



Touch Associated Clicker Training

Tucky: A Journey

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Almost seventeen years ago a beautiful cocker spaniel puppy named Tucker came into my life. I had been working in animal rescue for a number of years and had provided foster care for many dogs. But I was completely unprepared for handling a foster dog with Tucker's issues. All these years later, armed with much more wisdom and experience, I look back at the mistakes I made and am amazed at how resilient he was.

Tucker was an impulsive acquisition. The woman who had bought him suffered from a mental illness and had four children under the age of five. When she was discharged from the hospital she felt "guilty" about leaving her children for so long and promised to buy them a puppy. At the breeder's house the puppies lunged at the gate, all looking for attention from their new visitors. But the family was focused on the puppy who clung to the back wall. They wanted that puppy. They named him Tucker.

Eight weeks later I received a message on my Cocker Spaniel Rescue hotline. A woman's voice said, "Help! I need to get rid of my dog. This is an emergency." When I returned the call I learned that Tina's four-month-old cocker, Tucker, was snapping at her children and had lunged at visitors. Tina described Tucker as a shy, nervous dog who was especially terrified of men. He had just bitten her boyfriend and that was the last straw.

Before taking Tucker I asked a friend to go meet him and assess the situation since she lived nearby. She immediately called and said, "Get that puppy out of there." She described a rundown "biker" house with lots of activity and a busy road. When she arrived at the house Tucker was tied to the railing of the front steps. He was frightened and didn't have anywhere to hide. He was just a baby.

The next day I met Tina in a restaurant parking lot outside of Boston. In her back seat were four small children with runny noses and filthy clothing. Tina was clearly overwhelmed. The little puppy next to her on the seat emitted a low, steady growl when he saw me. Once outside of the car, Tina held Tucker's leash and he frantically backed away from me, choking himself with his collar. I suggested that Tina say goodbye, which she did by scooping him up and giving him a kiss. Then she placed him back on the ground, climbed back into her car and drove off.

Left alone with me in the parking lot, Tucker was terrified. He wouldn't let me touch him and it took almost thirty minutes before he would let me lure him into a crate. He thrashed, growled and yelped all the way home, as he bit at the crate's bars. I wondered what could have possibly happened to this tiny little boy.

I also worried about this puppy's future. After a number of years working in the humane field, I had never seen such fear and aggression in such a young dog. Was he too broken? Could I get through to him? I drove along, plotting how I would introduce him to my adult dogs at home. Would meeting three adult dogs send him right over the edge or what his own species exactly what he needed?

When we entered the house and Tucker saw the “big dogs” he frantically tried to climb my leg. I picked him up and our bonding had begun. He whimpered and clung to me. He was simply a terrified little baby who was trying to figure out a scary new world.

Over the next few weeks Tucky slowly became acclimated to the house but any little thing could send him into hysteria. He jumped at the smallest movement. He ran out of a room at anything that was new or strange for him. When I tried to leave him he would freak out and it was very clear that he was terrified of everything, including being left behind. His fears were beyond reason and I knew that he and I were going to be joined at the hip for quite some time. Consistency and predictability would provide the foundation for his trust.

So I worked with Tucker. And I learned on the job. I spread books out on my bed at night and pored through the chapters, trying to find the remedy for his various problems. It was a lonely time because some of my friends and family didn't share my passion for troubled dogs. They made comments and judgments, suggesting that I would always be single if I continued to take in difficult dogs. I will admit that my world may seem a bit excessive to the ordinary person who simply likes dogs. But I have been doing this work for over twenty years and the rewards are what keep me going. And over the years people who matter to me have realized that I am not a crazy lunatic, but that I just happen to love dogs and having them around is a natural, normal part of my life.

I knew I had a tough case and I had made a commitment to see Tucky through to the other side. I had my work cut out for me.

Tucker's past was a puzzle with many missing pieces. I would never know what went into creating such a frightened little puppy. But I set about trying to figure out ways to help him. We worked for over six months on his separation anxiety. It was a long, grueling process and it was not always easy keeping my spirits up. Many, many times I wondered if we would ever get to the other side. I sometimes questioned whether I was the right person for him and whether I was even choosing the right interventions. But we trudged on. Imagine my relief and delight one day when I left Tucky inside, took the baby monitor outside and for the first time heard nothing from Tucky on the other end. I sat on my front stoop and wept.

In an effort to desensitize Tucky, I took him on short, safe walks, praising him and giving him treats all the way. This was before clicker training was a common practice so it was a long, hard process. But slowly Tucky started to gain confidence. I did the same desensitization process with him when it came to his fear of men. That was a much longer project but eventually he was able to be in a room with men without freaking out.

After a couple years of working with him he appeared to be “normal” but his fears still ruled his life. On many occasions he expressed his anal glands because he was so frightened. Trucks would bump and bang down the road in front of the house. Tucky would panic and fly from the room. In the house he would sometimes stand tentatively in the doorway, his body in the hallway and his head peeking around the corner, poised for flight. Flight from what, I would ask myself? What could be so scary? I have to admit that in the early years I sometimes wondered if keeping him alive was the right thing to do.

Tucky's scary list went on and on. Leaves blowing in the wind. All men, at least until he knew them. Thumps in the night. Thumps during the day. Fast movements. The great outdoors. It was all so heartbreaking.

Then sometime around when Tucky turned four he turned a corner. He was less frightened in the house and moved around with a bit more confidence. He was much more comfortable with men and would even allow some men to hold him in their laps. He was a very sweet and gentle dog. His happy exuberance made me laugh as he would slap me with a paw or play with my other dogs. He had become a very funny and fun-loving dog without a hint of the fears that consumed him.

Of all of my dogs, Tucker turned out to be the silliest. His love for life was infectious. When he would dive onto my bed and dig to hide himself under the covers so he could play "where's Tucker?" I would get a catch in my throat and swell with pride. Who could have known that he would evolve from such frightened puppy into a goofball adult? As I would watch him sleep and hear his soft snoring, I would smile to myself because after all of our struggles together, he had become such a happy, well-adjusted boy.

We had a long time together and I treasure the memories of my dear, sweet Tucky, who passed away in June of 2010. He was almost seventeen years old. We went on a long journey together, Tucky and I. I loved him madly and I miss him terribly. And I know I made many mistakes along the way but I wouldn't trade those beautiful years for anything. Tucky was one of the best accomplishments in my life.