Dogs

The tall, black, long-haired one – Taylor, an Afghan-Labrador mix with patient eyes, a soft expression and a perpetually horizon-focused, surreptitiously alert gaze—inevitably telegraphs an aura of independent thought and purposive behavior that may or may not reflect reality. The Afghan part of him is an ancient and independent hunting type, generally tolerant of children and puppies but not infinitely so, a member of the family but neither invariably willing to occupy a place in the hierarchy subservient to nor necessarily cognizant of inter-species boundaries with his two-legged kin—a dog with a pronounced sagittal crest, large canines and jaw muscles capable of making good use of the teeth. Absolutely self-confident, he is never unnecessarily aggressive toward people, dogs or other animals but is very much capable of efficient, controlled violence under the right circumstances. He will "rescue" our youngest grandson from the creek, dragging him out of the water by the back of his shirt, but snarl if that same child tries to step over rather than walk around him when he's resting in the house. He will not tolerate fighting among his human pack members—intervening physically if he feels things are or could get out of hand—and often communicates his displeasure with tense posture even if voices are raised. He is so casually and predictably aware of human thought as to seem preternaturally observant but, in reality, is merely doing what a pack animal—an alpha male pack animal—does. Eye contact is an important element of pack status in the canine world. This dog will meet a human stare with a confident and defiant stare but only for a few seconds after which he either curls his lip to expose the canines, occasionally even voicing a low growl, or (rarely and almost exclusively with me) turns his head away and wanders off to sulk under the coffee table. Outside, though, he will often follow my gaze, triangulating, with his tail up and stiffly erect, between a distant object, my focal plane and his, trying to ensure that he sees and recognizes what I see and recognize. For reasons that I've yet to decipher, "what is that?" voiced by a human, triggers an alarm.

The other one, Panda, an American bulldog bred originally for herding and protection and later for fighting—what the experts refer to as a "molasser", derived from the ancient mastiffs of the Old World—also is a relatively old breed but, unlike her tall black friend, has been purposively developed—perhaps for reasons of safety but certainly to good effect—for generally friendly relationships with humans. Dominant and occasionally aggressive with other dogs and highly protective of her territory, she is nonetheless absolutely reliable with and dedicated to children, subservient to most adults and fully dependent on human contact to maintain her self-confidence and balance. Panda's intellect is not impressive but, as an unreconstructed and otherwise unfulfilled member of a mixed, two- and four-legged pack, she is demonstratively affectionate, tail-wagging-the-dog happy and the only canine who has ever

earned a place of unsupervised trust nestled with our grandchildren while they sleep on the couch. She also is immediately and unselfconsciously aware of human thoughts and emotions. Unlike any dog that I've ever met, the bulldog will return a human stare with a canine stare, holding it for so long that the human's eyes begin to water and the human becomes uncomfortable. I at first took this odd behavior for a sign of dominance or at least willfulness but, in contrast to the Afghan-Labrador, she never exhibits any aggression during a staring contest, even with small children. I've come to think that she believes it is possible for a dog to read a human's mind and that her odd behavior is really just practice. I've never asked her if she can tell what I'm thinking when we engage in this ritual but she always seems quite self-satisfied and relaxed when it ends.

As I've suggested, both dogs are capable of some level of apparently prescient function, albeit of somewhat different sorts. Taylor, who lies always at a geographic center of the house or yard between his people and the outside world, is the more accomplished of the two. If he is lying on the middle landing of the stairs equidistant from the front door, the basement and the second-floor bedrooms and I am in my office thinking about a second cup of coffee and wondering whether I should let the dogs out after their breakfast, before I reach for my empty coffee mug or switch from my computer glasses to my regular specs, he will be at the door to the back yard looking over his shoulder, waiting for me. Perhaps, through two levels of century-old pine flooring and joists, he can sense my muscles twitch before I make a conscious move. Perhaps not. But a dog which arose from an intact pack milieu would certainly derive an evolutionary advantage from being able to sense the intentions of other pack members by whatever means, apparently means that are beyond our perception or comprehension. Or maybe they can just read our minds because, as all dogs know and most dogs show, we're inherently inferior beings with inadequately developed senses.

Panda sleeps all day at my feet on a foam mattress—unless someone is asleep on one of the beds upstairs where she believes, because she has never been told otherwise, that she has a right to sleep. She appears to be relatively unaware of and unaffected by my movements, let alone my intentions, during the day but, oblivious though she may seem lying dead to the world on her mattress, she is nonetheless capable of distinguishing instantly between one of my trips upstairs for coffee and a chance to go outside without my consciously signaling which is my intent.

Both dogs have reasonable vocabularies, not the claimed 100 plus word vocabularies of the occasional Shetland sheep dog or German Shepherd, but certainly adequate for their needs and ours. We've made no intentional effort to stimulate their understanding of human speech—no repetitive training, no treats—but, like children, they pick it up and incorporate the skill into their far more developed understanding of non-verbal communication. That they know the

spelling out of d-i-n-n-e-r means food is not at all remarkable but, sometimes, their comprehension seems to reach into a more abstract realm. They both associate the word “farm” with the place they love best and respond to its utterance by nosing at their leads on the hooks by the basement stairs and searching for the coolers that we take back and forth every weekend. Maybe it’s not all that that surprising or unusual but it’s a sort of indirect association that I’ve not seen in very many dogs. In point of fact, other than the necessity of housebreaking, which was important but entirely uneventful, and “come”, which was for their safety and a bit more of a challenge, we really haven’t engaged in much formal training. We’ve pretty much just lived with the dogs and they with us. They’ve accommodated our idiosyncrasies and we theirs and it seems to be working out just fine. Professional dog trainers might not find the arrangement familiar or satisfactory and people who aren’t used to shedding dogs on leather couches might be aghast but we don’t generally view the dogs as either tools or possessions. They’re part of the family—the pack—and everyone, including the dogs, seems to be satisfied with that arrangement. The approach seems natural and engenders a kind of predictability that we all find comfortable.

