was, in truth, slightly chagrined. Phoebe has a lot of behaviors, too, but few are as well finished as Tilly's.

Well, I consoled myself, I'm so busy. What with these sons, and my work, and just life, I don't have time to really train my dog properly. Then every chance I do have to train, we're interrupted. And then there are all the bad habits other people teach her, like ankle-biting and leash-pulling and jumping up. If I cannot control my life, how can I control my dog? Then I remembered that I am a clicker trainer. It's not about controlling my dog. It's about communicating with my dog. The erratic environment in which my dog lives may make intensive training sessions hard to come by, but there's no need for it to blur the clarity of our communication.

Take loose-leash walking. A lot of different people take Phoebe for walks: my sons, the little girls from down the street, my dog walking partner. Can I depend on any of them to walk her correctly, not to let her pull? Of course not. In fact, to a one, they unwittingly train her to yank them down the sidewalk. Even I don't always want her trotting by my side looking up at my face. Sometimes she needs be at the end of the leash, to sniff every smell, and find just the right spot to relieve herself.

Yet, when I want her trotting beside me, pacing herself to my step, and ignoring squirrels and scents in favor of me, I want it instantly. The cue for walking nicely, then, can't simply be walking on leash. That covers too wide a territory—too many people, too many places, too many variables—in Phoebe's world. I need a clear signal to her that says, "Now, with me, in this place, I need you to walk that particular way I taught you." The more erratic a dog's environment, the more specific our cues need to be.

Drawing on my horseback riding days, I've turned Phoebe's leash into a rein; its position on her neck is her cue for the type of walking I desire. When I want her to walk by my side, it droops to the right, resting across her shoulder. She feels it as she walks, cueing her to continue the behavior. If she forgets herself, slight pressure on her shoulder, rather than her neck, reminds her. It doesn't hold her in position, but is a lightly felt signal. If walking at the end of the leash, sniffing and roaming as we go, is allowed, then the buckle of the leash moves up to between her shoulders. Conveniently, that's where it sits when anyone else walks her, so the behavior she gives them automatically receives the correct cue. While I haven't trained it yet, I think the cue for walking backwards (just for fun) will be draping the leash across her left shoulder. The position of the leash as a cue for walking manners didn't take long to train. It just required, and provides, clarity.

I empathize with pet owners who surrender to having half-trained dogs or chronic, annoying behaviors because they can't control all the influences in their dogs' lives, all the inconsistencies that end up reinforcing unwanted behaviors. Yet, the clarity of clicker training—one clear signal for one specific behavior—is the antidote for an uncontrollable environment. We don't have to ask everyone to train the dog, a hopeless enterprise. We just need to teach each cue clearly and completely, a little bit at a time. No excuses.



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The Phoebe Chronicles IX: Teaching Teenagers Manners



Phoebe and I live in Tidy Lawn, USA, a town that is sadly also home to many adolescent dogs that haven't been allowed to play with other dogs. The culture of dog ownership in this average American suburb just isn't sufficiently informed for pet owners to understand the importance of puppy playtime. Too many of Tidy Lawn's dogs, therefore, are nice enough dogs for whom canine body language is an unfamiliar, barely spoken tongue; well-intentioned klutzes who bound into playgroups like runaway steamrollers.

Thanks to lots of early socialization with her Genabacab Border collie aunts and grannies and Gordon setter uncles and cousins, Phoebe is a fluent reader of canine body language. She knows when a very young puppy wants to play, but not too much. She knows when an old lady doesn't mind a sniff or two, but has no interest in a raucous game of keep-the-stick-away. She adores wrestling and mock-fighting with her best pal, Lily the poodle. The canine klutzes, however, those non-socialized young dogs that abound in Tidy Lawn, are really beginning to get on Phoebe's nerves.

I've been fairly relaxed about letting Phoebe play at the park with any dog who comes along, confident in her ability to assess and respond appropriately. If she is able to tell another dog to back off, so much the better. I can bird watch and daydream while Phoebe manages the canine situation. Lately, however, her communication with a dog here and there, always some unknown, over-enthusiastic teenager, moves swiftly from merely a raised lip to raised hackles, fierce snarls, and bared-teeth snaps. "Dammit, you dope," I imagine her saying, "don't you speak DOG?!"

