

Hangin' Out

I suppose if we were two kids I'd say we were just hanging out together. But that somehow implies an equality between us my dog would never allow. She would not judge us as two equals. We are not childhood friends. To Murphy I am her servant, except when I'm her last resort of protection if things get really dangerous. Think of me as an Alfred Pennyworth, Batman's batman and servant. Consider again all those stories of dogs saving humans. Perhaps more often the opposite happened. Unless we're speaking of a dog saving a man's soul.

Today I've brought Murphy, a springer spaniel, down on the beach so she can feel the wind ruffle her hair and listen to the waves pound onto the shore. Every dog should have that experience in his or her life. So should every old man. A dog ought to have the freedom to run free on the beach, too, as if the world was made only for her that very morning, the sand floated back to flatness by the last overnight tide. Alas, our town fathers, the businessmen who have voted themselves in as our Lords of the Beach, do not agree. They have legislated a maze of dog rules that change with the season, change with the time of day, change with each political jurisdiction up and down the 50 mile natural strand of beach, and sometimes change at the whim of the officer enforcing them. I don't know why we can't have one set of rules simple enough for a dog to comprehend. And a grouchy old man.

At this time of year the tourists fill the beach during the day, and at night they carouse at the bars and restaurants belonging to our Overseers. Nowhere in this highly commercialized mix of beach rules and

regulations is there room for a dog to sniff her way through a dune or to chase a flock of gulls along the slate of hard wet sand where the waves glide in. Or just sit down at the edge of the earth to look out on the ocean and wonder.

Having not checked the local website for dog law changes in quite some time, and never able to understand the Rules Board in the parking lot due to an overzealous use of abbreviations, Murphy and I hide out just inside the dune on the path that crosses from the public thoroughfare to the water. Here we won't be seen from a distance by any of the beach police. I feel like an unwelcome immigrant sitting on the border about to make a dash to a new life of running from the law.

This would be a very good time for Murphy to behave, rather than start barking at passers by and bringing us the attention of the boys and girls who help make our beach safe for beer drinking.

Usually, Murphy can be a very comfortable dog to have around. That's more true when she's having a good day and behaving herself. Sometimes a streak of willfulness will blaze through her veins and she will literally start trouble. If she had a little brother, she would get up and go over to him and slap him on the back of the head, just to start a fight. With no little brother around, she comes to me or my wife and for no reason nips a toe or a hand with a bite not meant to injure but to inform us of her frustration. Either way, I take exception to it and the chase is on.

She comes running through the doorway to the living room with an ardent anticipation, tongue streaming out the side of her mouth. She has careened through three rooms to get here. To slow down now just because she's reached her destination would seem pointless, so still barking she circles the living room before putting on the brakes. She sits back on her haunches, looks to the left, then right to check for any changes since she was here ten minutes ago. Has any furniture been moved, has any dog toy disappeared from exactly where she left it on the floor ... always in the middle of a human walkway? She is looking for changes made by people or animals and she is continually searching for new friends. Murphy is ... shall we

say ... overly social. She wants to lick every person coming through the front door. If the entire population of the world assembled in my front yard, she would be ready for them.

It's simply not fair that a dog should always be that open and loving and happy while I occasionally sit in my human stew gnashing my teeth over some slight only a human would recognize. So I decide to be mean and annoy her before she begins to pick on me.

I get her attention and stare deep into her eyes. She notes my behavior while lying on the floor gnawing a rawhide bone, but goes on with what she's doing. I keep my stare on her and soon a look of suspicion works its way across her face. I can almost hear her whine, "Wha-at? I'm not doing anything wrong." Her jaws continue to firmly grasp the bone, holding it down on the floor. But now she swings her butt around 30 degrees so she can arch her eyebrows, peek up and keep an eye on my face while she wonders what I'm planning. I continue to stare at her until something behind her eyes seems to open up and I imagine I'm reading her mind. I know it's my imagination, but I've come to understand that a lot of one's relationship with a dog is indeed imagination. I wonder what she really thinks about. Perhaps she's still miffed when she remembers my writing the "Expected Behavior of A Currently Breathing One Year Old Dog," a checklist for behavior modification of puppies with implied severe consequences. Murphy didn't even take the time to read it. Hell, my wife wouldn't read it.

But Murphy knows there are limits and has to admit that *where* the call of nature is taken is important, as is trying to restrain herself from jumping all over anyone who comes to the door, from the UPS man to that scaredy-cat guy who mows the lawn.

But that's the discipline side of what some might expect from a one year old dog. Certainly all of her cuddling and attention should count on the positive side of the ledger. And what about all the entertainment she provides as she runs through the house? Who could possibly not appreciate Murphy's presence?

"Sir? Your dog is not allowed on the beach after seven a.m."

"I wondered about that, Officer. I didn't bring my watch.

"It's seven-ten, sir. You need to take the dog home."

"I will, I will. But can't we have another ten minutes? You can see she's really enjoying herself, Officer."

"C'mon, Mister. I'm just doing my job."

Officer Ryder works for a subcontractor. He enforces the rules among lunkheads such as me when he's not cleaning the toilets or touching up the paint on the hand rails leading over the dunes. I'm sure he was uniformed by a local costume store and is the only toilet cleaner in the state to wear epaulettes and a tin badge. I don't want to add to his frustrations in life.

Murphy and I will hang out at home for the rest of the day. I'll probably work on a writing project and she'll work on her bone.

From time to time she'll give up a spot on the floor she favors ... we have no idea why ... and come over to me and lay down, draping herself over my foot. As she works on her chunk of rawhide, the sound and vibrations of bone gnawing and crunching will travel down her chest and through to my foot. We're communicating again, but not like earlier when I stared into her eyes and imagined a conversation of my making. This time Murphy has taken charge and I'm not totally sure of what she's saying. I suppose it may have something to do with her very strong jaws and her position of authority on top of my foot. This is a dog who has something to say.

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