

How Dolphins Saved My Marriage

By Amy Sutherland

As I wash dishes at the kitchen sink, my husband paces behind me, irritated. “Have you seen my keys?” he snarls, then huffs out a loud sigh and stomps from the room with our dog Dixie at his heels, anxious over her favorite human’s upset.

In the past I would have been right behind Dixie. I would have turned off the faucet and joined the hunt while trying to soothe my husband with bromides like, “Don’t worry, they’ll turn up.” But that only made him angrier.

Now, I focus on the wet dish in my hands. I don’t turn around. I don’t say a word. I’m using a technique I learned from a dolphin trainer.

I love my husband. He’s well read and adventurous. But he also tends to be forgetful, and is often tardy and mercurial.

These minor annoyances are not the stuff of separation and divorce, but in sum they began to dull my love for Scott. I wanted — needed — to nudge him a little closer to perfection, a mate who would be easier to love.

So, like many wives before me, I ignored a library of advice books and set about improving him. By nagging, of course, which only made his behavior worse.

Then something magical happened. For a book I was writing about a school for exotic animal trainers, I started commuting from Maine to California. I listened, rapt, as professional trainers explained how they taught dolphins to flip and elephants to paint. Eventually it hit me that the same techniques might work on that stubborn but lovable species, the American husband.

The central lesson I learned from exotic animal trainers is that I should reward behavior I like and ignore behavior I don’t

Back in Maine, I began thanking Scott if he threw one dirty shirt into the hamper. If he threw in two, I’d kiss him.

I was using what trainers call “approximations,” rewarding the small steps toward learning a whole new behavior

I also began to analyze my husband the way a trainer considers an exotic animal. For example, an elephant is a herd animal, so it responds to hierarchy. It cannot jump, but can stand on its head. It is a vegetarian.

The exotic animal known as Scott is a loner, but an alpha male. So hierarchy matters, but being in a group doesn't so much.

On a field trip with the students, I listened to a professional trainer describe how he had taught African crested cranes to stop landing on his head and shoulders. He did this by training the leggy birds to land on mats on the ground. This, he explained, is what is called an "incompatible behavior," a simple but brilliant concept.

I followed the students to SeaWorld San Diego, where a dolphin trainer introduced me to least reinforcing syndrome (LRS). When a dolphin does something wrong, the trainer doesn't respond in any way. He stands still for a few beats, careful not to look at the dolphin, and then returns to work. The idea is that any response, positive or negative, fuels a behavior. If a behavior provokes no response, it typically dies away.

In the margins of my notes I wrote, "Try on Scott!"

It was only a matter of time before he was again tearing around the house searching for his keys, at which point I said nothing and kept at what I was doing. It took a lot of discipline to maintain my calm, but results were immediate and stunning. His temper fell far shy of its usual pitch and then waned like a fast-moving storm. I felt as if I should throw him a mackerel.

After two years of exotic animal training, my marriage is far smoother, my husband much easier to love.

Last fall, firmly in middle age, I learned that I needed braces. They were not only humiliating, but also excruciating. I complained frequently and loudly. Scott assured me that I would become used to all the metal in my mouth. I did not.

One morning, as I launched into yet another tirade about how uncomfortable I was, Scott just looked at me blankly. He didn't say a word or acknowledge my rant in any way, not even with a nod.

I quickly ran out of steam and started to walk away. Then I realized what was happening, and I turned and asked, "Are you giving me an LRS?"

Silence.

"You are, aren't you?"

He finally smiled, but his LRS had already done the trick. He'd begun to train me, the American wife.

Win Your Day!
Steve Gilbert

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