I know that Phoebe is dealing as appropriately as she can with inappropriate behavior. These occasional reactive displays are simply a sign that Phoebe is growing up. She will be two years old in a couple of weeks. Phoebe is just insisting on being treated with more respect and less familiarity by strangers than she did as a puppy.

"Phoebe is just insisting on being treated with more respect and less familiarity by strangers than she did as a puppy."

And yet, the worry creeps in, just as it would if one of my boys finally slugged that obnoxious bully at school. It should be okay, but what if it's not? Perhaps this turn in her behavior is more than frustration with klutzy dogs. Could it be she's been tumbled enough by dogs that don't know play etiquette that she's beginning to doubt her own ability to communicate subtly? Could she be leaping straight to aggression, the most overt form of canine communication?

Whatever the reason, I don't like to see my sweet-tempered, capable dog snarl and cringe, even rarely. She seems distracted and antsy for a while after such an encounter. Neither of us wants these events. What to do?

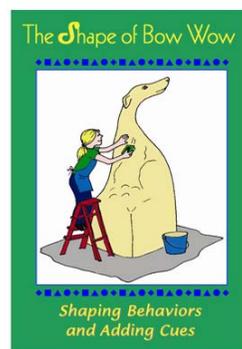
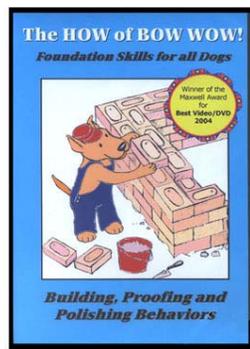
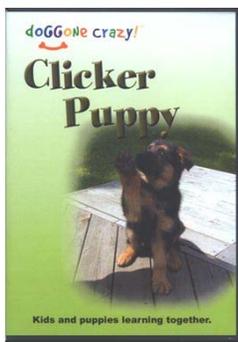
First, I'll do less daydreaming and more dog watching in the park. Whatever the reason for the behavior, I don't want Phoebe to rehearse it. And I want her to know that I will protect her from obnoxious dogs. So, we'll avoid groups of unfamiliar dogs for now, and increase play dates with trusted friends. We'll bring toys and clickers and treats on our walks that are just as interesting and rewarding as other dogs. I'll scour her environment for any aversives that may be making her feel vulnerable. Has she been scolded by my husband or one of the boys? Have I been so busy that she's not receiving all the communication she needs from me? (I will also try to deliver the message to the dog owners we meet in the park that dogs have elaborate rules of etiquette, and jumping all over another dog before being properly introduced may not be welcomed.)

Meanwhile, Phoebe and I will increase our weekly clicker training sessions both at home and at the park. While she is unsettled and distressed after an unfriendly encounter with another dog, after a clicker session, however, Phoebe is calm and relaxed. No matter what we've worked on, the training provides a session of clarity and success. And that, I hope, will bolster her confidence in every other encounter she has—even with dopey suburban teenagers.

Postscript: Time explains all. Phoebe has just come into her second season. No wonder she's been out of sorts!

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The Phoebe Chronicles X: Cotswolds Lass Goes Surfer Chick

My oldest and “middlest” sons couldn’t be more different from each other. Max, the 17-year-old headed to college next year, works hard. He stays up late to study for exams, holds a summer job in a hospital lab to learn more about cell biology—and to increase his star appeal in his college applications. For Max, working hard enables him to learn, so that he may work harder to learn even more. As his parent, I applaud his approach.



Still, I can’t help but admire his younger brother’s attitude. For 13-year-old Wylie, life is about having fun. If learning is fun, he’s all for it. If learning enables him to do something else that’s fun, bring it on. But if learning is dull, leads only to more hard work, or is done for the sake of an A on a piece of paper, this boy asks, then why bother?

