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Behavior Education for Pet Parents and Pet Professionals

Animal Behavior Associates Newsletter

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Dog Piece: **Separation Anxiety Misunderstood**



We just returned from a wonderful week off spent mostly in South Dakota at Suzanne's cousin's cabin on the Missouri River. We had great fun in the sun, water skiing, taking spins on the jet ski, swimming, and just visiting with family and friends. Our 3 year old Irish setter, Coral, traveled with us and got to live her dream chasing birds in the rolling hills

Dear Suzanne,

Wow, the last month of summer is here. We're bummed but we've given you two telewebcasts to look forward to later in the month. Read on!!

Best wishes,
Suzanne and Dan

• **Cat Piece:** **Oscar the Psychic Cat**

An essay appeared recently in the New England Journal of Medicine about Oscar, a cat that resides at the advanced dementia unit of a nursing home in Rhode Island. Oscar seems to know, even before the staff members, when one of the residents is about to die. Hours before a resident's death, Oscar goes to the room and curls up on the bed, purring and gently nuzzling the person. He stays till the person dies, and then quietly leaves. The two year-old cat has supposedly presided over 25 deaths in the nursing home since he came to live there as a kitten. Staff members view his presence at a bedside as "an almost absolute indicator of impending death."



behind the cabin.

After leaving the cabin, we left Coral for a half day at a doggie day care/boarding facility while we visited a tourist spot in another part of the state. Coral was placed in a large outdoor pen as a single dog, surrounded by other pens containing several dogs, all of whom were running the fence, barking at her. As we walked out of Coral's sight to the car, we could hear her high-pitched barking, clearly indicating she was upset. We weren't happy either but had no choice other than to cancel our plans.

Upon our return, the facility's owner informed us that she thought Coral had severe separation anxiety. (We did not reveal our profession!) Coral had panted, paced and whined for sometime after our departure, although she did settle down, had a long drink of water, and eventually rested until we returned.

Does Coral really have separation anxiety? Consider the following - Coral can be left alone at home and in our car without problems. Coral shows no hyper-arousal or stress related behaviors when we leave the house. We left Coral first in her crate and then loose in an enclosed porch at Suzanne's cousin's cabin (after being there for less than a day) with their dog while we went out on the boat. After a few minutes initial whining, the neighbors reported she was quite calm.

Coral's behavior clearly doesn't fit with generally accepted definitions of separation anxiety. What was the cause of her stress at the day care? While being left in an unfamiliar environment could have accounted for Coral's stress, the cabin was also unfamiliar and Coral was not distressed. At the day care, Coral was clearly quite frightened by the barking dogs in the adjacent pens. Also, we did not spend anytime with her there, as we had at the cabin - although brief -

The essay stimulates a number of questions such as - Can this be true? Can Oscar really predict an impending death? Can he predict any death or just those in the nursing home? Merely keeping track of where Oscar spends his time during the day may lead to different conclusions. But for now, let's by-pass the basic questions of whether or not Oscar has these abilities and assume that he does. As animal behaviorists we want to know - HOW does he do it? What sensory mechanism or mechanisms are involved and how did Oscar come to possess them?

As good scientists, we would start with careful observations of Oscar's behavior - exactly what he does, and when and where. Armed with these descriptions, we could then generate hypotheses about the possible mechanisms in play. For example, the essay describes Oscar sniffing around the person before settling in with them. Could Oscar be detecting some odor change in the person that reliably precedes death? We might then set up an experiment to test the hypothesis.

We could take clothing from a person who was dying and one who wasn't and see if Oscar was more inclined to lie next to the dying person's clothes. Or we might try to capture the breath of dying and healthy people and see if Oscar responded differently to these air samples.

Maybe it isn't odor at all but sounds produced by dying people that could even be inaudible to us. Or could Oscar be cueing on the increased attention staff and family might be giving to residents as their condition deteriorates?

The take home message is that science gives us a way to move past speculation of what Oscar is doing and allows us an objective way to identify causes and document whether the phenomenon is real or not. The scientific method - something that we'll discuss more in another article in this issue - can help us identify what may be extraordinary abilities (like detecting subtle odor cues) and arrive at more concrete understandings of behavioral observations.

