

Dogs, Cats, and Other People: Costly follies

by *Matthew_Margolis*

H.L. Mencken said, "The most costly of all follies is to believe passionately in the palpably not true. It is the chief occupation of mankind." The following letter from a reader demonstrates that it is certainly the chief occupation of those who champion the companionship of a particular canine at any cost.

"We recently got an 8-month-old yellow lab from a family with three small children. The lady said the dog could be aggressive and had nipped at her 2-year-old.

"She is a very nervous puppy â€" jumps at the slightest movement or noise. She also jumps and twitches when she sleeps. We have experienced her aggression now, and it is quite scary. The second morning we had her, something spooked her and she would not let us near our truck. The doors were all open, and she sat in the driver's seat growling and showing her teeth. I got a treat and put it on the ground near us. When I said "release," she got out, snatched the treat and jumped right back in. She calmed down, but was nervous all day after that.

"She has showed her teeth a few times, and we're not sure how to handle it. I read that it isn't always good to approach or discipline her when she is showing her teeth and growling because it could initiate an attack. I know that she is scared and confused. Within one week she stayed in four different houses, with all new people. We've had her for a week, and we'd love to keep her. We have no children, but we have nieces and nephews around often. We need to break her of these aggressive behaviors or we will not be able to run the risk of her hurting a child.

"She is a good dog â€" excellent when playing fetch, gives up the ball or toy every time. However, she gets aggressive with some of her toys when indoors. We gave her a pig's ear last night and she got extremely aggressive. Every time we moved, she growled and showed her teeth â€" even when we were nowhere near her. She came out of it, but again she was nervous for the rest of the night."

This is akin to buying a car with no brakes because you like the ashtray and don't smoke. With all the great dogs in shelters that need homes, why insist on the one you know is aggressive? It is one thing to root for the underdog and quite another to invite the snarling underdog to share your home.

Did John Lennon do us all in when he wrote "All You Need is Love"? The 40 years that have transpired since that release have taught me that this, like so many other missives of the 1960s, does not literally apply to everyday life.

When it comes to aggressive dogs, you need more than love. You need an excess of time, an arsenal of

experience and technique, and a backup plan for that moment when you realize some things can't be fixed. Now what?

This dog requires professional help and, as is, cannot be around children. Her aggression is trifold: She's possessive, territorial and fearful. It's like living with a three-headed rattlesnake, and, as the Roman satirist Horace put it, "as crazy as hauling timber into the woods."

Woof!

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