Sometimes I ask myself the same questions when it comes to training my dogs. Despite having a dog with champion lines and limitless potential, I’m not currently competing in agility or freestyle or sheepdog trials. I have no plans to teach Phoebe to be a search-and-rescue hero. We won’t be entering obedience trials anytime soon. So if we’re not set on collecting trophies and titles, what’s the point of spending hours training my bright and beautiful dog, learning the finer points of communicating with her, and teaching her? Because when we’re training, just me and my dog, we’re having fun, of course.

And yet, the opposing question also vexes me: Does my lack of ambition for objective recognition of her ability and my training skills prevent my dog from reaching her full potential?

Last month, my family and I took our annual week on Martha’s Vineyard, an island off the coast of Massachusetts. We rent a barebones cottage and spend all day, every day, at the beach. Our favorite stretch of shore has a big sign at the gate that says NO DOGS, just above the sign that says NO NUDE BATHING. Both rules are enthusiastically ignored. Phoebe immediately made friends, human and canine, up and down the beach for a half-mile. Soon our daily arrival was greeted with calls of “Phoebe! Here, Phoebe!” from other families already settled under their umbrellas.

While she had a wonderful time socializing and digging and chasing seagulls, Phoebe fretted when we left her on the sand and headed out into the surf. Thanks to the time we have spent clicker training, however, we could fix that. Her “jump” cue is rock solid; she’ll jump any obstacle immediately and repeatedly. That meant we could guide her out past the breakers by giving her “jump” cues timed to get over each wave. The familiarity of the cue alone was reinforcing, and helped her feel calm and directed in the strange element of rolling white water. When she reached a depth where she had to swim, and could not jump the next wave, she did a U-turn, was lifted by the wave and rode it all the way back to shore. Phoebe was bodysurfing.

Was it fun for her? You bet; she turned around and, tail madly wagging, came right back out again, as my husband gave her well-timed “jump” cues until another good riding wave came along.

This is the point of training, I thought, as I ran to get the camera. It gives our dogs and us more choices, more opportunities, more ways to have fun. Training for competition is just one opportunity to have fun in that it offers, as Kay Laurence says, “The challenge of teaching toward a goal, linking the learning together to make a whole, seeing the pleasure the dog gets from the partnership, and sharing ideas with other like-minded folks.” Winning is beside the point.

Working with Phoebe, I’ve been able to perfect a few cues, including “jump.” Our training on the agility field hasn’t led to agility titles, but it did create an opportunity for my dog to go surfing. How cool is that? Who knew Phoebe’s potential encompassed bodysurfing?

So while you’ll catch me bragging about my oldest son’s grades and certificates of honor, and you’ll see me cringe if asked when I plan to compete with Phoebe in agility or sheep trials, I try to remember that there’s a middle ground, a place where ambition meets contentment, where the doing is more important than the success. You’ll know you’re there when you’re having fun.

The Phoebe Chronicles XI: Family Dog—Working Dog?

Several parks and woody areas near Tidy Lawn allow, by decree or blind-eyed consent, off-leash dog walking. Phoebe and I visit them three or four times a week. She runs ahead, tracks new smells, meets new dogs, and plays keep-the-stick-away with her best friend, Lily the poodle. I stretch my legs and let my mind wander, while Esme does a creaky trot by my side.



We go most frequently to Fresh Pond, in next-door Cambridge, an urban park with a two-and-a-half mile walking track around the city’s reservoir. Fresh Pond is a gathering spot for dog owners who, on average, know a bit about dogs. The professional dog walkers bring their packs and meet under the big pine, their version of the office water cooler. Cambridge residents with dogs intended for

conformation competition come to compare notes and dogs. Many balls are tossed and praise for handsome dogs is shared. Phoebe and I both look forward to a visit with the doggy gang halfway through our walk.

On some days, however, I leave the gathering deeply annoyed, and must walk another mile before my feathers are soothed. It begins with a comment as we join the group and Phoebe sets to playing with the other dogs, while Esme settles at my feet.

“Wow, you’ve got two Border collies.”

“Yes, the black one over there, Phoebe, is two, and this one here is my old lady, Esme,” I respond.

“Border collies are wonderful dogs,” begins the lecture, “but they really need a job to do.”

I sigh, knowing what’s coming from this experienced dog person who has never owned a collie.

