

No such thing as Lassie



Sarah Whitehead

When I told a friend the title of this article, his first words were, "You can't say that! It's like saying there's no Father Christmas."

Well, that's ridiculous, I thought. Because of course there's no doubting Santa's existence, but Lassie – well, that's another story.

First off, Lassie was not a girl. She was a he. A bit of movie licence there, I think. Secondly, he could clearly understand English – the only communication issues he ever had were getting the rather intellectually-challenged humans to understand that there was a child down the well. Hmmm, not too realistic either.

As myths go, Lassie's legendary film career probably created even more trouble than certain TV dog trainers. Generations of people have loved Lassie, admired his looks and intelligence and been fascinated with his innate desire to help, love and please human beings. Of course, no one remembers the training that must have gone into each take, the hours of sweat, blood and tears from his trainer that it took to get it right. No, what people remember above all about Lassie – and other dogs from their childhood - is their eagerness to please and their emotional understanding of human-kind. Uh oh.

Perhaps this is what leads to many of the phone calls we have to our practice. It's good that owners want their dog to emulate Lassie, but often their expectations are completely out of kilter with real life.

"We've had our new puppy three days, and we are just at the end of our tether with her – she just won't be clean in the house, we've tried everything!"

Firstly, a tiny puppy may not physically be able to hold on long enough to be completely house trained for some weeks. Just think how long it takes babies to have full control over their bodily functions! Secondly, the idea that any puppy could learn all about the strange ways of humans in just three days is utterly unrealistic – after all, most humans take a lifetime to learn about each other and still find each other unfathomable. Thirdly, I always feel rather sorry when I hear that someone has 'tried everything' in a very (very) short space of time. Dogs need consistency, and house training is one of those behaviours that needs regular and ongoing, consistent input from an owner in order to help the dog get it right.

How about this one.

"We've had our dog for a year and we think we ought to do some training with him – he pretty much ignores our commands most of the time."

Oh really?! Dogs don't come into the world knowing what we are asking. Indeed, the fact that many of them do seem to pick up on what our words mean really does them a disservice – after all, if they know what, "Go find your teddy," means, shouldn't they also have worked out that "Heel" means don't pull on the lead? Well, no! Dogs will learn what works. Over time, they will make giant leaps of connection between words that mean very good things and words that mean very bad things, but they aren't quick at attaching meaning to human concepts that have little impact on them or compete for their attention. For this reason, "Heel" is very unlikely to become connected with walking nicely on the lead. At best it will be ignored, at worst it will become connected to being yanked back on the lead – and this then probably becomes a signal to pull harder to avoid the discomfort that will inevitably follow.

Finally, what about:

"We just don't know what to do with this dog, it's just so different from our last one. Our old dog was so eager to please, he never put a foot wrong. This one just seems to want to do his own thing."

Ah, Lassie. How you tricked us into thinking that dogs are ever eager to please their owners... visitors, or even random strangers.

The myth that dogs should be 'eager to please' is one that causes more damage and heartache than can ever be imagined. People somehow assume that dogs come ready trained, and if not, that a few nights at the dog training class where they are told what to tell the dog should work.

Of course, the thing about myths is that they are surrounded in secrecy. No one tells you that your gorgeous little fluffy puppy isn't interested in being cuddled. No one tells you that your adolescent mound of heaving Labrador only thinks about what feels good as he heads towards the pile of horse poop in the park. Sadly, this secrecy does untold damage because it makes it appear that dogs are being deliberately obtuse, when they are simply untrained.

Of course, myths pervade our society – and once they have a hold on our consciousness, they seem particularly resistant to being debunked. Mothers still tell their children to wear a hat when it's cold because "You lose a third of your body heat through your head." Sorry Mum, but actually it's only about 10%, because that's the proportion that is exposed by leaving your head uncovered. This myth was based on a flawed scientific experiment in the 1950s, but has persisted to this day. Research now tells us that covering one part of the body when it's cold is just as good as covering any other. Wearing a hat but going out without your trousers on will tell you this.

How about the belief that going out with wet hair means you are more likely to catch a cold? Or even that sitting on cold surfaces will give you piles? Nope. According to latest research you can do both without worrying, yet in studies 40% of people asked thought that these myths were true.

Perhaps then it's not surprising that dog-related 'old wives tales' are so persistent. It's alluring to think that somehow dogs understand us so well that they know what we are thinking and feeling. It's also attractive to some folk to believe that they are powerful leaders while their dogs are followers, or dominant while their dogs are submissive.

Ask yourself every time you want your dog to do something whether he would be able to see a reason for doing it. Dogs are simply not inherently eager to please, and they don't understand the English language, so unless he or she understands that 'good dog' really means 'stand by to get something really exciting, tasty or pleasurable' and that thing does eventually come, is it fair to expect them to comply?

Training encompasses all parts of living with a dog, not just sits and downs. Learning to be calm in the midst of a human household does not come naturally to many dogs, and they need time and input to be able to cope. Perhaps this is the time to create new beliefs about dogs and how they learn – and maybe over time these will become just as entrenched in human society as the 'Lassie myth' is now.