

Halling View Summer 2020

Buster

I have been reading *Buster's Diaries*. Buster was the dog of the Labour politician Roy Hattersley. He came to the notice of the public when he (the dog, not the MP) killed a goose in St James Park, an incident which was considerably exaggerated by the press. So you might have heard of Buster. In his published diaries, he tells the very funny story of how, from being a badly treated and neglected stray, he wound up living in a fancy house just near Westminster Abbey. There is the joy of meeting other dogs in the park, trips to the countryside, overnight stays in hotels, the challenges of living in a busy, built up area with far too many busy roads, and the mutual adoration there is between a faithful dog and the principal human being in his life.

Much of the humour revolves around Mr Hattersley's attempts to discipline Buster. The book was written in 1996 at which time there was a popular theory of dog training which revolved around the idea that dogs are basically wolves which have never grown up. There had been a study of a group of wolves which were observed always to be competing for dominance. This led to the belief that you must keep showing the dog that you are boss, dominating him, putting him down, so that he knows that you are the pack leader – the alpha male (or, I suppose, female). There are two problems with this approach. One is that no-one who loves his dog can keep it up. Roy Hattersley certainly couldn't. Neither could I, even if I wanted to. I don't want to because it is a false premise that wolves and dogs are continually fighting for dominance. The group of wolves in the study this theory is based on had not known one another previously. That's why I don't call them a pack. They were strangers to one another and that is why they fought to establish a hierarchy. This is the second reason why the theory doesn't work. Better studies show that wolves which form a pack know one another and know their place in wolf society. Fights sometimes break out and the social order changes over time, but, generally speaking, a wolf pack is a harmonious whole, a functioning social unit, which works, rests and plays together. Left to their own devices, dogs will behave in much the same way. A dog living in your home will instinctively want to fit into the pack. You do have to make it clear that you are the pack leader, but it isn't necessary to keep on reinforcing your dominance. His instinct will be to follow you.

The other thing to remember is that he is a dog with a dog's outlook on life, not a mini human being, and that he has his own personality which you need to work with rather than attempt to suppress. So, don't expect a big dog or even a small dog of a working breed to become a lap dog. If you get a dog, get one you can live with without crushing his own nature.

Reading *Buster's Diaries* reminded me of a book I read when I was a teenager, *King Solomon's Ring*, by Conrad Lorenz, an early student of animal behaviour. He was the one who brought to the public's attention the way that chicks will follow the first thing they see when they hatch from the egg, if not their mother hen then any other animal or human who will give them a lead. He also noted that most species of animals do not fight with one another to the death. It isn't in the interests of the species to do so! Yes, many kinds of animals will fight over hierarchy, over food and in order to acquire a mate, but it is never in their interest to fight to the death. It is not even in the interests of the victor to fight without restraint. If he is badly injured, he may not be able to get food or the wounds might become infected. So, in most species of higher animal, the vanquished will either run away from a fight or will make a gesture of submission which the victor will respect and break off the fight. Turning the other cheek when someone punches you isn't just a matter of showing Christian forgiveness to the aggressor; he's less likely to hit you again if you submit or just walk away.

When this doesn't happen, it is often because of human interference. If your hens are really savage in maintaining the pecking order, there are too many in a confined space. Bad people breed dogs or cocks to fight and put animals in situations where they can't run away. We do that accidentally when our dog is on a lead and another dog picks a fight. Usually (unless the other dog is really vicious or you are on the road) it's best to let your dog go and let them sort it out between them.

Generally speaking, it is the interest of both the individual and the species, if animals refrain from striving after dominance or fighting for other reasons and co-operate in the interests of the pack. The same is true for human beings, but we don't seem to be so good at realising it as most animal species.

As I write this, we are still in lockdown. Please let me know if I can help you in any way. Please send me any prayer requests. The Cuxton & Halling parish magazine is available <http://cuxtonandhalling.org.uk/> and, for the duration, I am putting a weekly sermon on the same site under TEACHING. I'm saying Morning & Prayer daily and celebrating Holy Communion on Sundays at 10.15 alone at home. If you wish to join in in spirit, please do. If you send me an email address, I'll include you in the loop for weekly news and monthly magazines.

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