

## **BARKING LOUDLY**

by Bret Lyon, PhD, SEP, BCC

My pleasant, meditative mood was shattered, once again, by sudden hysterical, loud barking. I live near the top of a hill in what in Berkeley qualifies as a semi-rural area—lots of trees around, near Sibley Regional Park. The hills, which seemed a drawback to me at first, have become incredibly useful in combating high blood pressure. Every day, I can step out my door and feel like I'm in the country. As I walk down my street, with fresh air and lots of green, my mind quickly goes happily blank. Then, suddenly, I am jarred out of my reverie by my neighbor's two dogs, who fill the air with thunder as I absentmindedly pass their house. While it happens almost every day, it always startles me and throws me, for a moment, into primitive fear. Over time, I have grown to hate those dogs—two little Scotties who have a false sense of their size and ownership.

I have watched with worry as the neighbor's little boy approaches them, only to see him greeted with silence and wagging tails. But not me. My quiet has been shattered every time. The fact that they are so small only makes it worse, as my instinctive fear reaction is followed by embarrassment that 1) they are confined, and 2) they probably couldn't hurt me, even if they wanted to. After just trying to ignore them, I have taken to screaming at them to shut up, creating an even greater uproar.

Finally, I made a decision. I was not going to put up with it any more. And I was not going to escalate my opposition. As I walk passed them, again having my entire nervous system jarred into panic by their barking, I stopped. I turned and approached them.

They went into a paroxysm of barking and jumping at me. The sound was absolutely deafening. "Nice doggies," I said. "I won't hurt you. You're sure good doggies." The din continued. I got closer to the fence that confined them. Absorbing the punitive and intense sound, I stood there, quiet and reassuring, my hand out to them.

I'm not sure how long it went on. Neighbors started to come out of their houses. The dogs' owner opened his door and started up the stairs.

Suddenly, the two little dogs stopped barking. Their tails began to wag, their bodies to wiggle. The barking turned into high-pitched whining, as dogs do when they want attention. Carefully, I moved my hand to an opening in the fence, ready to snatch it back again if I was misreading the situation. One of the dogs sniffed it. Then he licked it. Then the other dog pushed him aside and checked me out. Now they began jumping against the fence—seeking attention (I believed). I breathed hard and put my hand over the fence and began to pat one of the dogs on the head. He whimpered with delight. The other dog joined him. With the owner looking on with astonishment, we had an incredibly loving session.

Now, every time I walk past the house, they are waiting for me and we have a loving encounter. When their owner has them inside and there is no one to greet me, I feel disappointed. I miss my new friends.

The more I think about this adventure, the more interesting and symbolic it seems. My change of attitude changed everything. Had these been Dobermans instead of Scotties, I might not have done it—I would have certainly been more cautious and involved the owner. But when I think about who and what we don't want to face, internally and externally, I think

we do often overestimate the danger and difficulty. While things certainly don't always work out anywhere near this well, it might be worth a try.

This might be especially true of difficult emotions and memories. If we can face them with appropriate caution, but without panic. If we can be still and move very slowly, never losing ourselves or our center. Sometimes, even the most difficult emotion or memory can become loving, or at least helpful. When I have clients go back to their childhood memories of shaming, I always have them go back as their adult selves, never losing their resources and who they are now, so they can be with their shamed child—not dismiss or hate it—and not just disappear into it. Equally, with parts of ourselves that seem to be “barking loudly” with shaming and self criticism, if we approach them in the right way, we may find that they are actually trying to help us and give us important information.

#### POSTSCRIPT

I hadn't seen the dogs in quite a while. The weather had turned cold and my neighbor had taken to keeping them inside. I missed them for a while, then got used to them not being there to greet me. Yesterday, I walked down my street, lost in thought. There was a car parked in front of my neighbor's yard and I walked right by. I was several hundred feet up the block, when I heard something. Dogs were barking. The barking was loud, but somehow plaintive. I stopped and listened. Were my friends back? I walked back to my neighbor's house. There they were. They had been hidden by the car, but now I could see them from the opposite side. Their tails were wagging and they were barking and whining. Eager to greet me again.

“There you are,” I cooed. “You're back. So nice to see you.” I reached my hand in and petted them one after the other as they jostled to get my attention. I was right there, in the moment, with my friends. And it was a beautiful day.

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