

Active Compassion ~

Caring for Needy Dogs

Maui was so small that she fit in my hand when first I fell in love with her and took her home. She was six weeks old and the bulk of her life experience was jostling her brothers and sisters for space to nurse, and sleeping intertwined with the same pack that she had previously shared a womb.

But adopting a dog, even one with such a pristine background, isn't always a walk in the dog park.

Maui's mother was afraid of her. It was Maui's feistiness that attracted me to her. Plus, she was so cute that she was endearing even when peeing on the Persian rug.

Since she was a puppy, I expected her to make mistakes as she learned. But the process of training proved to be problematic. There were times that I thought it would be easier to tame a lion.

Training challenges can be compounded when a dog has been abandoned, neglected, or abused.

Adopting a dog with a needy background is a challenge. But it is also a privilege, and, I believe, a calling. I am a great advocate of adopting canine companions who have become homeless—whether

through a shelter or directly from someone who can no longer care for their dogs.

But becoming a pack leader for a needy dog is not for everyone.

They can require more time and work to train, but there are lots of good dog training books and courses to help. We also generally have little idea of a needy dog's background, but this, too, can be overcome, especially if we have been developing our intuitive abilities with meditation.

The biggest obstacle in adopting a needy dog has nothing to do with the dog. It has to do with us, and the quality of our commitment.

The tingling thrill we feel when we first fall in love is not enough to sustain the challenges of a long-term relationship—even with a dog.

Relationships require Active Compassion, which is the ability to act in the best *long-term* interest of our dog, and in our relationship with our dog.

Maui is a natural at Active Compassion.

We've had more than one needy dog end up at our house for a visit along with its human caretaker. As is the pattern with our visits, I tend our human visitor, while Maui takes charge of the dog.

Maui sets the boundaries right away, and she makes it clear that she is in the alpha position. Once she establishes that, then she brings the new dog into her space, showing the appropriate places to rest, play, eat, etc. When her charge has a sense of the ropes, that's when Maui makes the dog her new best friend. But if the visiting dog decides to challenge for the alpha role, or break the established rules, Maui

asserts her position until the dog again reverts to its allotted role.

Invariably, by the end of the day, Maui and her new friend are best buddies, as evidenced by the enthusiasm of their sniffing and licking as they say goodbye.

We would be right to believe that dogs have special ways of communicating with each other, but I believe that Maui's style of Active Compassion can work for humans, too.

But before we can begin to practice Active Compassion, we need to ask ourselves one key question:

Do we love our dog?

The question sounds inane, but many people have obstacles that can inhibit love for their dog. We can't fool dogs when it comes to love, they just *know*.

A friend once adopted a dog once that had been a pawn in a bitter divorce. The dog had belonged to the husband, and left with the wife when the man and moved into an apartment that didn't allow pets. It was a long, brutal divorce. By the time my friend adopted the dog, she had been starved, beaten, and neglected as a scapegoat for the husband.

This is an extreme case, but even dogs that are treated well *know* when love is missing from the relationship. Just as they know when we are afraid or angry. Lack of love is a huge obstacle to the practice of Active Compassion—from both our and our dog's point of view.

Active Compassion is nearly impossible for us when it's not based in love. Dogs need to feel loved in order

to have the motivation to become the dogs we want them to be.

If we don't love our dog, or don't love our dog enough, we need to address that issue before we read on—to be fair both to us and to the dog in our pack.

For those of us who love our dogs, or know we have the potential to love a needy dog, there are still a few things we need to address before we run out to the local shelter and pick out the dog that most melts our heart.

Let's go back to Maui for a moment.

The first thing Maui does with a needy dog, after the initial sniffing rituals and doggy greetings, is to set boundaries. She doesn't let the new dog loose with the excuse that it needs to feel comfortable before the rules are established. Maui seems to sense that the rules help the new dog feel comfortable.

Maui's rules include not jumping on any furniture that she herself is not big enough to jump on, not sleeping on her doggy bed unless invited, and not using the water and food bowls with her name on them when guest bowls have been provided. Guest dogs are expected to do what Maui wants them to do, and go where Maui wants them to go without question.

