

HOME

A Conversation With Arthur

The neon green frisbee floated effortlessly, in a lazy arc, across the broad expanse of carefully trimmed lawn. The long haired and graceful collie jumped high in a carefully planned, intersecting parabola and caught the whirling saucer in her teeth, to the squealing delight of several small children who were playing with this magnificent animal.

Idly, I wondered at all of the complex array of mathematical vectors that an aeronautical engineer would have had to plot to perform so casually demonstrated a feat of canine acrobatics. And as always, I speculated on the level of intelligence that must be present in so beautiful and sentient an animal.

The reflections stirred up memories in me of a favorite canine of mine from long ago. His name was "Arthur." Arthur was a beautiful Irish wolf hound with a magnificent reddish coat and a decidedly regal bearing. He shared several years of his companionship with me before moving on to the land of perpetual milkbones and dogbiscuits. My musings of Arthur brought back one incident with him that always comes to mind when I think of him in particular, and canine intelligence in general..

It happened one night, some years ago, just after I had finished having dinner. I was preparing to feed Arthur his nightly meal. As I spooned the mixture of dried dog food and bran into Arthur's dish, someone appeared to speak to me in a deep throated and raspy voice. I thought that I clearly heard the words, "you know I would really prefer something with a little more flavor.". Startled, my head snapped up like a gophers and rotated in a 180 degree arc. Spying nothing out of the ordinary, I stood up and decided to explore the phenomenon further. It was probably a smart Alec neighbor, who was having a good laugh at my expense. But no, the door was firmly closed and no one appeared to be in my immediate vicinity. I was watching too many "X-files" episodes, I concluded.

Puzzled, I continued pouring the dry dog food into Arthur's dish. He sat there patiently, waiting for me to finish, with that benign, long-suffering expression that is common to children who think their parents somewhat slow witted.

It never would have occurred to me in a million years that it was Arthur who had made the comment. A talking dog? Nahhhh!

You can imagine then my complete surprise when Arthur tilted his aristocratic, Irish Wolf-Hound's head up to me and said, both clearly and distinctly, "Didn't you hear me John? I said I would really rather you served me something more flavorful." I saw his mouth move and I heard the words, but I could not, for the life of me, put the two items together as a cause and effect. I just stared at Arthur like a moon-struck half wit, incapable of speech.

Arthur said patiently, "I'm sorry John, I didn't mean to startle you. I just have grown rather tired of eating dried food from a dish .

Isn't it possible to get a little more variety and perhaps a napkin and some flavored water with my meal?"

Still gaping like a thunder struck bumpkin, I managed to squawk, "Is that you talking Arthur?" "Of course it is John" he replied, ". Now can we talk about my menu selection please?"

"Well of course Arthur" I stammered, "What would you prefer?" I said, not believing I was having a conversation with a dog. .

"Hmmm" Arthur considered. "What about some nice, fresh lamb- chops and a small serving of oat bran? That should be tasty and good for my coat too. And could I have a napkin and some flavored water too please? It would be ever so kind of you."

As if in a dream, I prepared Arthur's requests and served them to him, along with the flavored water and napkin. He dined delicately and slurped the water in a dignified and quiet manner, touching the napkin to his jaws occasionally to avoid being messy. I could only watch in total awe, like a time traveler brought forward a few centuries, thunder struck at the many novel things around him. Had Arthur really talk to me? When he was finished eating, I planned to get to the bottom of this.

Arthur finished his meal and said quietly "Thank you John. That was very nice. I have wanted to ask you for those meal changes for the last few years, but I was always afraid of startling you."

"How long have you been able to talk?" I asked him?. "Oh since I was a small puppy" he replied. " I learned to speak from you and old Mrs Kendle next door.. She used to talk to me all the time while you were at work..She was a real character."

Still not quite believing what I was hearing, I inquired further. "Why haven't you said anything all of these years?" I asked, for Arthur was over 5 human years old.

"Well, I never really saw the need" he said." I knew it would startle you, and Mrs Kendle and I used to have long conversations about the newer types of current fiction and the latest movies playing at the cinema. That was talking enough for me" he said.

"Fiction? You mean you can read too?" "Why of course John" Arthur replied."I had to have something to occupy me all of the time you were at work. Mrs Kendle used to read to me from "The collected works of William Shakespeare" and the Bible. I found them quite entertaining..Then, as her eyesight began to fail, I returned the favor and read to her every day from the same works. It made her very happy towards the end..I was very sad when she passed on."

My amazement increased as Arthur continued on. He told me his views on current events and some of the more pressing concerns of the day. Apparently he was a regular watcher of CNN during the day. His grasp of many of the issues was both insightful and well considered.

To say that it was a surreal experience to be having a conversation like this, with a canine, is a mild understatement. I had always wondered at Arthur's reluctance to use fire hydrants or "do his business" in public. Now I knew that modesty and good breeding were the reasons for his circumspect behavior. Further, his taste for and pursuit of the female of his species was, he declared rather stiffly, "a private matter", about which he would not speak further. "Gentlemen do not speak of these things", he said somewhat huffily.

By this time, I thought that I should either check myself into the rubber room or secure a corroborating witness. I asked Arthur if he would mind watching CNN while I ran an errand. "If it pleases you" he barked. "I just want to be here and on time for the David Letterman Show."