“Are they a lot of work?” is the next question, with the questioner fully expecting me to unload a book of stories about the trouble my Border collies have caused me and my neighbors due to my ill-advised decision to keep them as pets. After all, the questioner has clearly read all of Donald McCaig’s books about the brilliant Border collie, including his dire warning that, “If this has persuaded you to buy a Border collie for a pet, I have done you and your dog a disservice.”

I don’t think I’d like to run into Donald McCaig in a dark alley because he seems a tough sort of person and I, frankly, entirely disagree with him. On the other hand, perhaps my definition of “pet” is not what he, and the disapproving questioner in the park, has in mind.

One of my neighbors has a bumper sticker on her car that reads: *Every mother is a working mother*. I think I’ll have one made up that reads: *Family dogs are working dogs*. McCaig and the expert in the park are right; Border collies are working dogs. That is precisely why I have chosen the breed for our family dogs. Of course they need training and an interesting, stimulating life. Every dog does. I provide that, and in return, rely on their intelligent, companionable usefulness to keep things running smoothly around here.

I have many jobs to do, all day, every day. I must walk children to school, drive the car different places, stop in at different stores, greet friends and strangers at the door, keep the boys’ roughhousing in check, exercise outdoors, sit quietly at the computer, and attend meetings at various offices. The dogs accompany me on all these tasks. They make every errand more interesting and less tiresome. They know when to be sociable and when to lie down silently. Do they know that waiting politely for me outside the bank is not absolutely essential to the success of my errand? No, but they consider it one of their important jobs, and I appreciate their dedication.

The dogs also provide services I cannot manage, as they keep raccoons out of our garbage and squirrels away from the flower bulbs, assess the friendliness or not of the stranger on the path in the woods, and are polite to me when the resident teenager is not. They certainly control my wrestling boys with barking and herding circles far better than I can. They have even earned the gratitude of the local Tidy Lawn administration by clearing the Canada geese from the sports fields every afternoon. Esme has always provided half-time entertainment at the boys’ soccer games by displaying her prowess as a goalie. Phoebe prefers basketball and plays a mean guard, knocking the ball out the hands of the best offensive players.

After raising and training two happy, companionable Border collies as—horrors—pets, I offer my conclusion: A working dog receives reinforcement not necessarily from the work it was

designed to do, but from fulfilling the partnership that accompanies the doing of that work. Involving a dog in all daily activities builds that partnership. Expecting great things of a dog builds partnership. Mental stimulation builds partnership. Clarity builds partnership. Frequent and positive reinforcement builds partnership. Clicker training, in short, whether on a sheep farm or in Tidy Lawn, creates partnership.

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The Phoebe Chronicles XII: What Drives a Border Collie?



Our cat moved out. He disappeared long enough for us to put up “Missing Cat” signs around the neighborhood. The single man who caretakes the house down the street, the guy who fixes his car in the driveway and no one ever talks to, soon called: “I think I’ve got your cat.” Matthias had walked in one day and called this neighbor’s quiet house home. And he won’t come back.

A muscular tabby, Matthias was a birthday gift to one of our sons from a cousin whose cat had kittens. His father was feral, a wild cat who wandered into the yard, left his gene pool, and took off into the fields again. Matthias is his father’s son. A crack mouse hunter who asks to be let out at night rather than curl up on a bed, he owns this hilltop. No other cats dare walk on our block, and even the coyotes that have been eating cats here and there around town haven’t made a meal of Matthias yet. I’ve always hoped they would.

Despite his handsome gold coat, booming purr, and unmatched record at keeping the house mouse-free, Matthias has a tendency that has nearly landed him in the pound innumerable times. He bites babies. He’ll cross the room to do it.

He didn't come by the habit through experience. The household in which he was born had several small children, yet they, like my children, are animal savvy and were never rough with him. He came to our house at eight weeks of age, where he was coddled only by children who know how to hold a cat. The biting was built into him. He just doesn't like children. The younger they are, the less he likes them. Now that all the children in the neighborhood are edging into adolescence, he likes them fine.

