

Learning life's lessons from dogs — just ask



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Sometimes, I'll lie awake at night and ponder the meaning of life, the universe and everything. Douglas Adams actually answered the question in his classic philosophic work, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. He said it was 42.

Lying awake at night without a calculator, I can neither confirm nor deny his solution, so I must make do with what limited functions I can muster in my own noggin. Math is not among them.

After years of dialing life's information line and getting a busy signal, I believe I got through twice during a two-week period in August. On both occurrences I was wide awake. And both times, the messages were delivered by dogs.

I spent the first two weeks of August doing my two weeks of summer active-duty work for the Navy in Portland.

It was there I had my first meeting with Triceradog (pronounced like triceratops, the dinosaur, but smaller). Triceradog appeared about the fourth day of my patriotic landscaping adventure and proceeded with its lesson.

Triceradog was a fat, brown bull terrier-looking creature that, through some unknown twist of fate, had broken its left front leg. It appeared that the injury was old and was of little concern to

Triceradog.

I, along with two other compatriots, did what probably any dog-loving people would do: We felt sorry for it and tried to catch it. Let the lesson begin.

Triceradog looked pathetic, standing there with its leg hanging like a broken twig. We looked pathetic as Triceradog not only ran away from our approaches, but actually outran us. On three legs.

Perhaps being outrun by a three-legged dog is not that big of a deal. After all, I only have two legs, so it had one up on me. Somehow, that line of reasoning offers little comfort.

Triceradog, far from being pathetic, even refused our offers of cold water (it was 90-something that day) and sought only to lie in some shade.

We considered calling animal control but quickly discarded the idea. All they would do is kill Triceradog, which is certainly an endangered species if there ever was one. Triceradog seemed to be getting along just fine and, as long as there was shade to lie in, needed no assistance from us or anybody else.

Toward the end of the second week, Triceradog made another appearance. Evidently, it decided it had taught its lesson well enough because, as I passed within a couple feet of it while riding a noisy lawnmower, Triceradog simply looked at me.

A week before, I couldn't get within 10 feet of Triceradog on foot. Now, with a flick of a steering wheel I could turn it into so much mulch. But it knew I had learned my lesson, and it told me so with its gaze.

"Have a nice day, but leave me

alone, thank you very much," Triceradog seemed to say with its not-at-all sorry-looking brown eyes.

About a week later I had returned home and went camping with my wife. My wife drove on the way home from camping and decided on a route that led us through some west Eugene residential streets.

As we meandered down one of these streets, we noticed a brown lump ahead in the road. The closer we got the more the brown lump took on the form of a dog.

It turned out to be a part beagle, part something. I'll just call it Beagle-thing.

My wife stopped the car perhaps 10 feet from Beagle-thing. We were driving our big, blue 1979 Monte Carlo. A great big piece of made-in-America steel that any creature with a shred of common sense, or simple self-preservation, would scurry to avoid being crushed by.

Except Beagle-thing. Beagle-thing had decided to plop its brown lumpy body square in the middle of street. It didn't move. It didn't even blink. It just stared at us, as if to say, "What the hell are you doing on my street?"

So my wife did what any driver in a similar situation would do. She honked. A real, American car honk. Not like one of those wimpy foreign car horns that meekly say, "Excuse me. Please. Pardon me. Sorry to disturb you."

Our horn sounds like it was transplanted from a ocean liner, a deep, low honk that simply says, "Move or die."

So, my wife hit the horn, and the car told Beagle-thing to "move or die." Beagle-thing

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would have none of it and began biting at fleas. So my wife honked again. Beagle-thing glanced at her for a moment, then went back to biting fleas.

"Maybe he has a broken leg. Maybe he was hit by a car and can't move," my wife said, sounding concerned.

Just to make sure, I suggested we drive around Beagle-thing for a closer look. So my wife maneuvered around Beagle-thing, who just looked at us, as if to say "Hah."

How humiliating, I thought, to be stared down by a Beagle-thing and lose. As I contemplated this embarrassment, I looked out of the rear window at Beagle-thing.

Another car, I think a Honda, had begun an encounter with Beagle-thing. But this time, Beagle-thing got up and trotted away. Just like that. The Honda didn't even honk its wimpy horn.

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the more I realized the lesson being taught by Beagle-thing was simply: Hold your ground, but know when you've pressed your luck far enough.

Kenny Rogers sang about it in "The Gambler," when he said to "Know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em." I saw it in an old swashbuckler movie once, where the hero said, "He who fights and runs away may live to fight another day," before jumping out of the window.

And now, here was Beagle-thing personifying the notion of "stick to your guns." Beagle-thing was sunning itself in its street, and the rest of the world be damned.

Someone, somewhere, some time ago wrote about truth coming from the mouths of babes (meaning children). I think they were wrong. Just ask any dog.

Martin Fisher is a columnist for the Emerald.

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