



Stark's Reality

One Smart Dog by Thom Stark

Our founding pound puppy, Wolfgang, is a great dog. He's handsome, well-behaved, affectionate and smart. Very, VERY smart.

Last week, he discovered that he could, if he chose, get out of his collar. (That's a necessary thing, because, should his collar get snagged while he's exploring one of the many dense thickets of underbrush hereabout, it's important that he be able to slip free -- or it could be a long, long time before we discovered his predicament.) Since we couldn't spare the attention necessary both to do the work and to watch him at the same time, we had him chained up on the back deck with a 20-foot lead of aircraft-grade cable while we labored in what will one day be our north pasture.

At any rate, he squeezed out of his collar and came bounding out, eager to be with his pack (he was badly neglected by his previous owners and he thus has fairly major separation anxiety issues.) We led him back to the deck and chained him back up. And, predictably enough, within a few minutes, he came galumphing back out into the pasture, tongue rippling happily in the breeze.

I'm ashamed to admit that I yelled at him. Then we led him back to the deck and I took in his collar a notch and put him back on the chain.

You guessed it. Two minutes later, he was back out in the pasture.

This time, I didn't yell. Instead, I led him back to the deck and took in his collar a second notch -- enough to prevent him from wriggling out of it no matter how vigorously he strained.

Then we went back to work. At dusk, we knocked off for the day, came inside and left him out on the deck by himself for an hour. Then we let him inside, but we left his collar cinched up uncomfortably tight.

It stayed that way for almost three days, until I just couldn't take the hurt in his eyes. On the third day, I let it back out two full notches. Ever since then, when we chain him up on the deck, he stays on his chain. As I said, he's one smart dog.

Then today, he again demonstrated his intelligence and initiative -- and, in a roundabout way, his obedience -- and thereby put me in a terrible bind.

We feed him once a day, usually in mid-afternoon. Within ten minutes or so after he's done eating we always take him for a constitutional, so that he can get a little exercise and, more importantly, leave calling cards and "while you were out" memos to the other dogs and assorted wildlife along the road. While we're walking him, we never allow him to go onto other

folks' property. He's allowed the run of the road and the medians on both sides, but he has to stop at the fence lines. He's been off his leash for about a month now, and he's gotten very accustomed to staying within bounds. If we tell him "no" or "stop", he responds pretty much immediately. (He occasionally gets distracted by rabbits, ground squirrels, deer or other dogs, but he will break off the chase if I say, "stop" -- although Judy sometimes still has a little trouble getting his attention in the heat of pursuit.)

Anyway, he and I were on our way down the driveway when Judy asked me to help her fill herbicide sprayer (we have several big piles of rocks on the property in the vicinity of which we can neither mow nor effectively barber the surrounding brush with a weed whacker, and they, of course, are uniformly surrounded by foxtails, poison oak and other decorative vegetation.) So I stopped to help her and, by the time I got done, Wolfgang had vanished.

Just about then, one of our neighbors drove by in her truck and called out, "Your dog is running loose up the road!"

So I hiked up the road about half a mile, calling him as I went along. I finally spotted him, perhaps a tenth of a mile or so further on, bounding down the slope of the next hill toward me.

Now, it was pretty evident to me that poor Wolfie's need had been so urgent that he decided that he just couldn't wait -- and that, as long as he abided by the rules, it'd be okay if he just went ahead and took his constitutional without me.

And, were it not for the handful of nitwits that insist on playing Mario Andretti around the blind curves and crests of the road, he'd've been right. Unfortunately, those idiots exist in just sufficient numbers -- and, because we live in such a rural area, Wolfie is ignorant enough of the dangers of vehicular traffic -- that the risk that he'll get run over is just too great to let him out on the road unaccompanied.

So, with extreme sadness at having to discipline him in so Draconian a fashion for doing what, from his own frame of reference, was clearly the sensible thing to do, I marched him home in frosty silence, cinched up his collar two notches and chained him up on the deck.

It's been about an hour now. Judy has gone into town to her Photo Club meeting and I'm doing email -- and Wolfie, who, as I said, suffers terribly from separation anxiety, is still out on the deck, alone.

It breaks my heart to treat him this way, but I don't see that I have any other real choice in the matter. If I don't effectively communicate to him that he cannot, under any circumstances, go for a walk on the road without one of us along, sooner or later, he's going to get run over and killed -- or, worse yet, injured so badly that we'll have no choice but to euthanize him.

And that would be a tragedy, because he's such a great dog -- and he's very, VERY smart.