

ALL CREATURES GREAT AND SMALL

On Becoming a Dog Whisperer



Cesar Millan,
“The Dog
Whisperer”,
Julia Levitt
and
Julia’s dog,
Tot Man

He is brought into situations with fearful, hopeless owners and aggressive or frightened dogs and leaves them all with quiet calm, confidence, and routines for living together in harmony. In seeing that, I have found my life’s calling.
— Julia Levitt on Cesar Millan, “The Dog Whisperer”

By Julia Levitt

Let me start at the end of the story.

I have to pinch myself to make sure that it wasn’t a dream. I spent five days in an intensive workshop for advanced dog trainers with Cesar Millan, “The Dog Whisperer,” the most famous dog trainer in the world, my idol.

I have all of his shows and training DVD’s. I subscribe to his magazine. I am a member of the “Cesar’s Way” online community. For the past few years I have watched *The Dog Whisperer* reruns for two hours every evening. I know each of the episodes by heart but still learn something new with every show.

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Cesar does not describe himself as a dog trainer. He says, “I rehabilitate dogs and I train people.” He trains people — the dog owners — through his words and through his presence. He is centered. He brings a sense of calm and a deeply respectful presence to every encounter. There is never a hint of chastising, or mocking, or derision. The dog owners’ children often become the “stars” of the dog owning family because Cesar finds in them a readiness to learn and to be present with the dog. Older people are addressed as “Mr. Steve” or “Miss Kathy,” reflecting Cesar’s Mexican heritage of respect for elders. He is brought into situations with fearful, hopeless owners and aggressive or frightened dogs and leaves them all with quiet calm, confidence, and routines for living together in harmony. In seeing that, I have found my life’s calling.

Like every little girl who has had a dog, I loved my Napoleon. In retrospect, Napoleon was a not an easy dog to be around. He growled at dogs and people. We generally



Julia and Napoleon

kept him in the laundry room with the linoleum floor so he wouldn’t mess the house. My parents, like most dog owners, didn’t have a clue as to how to raise a dog. But I loved Napoleon with all my heart.

My next dog, or should I say dogs, came about 25 years later. That’s when I started to collect dogs. First a German Shepherd we named Tristan after a character my husband and I loved from the TV show *All Creatures Great and Small*. Then a soft-coated Wheaten Terrier named Duigan (an Irish name because Wheatens come from Ireland).

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ALL CREATURES GREAT AND SMALL

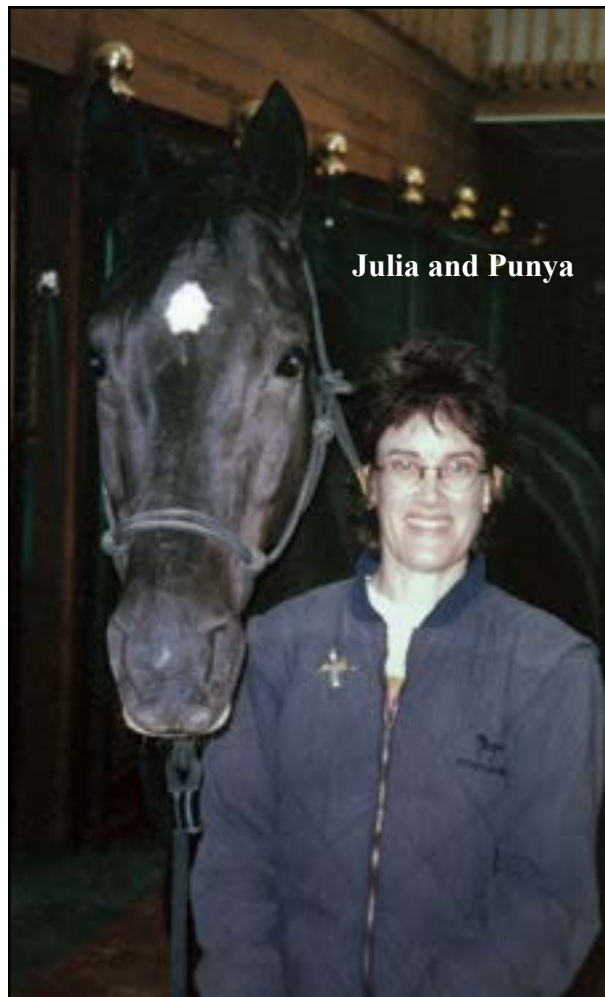


Julia, Duigan and Tristan

That's when I started to collect dogs.... I took dog training classes with all of them and trained all of them, some to the very highest levels of obedience. But all of this had nothing to do with dog whispering. It had nothing to do with providing the dog with a calm, assertive presence — a presence that allows the dog to feel stable and reassured.

