

Mentoring Those Outside The Fancy  
Peri Norman 2012

The inquiry in my mailbox sounded vaguely familiar. The woman's story was a sad, but not uncommon one. In this challenging economy; a family illness, a lost job and a series of moves had forced them to give up their two beloved Belgian Tervuren. Now, she told me wistfully, they were resettled in a permanent place and trying to put a difficult and trying time behind them. They missed their Tervuren terribly and wondered about fostering or acquiring another. I picked up the issue of Tervuren News Tales lying next to my computer and flipped to the rescue column. The names matched. The story, of course, was told from a slightly different perspective. I set the magazine on the desk and my mind wandered back to a recent show and a conversation I had with my good friend Becky. We were sharing notes about our local backyard breeders and the techniques we were using to try to educate them and bring their breeding up to a higher standard. We talked about the importance of patience and maintaining a relationship. Continuing to work with people whose values and culture is not the same as ours is the only way to keep the flow of information open. If we alienate them, we lose the opportunity to educate them and bring them into the fold.

We must continue to reach out and educate. Each one of us confronts these types of issues every time we take our dogs to a competition, to a training class or just around the block. When we hold an office in a club or participate in a Meet the Breeds or Responsible Dog Owner Day, we need to put on our best "teacher" hat. The responsibility lies with us to be the best possible examples of responsible dog ownership we can be. In the same breath, we have to recognize that different people have different needs, perceptions and abilities. Yes, our dogs are really smart and it is easy to look really good and have very high expectations for our wicked bright, gorgeous Belgian Tervuren. Particularly because our dogs are so awesome, we have to be mindful not to alienate people we could otherwise mentor and teach by having impossible standards. Some of us thrive on the crazy world of competition. Some people do have dogs as service animals or for similar specific purposes. However, the vast majority of people have more mundane, but just as important needs filled by their canine companions. As it is with training our brilliant, but sensitive dogs, finding the right path to effectively mentoring and educating those who are not a part of our world will require thoughtfulness, fairness and a balanced approach.

I don't have any puppies available right now and will not have in the foreseeable future. I'm sure the family whose inquiry arrived in my mailbox last night will find another Belgian Tervuren without too much trouble. What I say to her in my reply may make a significant difference to her family and a dog. Wish me luck and wisdom.

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