

Friendships Take Time: Even Those with Animals

By Janet Herring-Sherman

I've always been an animal lover, so I take it quite personally when an animal gives me the cold shoulder. That happened three times this past winter and spring. Now, it's like Christmas in July, because the two dogs and horse have warmed up to me enough to permit a touch or two. I can't say that I did anything special to earn their trust. I just waited them out. It was an exercise in patience.

NEKOTA

Nekota, a young bearded collie from champion lines, was the first to finally allow me a pet. She came around about two weeks after I started seeing and feeding her twice a day. My friend and Nekota's owner, Tish, was out of town on dog and family business. I was pet sitting three of her bearded collies: Nekota, her mother Kiwi, and another female, Bubbles.

The jovial trio always greeted me with enthusiasm and noisy delight. I'd ruffle the long, silky hair of Bubbles and Kiwi; then they'd set off to romp and tumble on the winter-wet green lawns. I wanted to pet and hug Nekota, too. But she kept her distance even when I offered her treats.

After a few days, I was feeling slighted, so I quit pursuing her affections. I stopped trying to make eye contact with her, too. This wasn't too hard since bearded collies have long, bushy eyebrow hair that covers their eyes to protect them from stickers and debris when doing the livestock herding for which they were initially bred.

One evening, as I was preparing their dinner in Tish's kitchen, the three dogs came in from outside and gathered around me. Truth be told, they were more interested in having me throw the raggedy toy they'd dropped at my feet than they were in their meal. Nonchalantly, yet deliberately, I let my hand slowly drop to Nekota's head -- for an instant. She didn't recoil. It was nearly impossible not to look at her, but I didn't: That might have made her feel challenged, hence retreat.

I repeated similar gestures over the next few days. By the time Tish returned home, Nekota was curling at my feet and allowing me to stroke her head and scratch her chin for as long as I liked. I lavished praise on her in a very subdued manner: She didn't seem to mind. She liked me after all.

The new accord between this dog and I meant more to me than many other successes in my life. Good Girl, Nekota!! Thanks for considering me a member of your pack for awhile.

continued

STELLA

I'd known Stella, a shy and aloof rescued mastiff, much longer than I had Nekota when her standoffishness began to ebb. Quite possibly, Stella knew abuse and /or neglect in her past. Once settled in a safe, quiet environment, it still took the big taupe-colored dog months to stop evading me when I visited the farm where she lives. She couldn't be bribed with treats, toys or praise. Cats terrified her, too. She was wary of all that moved – even the wind it sometimes seemed.

When my husband, son and I have acquired rescue dogs in the past, we've been cautioned that it can take as long as a year for a dog to really feel secure with a new place and unfamiliar faces. So I waited on Stella, and waited some more.

It's all too easy to envision Stella having been cloistered away and used for the single purpose of making babies in a puppy mill setting. If that was the case, it explains why she's still afraid to be in dark, tight places. It may also be the reason beneath her aloofness: It's possible she'd never known affection at the hand of man, or woman, prior to her rescue by English mastiff guardian angels Sue and Gary May of McMinnville, Oregon. The couple founded [Mastiff Rescue Oregon](#) and has placed more than 80 of these cougar-size gentle giants in loving, permanent homes.

For the longest time, when Stacy had guests, four-year-old Stella would retreat to a spot where she could rest her chin on her giant paws and observe the movements of all those folks she didn't know. A few other dog-loving friends, who frequented Stella's home, and I started letting a hand kind of dangle whenever we sat and chatted with our host, Stacy, Stella's owner. We hoped our hands would serve as bait for the lonely Stella, who appeared a little braver each day.

One night, a collection of us were having a group lesson in making pot-stickers. I was preparing to slice and dice celery at the island in Stacy's kitchen when I felt a cold nose bump the hand I had resting on my hip. (That's about eye level for big-and-tall Stella.) Purposefully, I kept talking about chestnuts and folding pasta and barely acknowledged Stella. A few visits later, Stella approached me from behind and stood at my side. The next time, she let me stroke her head as I stood talking with Stacy, a coffee mug in my hand.

The encouragement Stella has received in her new forever home has given her the confidence to trust, perhaps for the first time in her adult dog life. She'll even give the new kittens clattering about a curious sniff instead of completely ignoring them or immediately leaving their presence.

Nowadays, when I arrive at the farm, Stella lopes out to meet my car instead of racing off to hide behind the free-range chickens or miniature pinscher tap-dancing about. Stella's long tail, no

longer tucked between her powerful back legs, is carried more naturally and, most of the time, swings lazily from side to side.

Oh yes, the “min pin,” small enough to be a lap dog, isn’t a snuggler or a cuddler. But loving, lanky Stella is.

BOBBY

Bobby was the last hold-out: He took nearly a year. Bobby is a chestnut-colored, top-performing cutting horse that belongs to the owner of the barn where I stable my horse, Callie. This athletic gelding, too, may have been mishandled in his youth, long before he came to the loving home where he is now the star.

At first it was tempting to think Bobby was stuck-up, even vain; then I remembered those were traits exclusive to humans. He’d move to another part of his stall whenever I entered to clean it or feed him. I didn’t dare try to remove his fly mask at night. He reminded me of a cat. Everything had to be on his terms and in his time. I’d offer Bobby a carrot or apple slice, and he’d turn his head away. I’d never experienced a horse refusing things that were like candy to them. I was flabbergasted and, yes, my feelings were hurt.

“Bobby’s just like that,” his owner assured me. “It’s not you. He’s even more skittish around men.” That would make sense if he’d been corrected too harshly or ridden too hard by a man somewhere along the line; however, I was determined to befriend him. Every time I’d pass Bobby’s stall or paddock on the way to catch my horse, I’d stop to offer him a treat. He’d look me right in the eye, then turn away. That left me feeling like the wallflower kid who never gets asked to the floor at a junior high school dance. Many days I left discouraged.

One afternoon, I offered Bobby a treat on the way back from the pasture with my horse at the end of a lead rope. Instead of shunning me and turning tail, Bobby remained still. When my horse tried to nudge the treat away for herself, Bobby grabbed it from the palm of my hand! We tried that approach day in and day out -- with varying degrees of success.

Then one day, the farrier arrived ahead of schedule. Bobby’s owner, unable to leave work early, sent me a text message and asked if I would please halter Bobby and bring him to the main barn for his session with the horseshoer.

“Me?” I thought as I replied, “Yes, sure, no problem.” Once inside Bobby’s run, his halter slung over my arm, I talked softly and approached him slowly. Next thing I knew, I was buckling the blue halter alongside his ear, and he stood perfectly calm as I did! I wouldn’t say we were BFFs (best friends forever), but Bobby and I are working on being more than acquaintances.

Nekota, Stella, Bobby: When they finally befriended me, I was reminded of a slogan 12-step programs use. It goes something like this: “Change takes time, so be patient with it. When we try to force solutions, we become irritable and unreasonable without knowing it: As in, I let one dog hurt my feelings; another make me feel unworthy; and I thought of a horse as being a snob.

Animals that Take Time to

Outwaiting, not outwitting, PLAYING HARD TO GET

Animals Who Befriend You – on Their terms, In Their Time

Waiting on the Animals

Bonding with Animals that Play Hard-to-get

: on Their turf, their terms