

## Love Lessons from a Killer Whale

Finding clues for happiness in the wild kingdom

Amy Sutherland didn't begin treating her husband like a performing seal out of the blue — she did years of serious research first. Sutherland, a College of Communication journalism lecturer, was working on a book about animal trainers when she found herself applying their techniques, such as positive reinforcement for good behaviors and nonreactions to bad ones, to her everyday interactions at home.

A funny column about the results — titled "What Shamu Taught Me About a Happy Marriage" — appeared in the *New York Times* in the summer of 2006. Six months later, it was the most viewed and most e-mailed article of the year. Her book, *What Shamu Taught Me About Life, Love, and Marriage: Lessons for People from Animals and Their Trainers* (Random House), was published last February.

Sutherland recently spoke with *Bostonia*.

**Your book covers a range of animal-training behaviors. Which were easy to adopt at home?**

Most of these principles are simple in concept but devilishly hard to apply. Once progressive animal training showed me why nagging doesn't work, I gave it up, and that was surprisingly easy. Until I stopped, I didn't realize how much my nagging dragged me down. The hard part was retraining myself to watch for what people — especially my husband — did that I liked, and then making sure to reward it, to be appreciative. Like most humans, I'd been brought up to focus on what bothered me in other people and heap attention on that.

**What's the best technique you learned?**

Trainers say you get what you reinforce, which was a tremendous eye-opener for me. I had to look at my own behavior and consider how I might be fueling in someone else behavior I didn't want or didn't like. When I would respond to my husband's ire over losing his keys by helping him

look or suggesting ways not to lose his keys, I was unwittingly reinforcing his pique. Recently, he got in the habit of asking me what the weather forecast is, and for some reason, this got on my nerves. Then I realized he was asking me because I always answered. If I didn't want to be his personal weather .com, then I should stop acting like it.

**You were so open with your husband about the techniques that he started using them on you. Are you still retraining each other?**

Once you cross over, there's no going back. It's really just a much easier, more productive way of relating to each other. There's a lot less nagging and bossing in our household and a lot more thinking like dolphin trainers.

**This book idea came from a year spent at Moorpark College's Exotic Animal Training and Management Program. What's the most important thing you learned?**

There are universal principles of behavior that cut across species, from

African crested cranes to the highest of primates. If a pigeon pecks a piano key and gets a seed, the pigeon is likely to play on. If a human tickles the ivories and gets a standing ovation, the same. If a pigeon gets a shock when it pecks the key, end of concert career. If a human gets booed, the same. It showed me that we humans, who so often think of ourselves as an invasive species, are just another strand in the web of life. I found that heartening.

**Did you and your husband find yourselves identifying with any particular species?**

It was a happy day for me whenever I got to trail along with the students as they walked the wolf, Legend, at the teaching zoo. That's probably partly the social animal in me being drawn to other social animals. My husband feels the same way. He also has a thing for lemurs — like them, he is lean and graceful. But he doesn't have their big eyes, nor can he jump from tree limb to tree limb.

JESSICA ULLIAN



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