With that comment, I scurried out the door and hurried two blocks over to the apartment of my best friend Alice. We had known each other since we were kids and I always depended upon her exquisite common sense in delicate matters.

Alice greeted me, at the door, in an oversized football shirt and slippers. She was making pop corn and getting ready to retire.

After some verbal fumbling, she stopped me with a raised hand and said "O.K., let's have it. What have you gotten yourself into now?" Alice was like that, she wasn't much for small talk or verbal fencing. I gave a mental shrug, put on my most sincere face and said "Alice, have you ever talked to a dog?" The silence that met my question and the raised eyebrow meant she thought I was putting her on. "O.K. I give" she said. "What's the joke?"

I launched into the events of the last few hours hurriedly almost afraid that she would get up and ask me to leave. She didn't though. She looked at me in that kind and gentle way of hers and said "John, have you been under a lot of pressure at work or something?" I assured her that I hadn't and that Arthur had really carried on a conversation with me this very evening. I begged her to come over and listen to him talk.

She of course didn't believe me, but for the sake of friendship, she said she would come over. She changed into jeans and sneakers and we set off along Clancy Street for my apartment.

As I turned the key in the lock and walked into my apartment, I could hear the announcer on CNN talking about Lebanon and the Bekaa Valley. "See" I said almost plaintively to Alice, "Arthur is watching CNN."

The dog was in fact stretched out in front of the T.V. and appeared to be watching the program. We approached Arthur and I said in my most proper voice "Arthur, this is Alice. Would you tell her what you told me a little while ago about Shakespeare?" Arthur said and did nothing but wag his tail.

I tried again, this time a little more forcefully. "C'mon Arthur, tell Alice about your views on the literal interpretation of the Bible." His tail wagged a little harder but there was silence.

"Alright, the joke is over" said Alice. "I don't know what you are trying to prove but it isn't funny and I have had enough." "It isn't a joke" I pleaded, "he really can talk, honest."

Alice is a very good friend but when she thinks you are laughing at her, her temper flares and there is no dealing with her. She stalked out of the apartment, slamming the door closed behind her.

I turned to Arthur and in a loud voice said "Arthur, you wretch, how could you do that to me?" Arthur looked at me for a time and said quietly
" John, you are getting all red in the face.Perhaps you should lie down for a while."

"You can talk!" I shouted, "Why didn't you talk for Alice just now" I demanded? He looked at me for a while before he answered haughtily " Would you like it better if I 'fetched' or rolled over or 'sat' when you commanded?Perhaps I made an error in judgment in speaking to you John. I thought you a little different from most of your species." With that rebuke, he wandered off and refused to speak another word to me.

I had the distinct feeling of being a character in a Kafka novel and it was making me ill at ease. I retired for the evening, hoping that Arthur would feel differently in the morning and explain his curious behavior during Alice's visit.

When the alarm rang next morning I had no thoughts of Arthur or speaking in an erudite fashion with any of his species. I stumbled through the shower and dressing routine like I always do, half awake.

In the kitchen ,while making coffee, i happened to look down at Arthur's dog dish and the events of the preceding evening came cascading back to me like a run away freight train. "Arthur" I called out loudly.Where are you?Come here boy." I found him sleeping in his usual spot by the rear door. "Well, have you changed your mind on anything?" I inquired in a fashion well calculated to show him how insulted I was by his behavior. The dog merely cocked his head at me and wagged his tail. " Nothing to say" I said snootily. Fine, I will deal with you later. my canine friend."

I grabbed my briefcase, charged down the outside stairs and ran to catch the 8:10 A.M., Clancy Street bus for work . I would figure this all out later.

Through the course of the day,I had a chance to consider the events of the previous evening. Had I really held a conversation with Arthur? I couldn't talk it over with Alice, she was still in a snit from the perceived prank that I had played on her with the dog. I dared not mention it to anyone else less they take me away to the funny farm. It was a poser. Maybe it had all been a rather vivid dream .As Scrooge had said in Dickens classic "The Christmas Carol", "more the stuff of undigested bit of beef than spirit."

After work, i approached my apartment somewhat apprehensively.Through the door, I could hear CNN blaring away on the T.V.. Had I left it on? Was Arthur watching the news again? I entered my place, noisily announcing the Master's return. Arthur was indeed sitting in front of the television and apparently watching the program.All attempts to converse with him brought a stony silence. Maybe it was all a bad dream. I thought. Maybe I had better call Alice and make some amends before the situation got any worse.

On my way to the phone, I stopped to pour some dry dog food into Arthur's dish. Next to the dish was a copy of "U.S. News and World Report" opened to an article on the Federal Reserve's Policy on tight money supply

Now, I didn't know what to believe. Can Arthur talk or can't he? From that day on, Arthur never again spoke to me. After a time, the incident faded in my mind and became part of the vague penumbra of memory, where fact and fancy merge.

But I look differently at dogs, and indeed all animals, when I encounter them now. I show them respect and treat them kindly, like they were friends. For, you never know when one of them might say something about your behavior and to the wrong person!

And anytime I visit the Zoo, I feel sort of funny. Sometimes, when the wind is up and voices carry I half imagine that I hear the comment "Did you get a load of that short dumpy guy with the ugly tie and moon face?", followed by a loud chortling sound from the bears.

I guess it is something that we will have to deal with. Now, if only the refrigerator and the can opener have the good grace to remain silent!

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