

Dogs, Cats, and Other People: Some things we just don't want to hear

by Matthew Margolis

There are some things we just don't want to hear: The disease is incurable. The relationship is over. The economy won't rebound anytime soon.

The dog is aggressive is a big one in my business.

A firefighter back east called last week with a real head-scratcher. He has a 3-year-old Cane Corso, which is an intelligent and powerful Italian mastiff breed. He discovered the dog in an abandoned warehouse a couple of years ago and decided to give it a home. When he relocated eight months ago, the dog suddenly took to growling. And, no, the story doesn't end at that.

The fireman took his Cane Corso to the dog wash in his new hometown, where a woman oohed and aahed and asked for permission to pet him. Initially the man kept her at arm's length, explaining it really wasn't safe. But she persisted and asked him why he had the dog in a public place if it wasn't safe.

Logical question.

The story ends with this: The man acquiesced, and the dog bit the woman.

If you follow this column regularly, you aren't surprised. It happens all the time. People let love cloud their sanity: women go back for beating after beating; men live with belittlement and emasculation; dog owners tolerate the snarling, snapping, biting objects of their affection.

I asked the firefighter, "Is the dog trained?"

"Yes, I'm a trainer."

"I thought you were a firefighter."

"Yeah, but I've had a couple of dogs, and I trained them, no problem."

These days, it seems everyone's a critic, everyone's an economist and everyone's a dog trainer. But in reality, most of us are amateur experts in almost everything. Most people don't know how to cure cancer, the economy or canine aggression – much less all three.

What's the difference between an expert and an amateur?

Dictionaries will tell you money. I say credentials.

Countless people have paid good money to noncredentialed, untrained dog or animal behaviorists, only to be left with the same problems and more of them.

The fireman wanted my advice, and I gave it to him:

His dog suffers from fear-based aggression, for which there is no cure. He can and should go forward with a behavior modification plan with the understanding that his dog will never be 100 percent safe to unleash on the world. And under no circumstances should he take this dog into a public place knowing, as he does, that it is an enormous liability. The dog is dangerous and should be kept away from public places and muzzled when not secured at home.

But he didn't want to hear it. "I can't accept this."

Are you surprised?

Truth be told, even if it meant I were forever out of business, doomed to begin again in another career, I do wish everyone were a dog trainer. That would mean a world full of happier people and happier dogs. It would mean close to 5 million fewer dog bites in this country every year. It would mean courts unclogged with the frivolous suits between neighbors and former friends, now at each other's throats over the barking of a dog. It would mean more space in our nation's crowded emergency rooms. It would mean more service dogs and fewer dogfights. It would mean safer kids, stronger families and better communities.

Besides, I've always wanted to be a firefighter. And I have put out a few flames in my day.

Woof!

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