- **Our Piece:**

prior to leaving her.

The moral of the story? While we appreciated the day care owner's helpful intentions, she did not have sufficient information to determine whether Coral suffered from a separation anxiety problem or not. She was basing her opinion on one observation of Coral in one unique situation. Be cautious about interpreting behavior based on very little information and single observations in one context.

To learn more about the practicalities of assessing a very different behavior in a very different context be sure to attend our [Canine Aggression workshop](#) coming up September 15th and 16th.

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**Thinking of coming to our September [Understanding and Modifying Canine Aggressive Behavior Workshop](#)? We'll be giving you a preview of the workshop on August 23rd with a FREE Tele-Webcast. You do not have to register for this preview, just [GO TO THE PAGE NOW](#) for all the information you'll need to listen in. PRINT the page, as we may not send reminders for this event.**

We are bringing back our [Using Counter Conditioning and Desensitization Techniques Effectively](#) Teleclass -Webcast on August 28th. As always now, you have the option of participating via telephone, webcast or listening to

### Observation, Explanation and Science

Both the cat and dog articles remind us that it is easy to jump to conclusions about what animals do and why. It's human nature to speculate about things we haven't seen before and make up



explanations for them. This is a good because it causes us to think about the things we experience in our world. However, it's not so good if we simply accept our made-up explanations as the truth.

Recently, our friend and colleague Dr. Karen London was lamenting the fact that ethological methods seem to be less and less used by those interested in explaining dog behavior. We think she was referring to the systematic, objective observation of dogs in their natural habitat, which was the method of choice in classical ethology.

Everybody watches dogs, but few of us really observe them in a scientific way. There is so much we don't understand about dog behavior, including that some behaviors haven't even been adequately described. For example, we know what postures dogs use when they urinate, but we don't have good descriptions of normal frequencies of urination for different aged dogs, or how that behavior changes through the life span of dogs.

The social behavior of dogs with people and each other is also poorly understood. Some people believe that different breeds of dog play differently with each other, but no one has examined it systematically. Animal Control Officers frequently tell us that some breeds are better about giving warning signals or threats prior to an attack than are others, but again no one has systematically studied it. Suzanne believes that breeds of dogs have distinctive "breed- typical" odors - Irish setters smell differently than Dalmatians, for example.

We'd like to leave you with two points. First, with training and experience many pet professionals can contribute to our knowledge of pet behavior without becoming card-

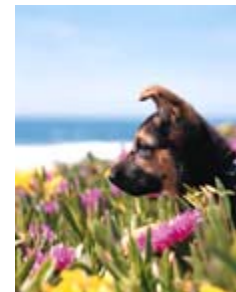
the replay, which will be available for 3 days after this one session class. PLEASE NOTE - you can receive CEUs for any of our approved events ONLY by participating LIVE by phone or webcast. REGISTER NOW, class size is limited.

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carrying ethologists. We would encourage pet professionals to collaborate with scientifically trained animal behaviorists to expand our knowledge of pet behavior. Second, we all need to be more critical consumers of information about pet behavior. When some one tells you something like - cats are always attracted to people that don't like cats, or dogs always strive to be dominant ask "Where did that conclusion come from? Is it based on science or is it just some one's opinion?" And what observations went into forming that conclusion?

• **What's New:**
Work, Work, Work

We've borrowed that line from Jimmy Buffett's "License to Chill" song as that's all we've been doing since returning from our trip to South Dakota. We began the trip with an all-day workshop on July 27th to graduates of the veterinary technology program at the Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture in Curtis NE.



Suzanne presented "Becoming the Parent Your Pet Wants" to the Lakewood Singles club on August 5th.

Our new DVD "Helping Fido Welcome Your Baby" is finished and in production. We also created an audio version with the same great information. We're updating our webpage but you can view the 'old ' infomation if you wish [HERE](#). The new DVD and audio CD version avoid the compability problems with the old format mentioned on the website. If you just can't wait, to get your copy, call our office at 303-932-9095 and we'll be happy to take your order. If you order either product NOW before the official release, we'll give you a 10% discount off the \$29.95 regular price.

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