Who Matthias doesn't like, and never will, is Phoebe. It's her doing, really. Esme, our 12-year-old Border collie, and the cat are cordial. They touch noses as they pass each other in the doorway. Young Phoebe, however, never saw a cat until she came to live with us at 15 weeks, and never sees Matthias without dropping into a crouch, freezing, and leaping to attack. No amount of bloody scratches on Phoebe's nose deters her. Matthias hasn't been able to walk through the living room without watching his back for two years. No wonder he relocated.

If Phoebe had lived with a cat during her early weeks, would she be more accommodating toward this one? After all, she never saw a child either until she came to live with us, and she likes them fine. The younger they are, the more she likes them. In fact, she adores children and seeks them out wherever she goes. Only a baby in stroller can distract her from a squirrel in a tree.

When my mother and I brought my children and young nieces to the Cotswolds over the summer, we visited with Phoebe's mother, Quiz, and grandmother, Kiwi. Neither collie has spent much time with children, but Quiz's face lit up, just as Phoebe's does, when she saw them: "Oh, lovely, children!" And she made her way right into the middle of their pack. Sweet Kiwi said her hellos, yet preferred the company of the adults.

Clearly, Phoebe's comfort level with children, to the degree that she seeks them out and prefers their company to all but mine, is a gift from her mother. It's a part of the "inherited pack of traits," as her breeder Kay Laurence says, that could have been put to use gentling a lamb, but has been applied instead to coddling children.

Once I took Phoebe to a herding clinic where she displayed a businesslike keenness toward the sheep, circling them with balance from the beginning. If I had a flock on which to practice, she would be a fine working sheepdog. I also brought elderly Esme and two children along that day. While working with Phoebe, I looked up and saw Esme, who never glanced at the sheep, circling my running children with perfect balance and pressure. Perhaps, at some point, she too could have been a fine working dog, but her genetic toolbox has been used for another purpose.

It's possible, however, that the most important tool in the box, the key inherited trait that decides whether a dog is good on sheep or good with children—or splendid with both—is simply the desire to please. The collie's eye for doing what pleases us is uncanny; of course, my dogs would be drawn to children. And perhaps Phoebe figured out right from the beginning that I never really liked that cat. She was just trying to please me.

The Phoebe Chronicles XIII: A Brick and a Click



I just brought Phoebe along so she could say hello. Really. Kay Laurence, her Genabacab grandma, was leading a workshop one weekend in October, but we didn't plan to participate. Phoebe and I could only stay for the morning, in any case, as we were due at the annual Tidy Lawn Halloween Party for Dogs that afternoon.

I also knew that everyone registered for the workshop would be an advanced practitioner of the art of shaping and cueing. I'm a pretty sloppy clicker trainer, as Phoebe would be the first to tell you. From cooking to filing to dog training, precision is not a natural inclination. I, frankly, didn't feel qualified to join the gathered group of clicker wizards.

Yet I did want to get a look at Kay's micro-shaping techniques, which were the focus of the seminar. I know a click can mark any behavior, no matter how small. But can it mark a mere muscle movement, a motion so small the dog is unaware of what it's done? Taking notes off to the side, Phoebe asleep in her X-pen, I jumped when Kay looked around and said, "Let's see... Gale, get Phoebe and let's try this out."

Oh, rats. Couldn't we just hide over here and watch everyone else? Never mind, I've passed the CAP test; we could do this. Kay asked me to shape Phoebe to put her forepaws on a brick. Easy-peasy. After barking at me a bit (translation: "What? What! What is it you want me to do? Tell me clearly!"), she focused and settled to the task. Soon two paws were on the brick. Well, one paw was on the brick and the other slapped the brick before falling off the side. Phoebe's shaped behavior was as sloppy as my training. Not to worry, I thought, the behavior is rough, but it can be polished—shaped for quality—in subsequent sessions.

Then Kay took over. She placed the brick again in front of Phoebe. Phoebe approached the brick, about to repeat the behavior but got a click before she got there. Kay kept clicking on Phoebe's approach to the brick, rather than for the desired ultimate behavior. What was she shaping? The slant of her shoulders and shift of her weight. Kay was marking Phoebe's muscle movements so that when eventually she did place both paws on the brick she would already be balanced and in perfect position; Kay was polishing the behavior before it was established.