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Then another Wheaten. Then a Portuguese Water Dog (like the Obama's have). After the Wheatens passed away, it was then a retired racing Greyhound. After the Greyhound and the "Portie" passed away, we "downsized" to smaller dogs — a Cavalier King Charles Spaniel and two Pomeranians. I have loved them all.



Julia and Punya

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I took dog training classes with all of them and trained all of them, some to the very highest levels of obedience. But all of this had nothing to do with dog whispering. It had nothing to do with providing the dog with a calm, assertive presence — a presence that allows the dog to feel stable and reassured. That is something totally different. Cesar Millan and dog whispering had not yet arrived on the scene. In the meantime, I was learning about a different kind of whispering — horse whispering.

While it is true that I loved my Napoleon, as a child I did not want to be a dog. I wanted to be a horse. My sister and I spent hours pretending to be horses. As adolescents we rode horses. And 30 years later I bought a horse and named her Punya, which means "good karma" in Sanskrit. I devoted most of my waking hours to learning about horse whispering. If you saw the recent movie *Buck* about Buck Brannaman, "The Horse Whisperer," that's what I was learning, from instructors who had worked directly with Buck. Natural horsemanship is about relating to a horse in a horse-like manner and speaking their language rather than using abusive or coercive techniques to "break" a horse. It works. It is a delightful pleasure. It touched my heart.

And one day five years ago it almost killed me. As will happen occasionally with any horse, my horse spooked and threw me. I had been thrown off a horse many times over the years but this time was different. This time I broke my back, had eight broken ribs, a collapsed lung, and a separated shoulder. I was first taken to St. Joseph Mercy Saline Hospital, and then transferred to the Trauma Unit at St. Joe's in Ann Arbor. I wore a brace on my torso for six months. As soon as I had the okay from my doctor, I went back to riding — but it wasn't the same. Well into middle age, I shuddered at the potential impact of another accident. I decided to get out of horses. It left a big hole in my life.

Just to fill the time and to keep busy during this transition, I joined up with a dog walking service. I love dogs and love to walk. What a perfect combination. Right around this time I was starting to watch *The Dog Whisperer* on TV. I tried some of his techniques on the dogs I was walking and they worked great! One of my first real successes was walking two Jack Russell Terriers. They were typical Jack Russells, feisty and in command, and a pain to walk. I tried Cesar's techniques of calm, assertive leadership, and, somewhat to my surprise, the Jack Russells responded just like on TV! In about five minutes, they were walking along like little gentlemen! Even the neighbors were pointing, and laughing, and amazed. "Are those the same two dogs you started out with?" Talk about fun! Because of all of my horse whispering and natural horsemanship experience, I was able to pick up the basics of dog whispering pretty quickly. And it worked like a charm.



Cesar and Tot Man

From there my path was clear. I became a dog trainer and a professional dog whisperer. In addition to training dogs and their owners, I started teaching dog training classes at Ann Arbor Animal Hospital and started to write a dog training blog for AnnArbor.com. I contacted Cesar Millan's protégé, Cheri Lucas, and asked her to provide me with telephone coaching so I could continue to learn about dog whispering. This past January my husband and I planned a vacation to California so that I could spend a half-day learning from Cheri Lucas. Cheri was very pleased with what I had learned about dog whispering and encouraged me to attend the first workshop that Cesar ever planned for advanced dog trainers.

That's how I met Cesar and became a true "dog whisperer." I brought my Pomeranian, Tot Man, to the workshop. He was the only toy breed there, going on pack walks with the big dogs, and everyone loved Tot Man, including Cesar. It has been a long road. I am at the age when some are ending their careers, and I am just starting my career, my calling. My calling as a dog whisperer.

Julia Levitt, "Ann Arbor's Dog Whisperer," provides effective dog training for all breeds. In addition to private training and "board and train," Julia also teaches classes at Ann Arbor Animal Hospital and writes articles for AnnArbor.com that help dog owners "live in harmony" with their dogs. More information about her dog training services, upcoming classes, client comments, and all of her previously published articles can be found on her website, www.InHarmonyDogTraining.com. Contact Julia at Julia@InHarmonyDogTraining.com and follow her latest activities on the In Harmony Dog Training Facebook page.

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