Maui establishes herself as Alpha, and we need to be comfortable doing that, too.

If we don't take the alpha role, our dog will, and that sets up a dangerous dynamic for the pack.

Since Maui is just six and a half pounds, we rarely have visiting dogs that are smaller than her. Maui is living proof that pack leader isn't about size; it's about attitude.

Maui expects the visiting dog will follow her lead. If the dog is comfortable with that, then sometimes the strength of Maui's attitude is all that is needed.

When that doesn't work right away, Maui has a progression that I've seen her follow. The first step can be described as Loving Assertion.

In human terms, Loving Assertion is what we do when we begin to train a dog a new command. First, we say, "Sit," then, with Loving Assertion, we gently press our dog's hindquarters down.

Maui's version involves nudging and the occasional soft growl, but it serves the same end. It is the new dog's first overt signal that there is something it is supposed to do, or not do.

Maui is very good at this. Or, at least this is often all it takes for a dog to understand and follow a rule.

Remember, dogs, especially needy dogs, *want* to love and be loved. They *want* to trust and be trusted.

But if love and trust have backfired on them before, or have been in short supply, sometimes it takes a while for a dog to feel secure enough to submit.

Needy dogs can act out of fears that they learned long before they met us. They might snap, or growl, or run away from, our caring advances.

One sign that we are practicing Active Compassion is that we have the patience to continue to lovingly work with our dog, even when we have to resort to firmer measures, even to those that break our hearts.

But there are some things that we can try first.

We can try to understand our dog's fear or resistance from our dog's point of view.

This doesn't require a pet psychic. We all have the ability to communicate with animals. We do it all the time—our dogs pick up, and reflect our emotions. If we are relaxed and loving, they are more likely to be relaxed, too. If we are upset or out of control, they are will be, too.

To understand our dog, we just need to open the channel of communications both ways. We do this by calling on three of the benefits of meditation: objectivity, compassion, and intuition.

Objectivity helps us step away from our frustration and better view the world from our dog's point of view. Compassion helps open us up to the experience of being Dog, and feel the connection that that we have with our dog. Intuition allows us to pick up on the signals and feeling that our dog is sending to us.

While we can't read their minds, we can usually begin to understand if our dog is resisting us out of fear, frustration, anger, mistrust, or some other block that stands in the way of our position as pack leader, and our dog's role as part of our pack.

It's good to remember, too, that a needy dog's innate ability to trust and love has probably been damaged. They may be struggling to find their Inner Dog as much as we are trying to discover our Inner Pack Leader.

Better understanding our dog's point of view can help temper our frustration when we find ourselves at odds with our dogs.

Another strategy is to visualize or to speak silently what we want our dogs to do, and trust that their instinct will help them understand.

Maui does this, I believe, when a dog is pulling size on her and won't respond to her nudges and growls. I've seen her stand back and stare at the stubborn dog, as if willing it to do her bidding. She then gives her nudges and growls another try—she returns to loving assertion. If that still doesn't work, she gives a stern warning bark.

This is the point at which we use firmer measures. We may need to physically restrain the dog, like we discussed in the section on what to do when our dog won't meditate with us. Or we may need to resort to stricter measures still. A good dog-training book, or a good dog trainer can help us find the strategies that work best with our particular dog.

But this is the time when our Active Compassion is truly tested. Some things like crating—confining our dog to a crate for periods of time—seems on the surface to be cruel to our dog. But used properly, it not only gives us a way to control our dogs reactions to stressful situations *before* they happen, but it gives our dogs their own safe place to go to get away from us.

Strategies like crating can also take lots of time and effort, and we might need to try a variety of training techniques to figure out what works. This is the fine print that we don't realize that we are signing up for when we adopt a needy dog,

But we owe it to our dog, and ourselves to stick with the effort. Some of the most intractable dogs end up being the most stalwart companions. Plus, if we stay with it, we can learn as much about ourselves as we learn about our dog—maybe more.

Are some dogs incorrigible?

Maybe, but I like to think not.

As humans, we have all known fear, felt unloved and misunderstood. Some of us might be considered incorrigible.

But a dog who loved us would never abandon us.

As pack leader, we owe at least this much to our dogs.