Building a behavior from the inside out, rather than getting a rough approximation and then smoothing it, is the essence of micro-shaping. It's tricky stuff. Not only does it require a reversal of our training plans, but a high degree of clicker precision. The handler's mechanical skills both in timing and in tossing the treat must be smooth and quick. Kay used the treat toss to reposition Phoebe's weight—back on her heels and ready to shift forward—in a way I could not manage (at least, not with an audience) without a lot more practice.

Micro-shaping also relies on the handler's observation skills and ability to anticipate the dog's tiniest muscle movement. You need to see what it is you want to reinforce, see what happens just before it, and see it every time in order to keep up a high rate of reinforcement—also a key to success.

Is the challenge of micro-shaping too high for a lackadaisical trainer like me? On the contrary, it may offer the solution to that roster of quickly, easily trained behaviors that never become truly polished. (Phoebe and I have a lot of those.) Like preparing to paint a room by first spackling and sanding the surface, rather than slapping the paint over all the flaws, I can save myself a lot of trouble later on by doing it correctly from the beginning.

And Phoebe? Makes no difference to her. Any clicker training session is puzzle-solving. Whether I'm clicking her for a shift in her weight, instead of standing and walking on her back legs, it's all good fun.

The Phoebe Chronicles XIV: Clicking the Family (Dog)



On the way home from karate class, we dropped off our seven-year-old car pool passenger at his front door. As we drove home, Nathaniel, my own seven-year-old, sighed. “Christopher is hard to train,” he said.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I say something nice to him whenever he says something nice to me. But he doesn't say a lot of nice things. He's getting better, though.”

I don't think Christopher's mother would appreciate that my son considers her son a training prospect, but then I suspect her definition of “training” has something to do with dominance and discipline. The only sort of training my son has seen has been positive: marking and rewarding incremental steps toward an eventual goal.

He would certainly be less aware of the mechanics of positive training—and less able to implement them on his own—if he didn't live with a couple of clicker-trained Border collies.

Clickers are like pencils or nickels in our house. They're on the mantle, in the coat pockets, under the couch pillows. Clicker sessions happen at odd times, anywhere I happen to be. Waiting for the teapot to boil, Phoebe looks attentive, I click her four or five times for backing up in a straight line. Sitting on the couch watching TV, my teenager polishes off a package of beef jerky. Rather than throw out the bits at the bottom of the bag, I ask Phoebe to earn each tasty morsel by practicing spinning to the right, so much harder for some reason than spinning to the left. Dragging the garbage cans up the driveway early in the morning, Phoebe wants to help by yanking on my pants leg. I check my coat pocket for a clicker, ask her to lie down and stay, click once I've got the can where it needs to go, and reward her with a game of tug with a stick.

My three boys live with all this clicking, and accept that this is how one communicates with dogs. They do it themselves, and have clicker trained old Esme to paw their foot when they ask any question beginning with “Who’s the best... -looking in the family/basketball player on the street/skateboarder in town?” They’ve also trained Phoebe to bark on cue, run toward them and bounce off their chests with both paws, and nibble on their fingers when she wants the treat they’re hiding in their fist. While I’m not keen on the behaviors they’ve chosen to train, they got those behaviors with solid, positive, marker-based training.

I’m most pleased, however, with how they’ve implemented the principles of clicker training into their interactions with other humans. In the carpool to and from karate, Nathaniel’s friend teased and generally made himself unpleasant. Once in a while, however, he talked about his passionate interest in endangered animals. Rather than teasing back, Nat waited for these moments, and responded with enthusiasm. Gradually, our car rides together became discussions about wildlife, which evolved into shared plans for saving the rainforest, and the rest of the world while they were at it. Positive beget positive, negative self-extinguished. Simple clicker training.

My boys have learned the mechanics of clicker training by picking up a clicker and treats and trying to get the dog to do something. Those skills are evolving, however, into an ability to focus on the solution to a problem, rather than the problem itself, and to enact that solution step-by-patient-step.

The Phoebe Chronicles XV: A Good Dog



Long before Phoebe joined our family, 13 years ago, we brought home 10-week-old Esme. A nearly pure-white Border collie, she soon put her shepherd instincts to work, substituting a pack of kids for a flock of sheep.

