

Notes from a Dog Walker: Back to Their Nature

By Michael Brandow



Hiking with a pack of dogs can be a path to self-discovery.

I don't think I'm overreaching by speculating that when we're moving confidently and gracefully in unison along an ancient path in the deep woods, something primal kicks in, for both me and my dogs. The feeling is overwhelming and hard to describe, and maybe can't be accurately, but has something to do with movement and position relative to each other. A sense of well-being comes over me and my little legion, the kind of contentment that comes with being in a place and time with no desire to be in any others because all is as it should be. I'm a firm believer, after many such outings, in the theory that prehistoric hominids first befriended wolves, not around villages where some say garbage



heaps attracted them, but on the great hunting highways where we learned from each other—us more from them, I suspect—long before humans became sedentary and wolves became dogs.

Running free, of course, isn't all fun and games. The wild is no amusement park. I've never lost a dog in town or country, but some of my clients have let their loved ones dart off after a rabbit or a deer, never to be seen again. Those poor creatures likely starved to death, or froze. Others may have met predators, perhaps some old relations.

I believe my pampered big-city canines have gained as much self-knowledge on the trail as I have. More often than not, never having been taught or told, they simply know what to do to run as a pack. Happily out of their urban "heel" positions, they fall naturally into line along a path. Some may have never been to a city park, much less to the wide open country, and still they tend to understand this is no free-for-all, being off-leash in the wild. Certain dogs, like my own sweet Samantha, instantly assume the scouting position, up front a few yards from the rest of us, while

others flank us on both sides, off the path and out in the underbrush. Some tag along as rear guards not far behind. Fraidy-cat humans, scared of their own shadows and better off back in town, are always whining about free-ranging canines they encounter on their bird-watching expeditions. They complain to park rangers that we're threatening "the environment," and them. If they stopped being such whiners for a minute and watched closely, they'd see how orderly my canine congregation is. For the most part, barring some tempting scent, my dogs stay on the straight and nar-

row, and to their positions, and they wouldn't hurt a fly, or a butterfly collector. No commands are needed, as I suspect my ancestors didn't need spoken language to work with wolves, a trait as overestimated, again, as my opposable thumbs holding a hiking stick I picked up along the way.

Sounds far-fetched?

Something taught my dogs to assume their positions and I assure you it wasn't me. It's possible, I'll admit, that walking as a team on city sidewalks helped prepare them for off-leash outings—and it can't hurt to keep liver treats in my pockets on the trail, just in case—but this doesn't explain everything. I've hiked with every shape, size, color and combination of Greyhound, Shepherd, Beagle and mutt to assume a position, and unless a Retriever's irretrievably inbred and not too swift in either town or country, he'll be trusted free-ranging and fall right in line. Just about any dog can do it.

One of the most

rewarding sights in all my years of taking clients' dogs hiking was that of a tiny lapdog, of the white-and-fluffy genus, a type you'd never expect to see in a woodland setting, lighting up on his path to self-discovery. The small Shih Tzu named Ryan, stylin' with a puppy cut to ward off burrs and discourage ticks from hitching a ride, kept up like a trooper for miles, leaping over fallen trees, diving into streams, tackling steep rock inclines, overjoyed to finally learn what it's like to be a dog. 🐾