While the dogs have adapted to the human world in which they live, bending it to their needs as much as possible, they remain fundamentally animals with animal instincts and sensibilities. In the woods, far from cities and towns, there is a faint, unfathomable hum of which only a very few people are aware. Something between a sound and a vibration, it’s a little like the hum of an electrical field but infinitely more subtle and not tied to any one of the usual senses. I’ve often wondered whether it may, in fact, be the sum of all the weak electrical fields—the souls—of all the life forms in the forest. It ceases only on the darkest, coldest, clearest nights of mid-winter and pauses briefly when a predator or other large animal passes through, as if the world is holding its breath in nervous anticipation for a few seconds. For me, it creates a nearly subliminal sense of well-being when present and a vague sense of discomfort when it’s not. I know that the dogs are aware of the hum as well, not because we’ve spoken of it but because, when it stops, they become suddenly quiet and alert. Outside at the farm, on the black, brittle nights of January, when we go for the last walk of the day in the dead quiet of those late hours, the dogs are noticeably tense, holding close to me and to each other as we walk down the dark road, stopping often to peer back over their shoulders in the direction from which we’ve come and eager to return to the house and the warmth and glow of the wood stove.

I wrote about Taylor and Panda about 9 years ago. In the interim, they both died of cancer – Taylor about 7 years ago and Panda just last year. Their ashes are buried side by side in a perennial flower bed near the house covered by large, flat slabs of gray shale from the creek. Where my ashes will eventually reside.

When Taylor died, Panda went into a serious funk. I don't know if dogs experience depression but, if they do, she did. She spent weeks wandering around the house and outside sniffing the places that Taylor frequented and looking at us as if we should have an answer. Some of her spark was gone. She had never been apart from her "big brother" and I think somehow or other she blamed us for his disappearance. After a few months, thinking that she might perk up if she had a companion, we adopted a 3-month-old German Shepherd-black and tan hound cross – Jett. On Fathers' Day. Now she had something else to blame on us. For the first few weeks, she was downright hostile. For Jett's safety, we kept them both on leads but, of course, that only made it worse. Once we took the leads off and let them interact normally, they quickly reached an accommodation and, within a few months, they were fast friends, never far apart and never failing to turn around to check on the other when we were walking in the woods. They rarely slept without maintaining some sort of physical contact – on the couch, by the wood stove, on the beds. At nearly 150 pounds between them, it took some getting used to sharing a full-sized mattress with them.

Jett is a classic shepherd-hound mix: reasonably intelligent, sweet and loving with absolutely no trace of aggressiveness or dominance toward other dogs or people, but with barely restrained wanderlust and unrestrained prey drive (although he doesn't chase deer). He doesn't have the regal, sometimes aloof bearing that Taylor did; he's more of a "go along, get along, Joe" kind of dog, well-adapted to life on a farm. Although displaying no aggression toward people, he is very protective of his space, perhaps because we're a mile from the nearest neighbor at the end of a gravel road. He spends a good part of his day and most of the night lying on one of the beds next to a window on the second floor peering out over the driveway and the field beyond. He barks incessantly at the letter carrier and UPS and Fedex delivery trucks and pretty much anyone in a vehicle until they either leave or walk up to the house. Of course, he also barks at foxes, coyotes and the occasional bear but it's a different, more urgent sort of barking punctuated by deep growls. When people, whether strangers or friends, come into the house, he puts his paws on their shoulders and tries to kiss them – a behavior that we've had little success in correcting. Somehow or other, he has decided that that's the appropriate thing to do when someone comes in. Very European, I suppose, but not always appreciated by our friends from the city and older relatives.

One of Jett's defining characteristics is his voice. Barking at the letter carrier and delivery drivers or other vehicles, he has the annoying, high-pitched bark of a shepherd. Otherwise, though, he vocalizes like a hound: deeper and more resonant. In the house, he just talks – a deep, guttural, murmuring kind of vocalization that sounds distinctly human and can go on for several minutes where he clearly knows what he's saying even if we don't. He has learned to actually speak a few words in English, including "out", "hi", "hello" and "oh", and more often than not

uses them appropriately. He uses “out” both when he wants to go outside and when someone is sitting in his favorite chair. He also understands quite a few spoken words, as well, and neither spelling nor sign language defeats that. Early on, Jett developed a habit of sitting on chairs at the kitchen and dining room tables. I suppose that we should have discouraged it but he looks so polite, natural and comfortable sitting at the table that we tolerate it. My mother-in-law visits us from time to time and, at 101, is a champion Scrabble player. When she’s here and playing, Jett will sometimes take a chair at the dining room table to kibitz, mumbling in his own way as if giving advice on obscure, 2-letter words. She’s quite used to the idiosyncrasies of our dogs and will sometimes show Jett her remaining tiles and possible words.