With a name borrowed from the Salinger story *For Esme, with Love and Squalor* (“love and squalor” summing up our life nicely), Ez became our nanny. Babies were her love and her life’s work. I had wanted a dog smart enough to learn to fetch a baby blanket if I needed one

while nursing or otherwise occupied. I got a dog that would stare at me piercingly if the baby cried and I didn’t respond as quickly as she deemed appropriate.

Our increasing flock of small boys ranged and wandered safely while our sheepdog kept her keen eye on them. The middle son, the one who was a crawling baby when she was a tiny puppy, became her special charge. If I didn’t know at which house on our street his little troupe of boys was playing, I’d ask Ez, “Where’s Wylie?” She’d trot over to that front door, looking at me over her shoulder as if to say, “Right here.”

Ez soon expanded her charge to all the children on our street, trotting beside toddlers on the sidewalk, nudging them away from the road. She scolded the older children for roughhousing; parents in our neighborhood learned a certain pitch to Esme's bark meant that the touch football game was getting out of hand. Children up and down the road grew up with Ez as "their" dog, stopping by to call her out for a game of soccer, or to keep them company while their mother was at the store. Visiting dog-phobic children would be brought by to meet Esme. Sensing their fear, she would drop to her belly and creep forward, wagging her tail. When her nose reached the child's toes, she would turn bellyside up, eliciting a timid pat and a brave smile.

In her prime, Esme had the run of the town's playgrounds and athletic fields, keeping an eye on the boys wherever they went, taking part in whatever they did. (I taught her to raise her paw to her nose in a clumsy salute. The animal control officer, an ex-Army sergeant, so appreciated the gesture he never mentioned her leashless, wandering ways.) One day at the playground, I turned to see Ez coming down the slide, and scolded the kids for pushing her down it. They all shouted, "We didn't! Ezzie wanted to!" Sure enough, she ran round to the steps up the climbing structure and did it again. Every visit to a playground after was filled with calls of "Do the slide, Ezzie! Do the slide!" Round and round she'd run and slide with a gaggle of giggling kids behind her. My mother came to visit and asked how I had trained that trick. I confessed I hadn't done any training except to teach Ez not to cut in line. During the boys' soccer games, she'd stand on the sideline and stare, alternately, at the ball and the coach. Her eyes said it all: "Put me in, Coach. I'll control that ball."

As arthritis weakened her hips, Esme substituted creaky strolls around the neighborhood for slides and soccer games. She took up visiting the elderly woman who lives by herself, sharing an afternoon snack. Ez had become an old dog. Young Phoebe had enthusiastically taken over the task of herding the kids from the playground to the soccer fields and back again. Ez sunned herself on the front stoop. On their way back into the house, the boys would sit beside her for a moment, rubbing her ears, and telling her what a good dog she was.

Through the years, whenever friends asked for my advice about getting a puppy and the responsibility of a dog on top of raising children, I would explain why I chose to have the hair, the expense, the early morning walks, and all the other extra burdens dogs add to my already demanding days. "At least someone obeys me," I'd say. If my questioner wanted a thoughtful answer, I'd say that being a mother of small children can be a lonely job. Surrounded by voices and bodies all day long, I am still alone, the only one who really knows the thoughts and tasks that compose my days. My children radiate away from the center, from me. My dogs turn toward me, focused on me while I direct my attention outward, toward my children. The dogs keep me company.

As my sons grew out of frontpacks and strollers, too quickly toward skateboards, then bikes to take them downtown, and driving lessons to take them further, my answer changed: Someday, my boys are going to leave me. My dogs will never leave me.

Except that Esme did leave. One day she went for a walk and didn't come home, dying quietly in a hidden spot outside, with typical grace and humility. She died just as my eldest son finished his college applications, in the year when my youngest son started first grade. Her life, from fluffy

puppy to old dog on the porch, spanned the small child years of my life. Her last gift to me, her final task as nanny, was to give me a moment in which to grieve it all. And then, to turn fresh toward whatever comes next.

Goodbye, pudgy fingers and corn niblet toes. Goodbye, mashed bananas and corduroy overalls. Goodbye, babies. Goodbye, Esme.

The Phoebe Chronicles XVI: The Dharma of Clicker Training

Physicists have string theory, the hoped-for, unifying “theory of everything” to fully explain and link together all known physical phenomena. Looking at fundamental interactions in nature and space, string theory seems to underlie it all. Very exciting, if you’re a physicist.

I’m no physicist nor am I a Buddhist, yet it seems to me that perhaps Buddhism offers the same workable, unifying theory of everything for the rest of us. When I observe the things that interest me—writing, gardening, cooking, walking, children, friendships, and clicker training—through the frame of Buddhism’s simple, grounding ideas, the process becomes the same for each. If I engage in these areas of my life with the teachings of Buddhism in mind, they all proceed with more pleasure, peace, and productivity than they would otherwise. It is a spiritual theory that unifies, explains, and guides daily life and behavior.



Clicker training is especially interesting when viewed through a Zen lens. Take these words of Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese monk, poet, and peace advocate:

“Every day we touch what is wrong, and, as a result, we are becoming less and less healthy. That is why we have to learn to practice touching what is *not* wrong—inside us and around us.”

This is the fundamental realization that we make when we first become clicker trainers. Focusing on what we don’t want leads to more of what we don’t want. Turn your focus to the behaviors you do want in order to see more of these behaviors. The others will disappear.

That epiphany generates the next principle of clicker training: desired behavior must be recognized in the moment it occurs. Clicker trainers practice the discipline of acting in the moment, to recognize wanted behavior. It’s how we time our marker signals. In Buddhism, this awareness of the moment, in the moment, is called “mindfulness.” Thich Nhat Hanh, again:

“Life can be found only in the present moment, because ‘the past no longer is’ and ‘the future is yet to come.’”

Clicker trainers know this truth well. When we say, “It’s only behavior,” we mean the genesis of the behavior is irrelevant, because it is in the past. We may envision a finished behavior, but that is for the future. The only behavior that matters is the present behavior. We, too, are interested only in the present moment, only in life itself.

As I ponder these commonalities, I begin to see the Zen of clicking everywhere, under many different names. A client of Pen and Press, my business partnership, is a healthcare consultant. He bases his work, in part, on a business strategy called “positive deviance,” a theory of creating lasting change through incremental progress. Positive deviance asks leaders of organizations, whether corporations, schools, or hospitals, to “stop focusing on problems and start focusing on what’s going well.”

The concept originated when a group from Save the Children traveled to Vietnam to study why some children were less malnourished than others, although they lived in the same conditions. Given an impossibly brief six months by the Vietnamese government to erase malnourishment in the country, they dispensed with conventional wisdom (deliver boxes of food), and sought solutions with available resources.

The group visited villages and looked for children who were in marginally better health, then worked side-by-side with those children’s mothers, the “positive deviants,” to understand the survival feeding practices they used. In many instances, the “deviant” moms breached conventional wisdom about how, when, and what to feed a child. The group then helped the “deviant” mothers teach other mothers about their practices. They used the same strategy in 14 villages, each time finding solutions from within the village itself. They observed and marked positive behavior, and the positive behavior increased. They looked for behaviors already present and rewarded them, increasing them bit by bit until these became the dominant behavior. Sound familiar?

As a world health program, positive deviance has now reached 2.2 million Vietnamese people in 265 villages and has been applied in more than 20 developing countries. Corporate leaders are taking note and applying the concept as a way to encourage the best performance from their employees. They call it “leveraging internal successes.” Clicker trainers call it “shaping.”

How can any theory of behavior be applied to both Hewlett-Packard and a hungry child? Because regardless of what we call the bucket, whether positive deviance, mindfulness, or clicker training, they’re all drawn from the same well.

So, when you next pick up a clicker to shape a simple sit, pause and reflect. You may think you’re training your dog, and you are. Yet you are also joining a vast and varied movement, both ancient and new, that turns our eyes and minds from negative to positive, coercion to reward, inertia to change, problem to solution, pain to pleasure, and strife to peace. And that’s exciting.