Dog training – time to "get over it" and get on with life!

Prayer from Dog to God:
"Dear God: We Dogs can understand human verbal instructions, hand signals, whistles, horns, clickers, beepers, scent ID's, electromagnetic energy fields, and Frisbee flight paths. What do humans understand?"

OK, so you have a dog and you want it to be trained, right?
If you have read books on dog training, have been to an obedience class or two, or talked to any "experts" on dog training, you are probably confused.

Each dog training theory is presented with the zeal of the Sermon on the Mount –accompanied by ruthless criticism of any other method and threats that if you use any other method you will ruin your dog for life.

Use food. Don't use food. Use Clickers and whistles. Clickers are useless, use your hands. Use electric collars. Be positive, all the time. No, show your dog who is boss. Tug & jerk. Tugging damages your dog psychologically. Praise a dog. No, don't praise a dog, do you praise your kids when they do what they are supposed to? Check chains are cruel, halters are cruel, e-collars are cruel, harnesses are cruel and collars are cruel. Ban this, ban that.

"Assertiveness" has become confused with "punishment", and "punishment" merged into "cruelty" according to some behaviourists. There's "dominance theory", "fear theory" & "anxiety theory. **Where's the reality?**

While unprofessional trainers attack other trainers, the result is untrained dogs, confused owners trialling multiple methods, or giving up completely. Behaviour problems haven't diminished, either.

One of three outcomes may result from the above:

1. The dog continues to misbehave – which is OK if that means pooing on the verandah, but dangerous if the behaviour is play biting children or endlessly barking till the neighbours complain.
2. Dog & Owner train each other accidentally to a point of "minimal tolerance" and life resumes a somewhat less stressful pace.
3. The owner gives up completely and surrenders the dog.

A wise person once said: "*When there are 70 different remedies for a problem, then there isn't actually one single "right" one at all – otherwise everybody would be using it*". It's the same with dog training, really.

NOW, for the good news:

1. Dogs are surprisingly rational creatures who human read body language really well and generally really want to be loved. They are often keen to learn, but *you* have to know what to expect and *they* have to have *motivation* to learn. There has to be "something in it" for them to really perform.

2. Not all dogs are the same! Some are motivated by food, some by games, some just by being trained. Some dogs need more robust techniques because they like to "look up to a boss", other dogs melt into jelly at robust techniques and need just a suggestion to get the message. Some dogs simply don't see the need for "sit", "stand", "stay" and work better with commands like "retrieve that bird", "get out of the kitchen", or "get off the couch"! Most times, with patience, the dog trains the owner and vice versa.

For example, a vet rescued a Cattle Dog with a bad attitude to wandering. This dog "ran on his stomach". For nearly a year that dog thought his name was "*Biscuit*" while his wandering behaviour was diverted. His motivation was food and love (in that order) and the reward was consistent, first with food and later with pats and games.

Watching the way dogs interact with each other is useful. Watch "Dog Law" being enforced by other dogs (not the nasty ones!). Dogs **do** use punishment – short, sharp, frightening not painful, *at the moment the crime is committed*. BUT most of the time dogs use voice (growling, snarling, grumbling) and body language to get the message across. Dogs do use praise and rewards – play, "wrestling", 'yips', chasing, and playful body language.

So what do we conclude from all of this? Three things:
1. "Experts" are experts only in their own field. *Successful* dog training is a result of a match between the owner, the dog and the training technique. Most times dogs "get it" instinctively.

2. The real key is *consistency*. If puppy is *always* growled at for misbehaving, if puppy is *always* rewarded with a pat or kind word for doing the right thing, then he is more likely to get the message.

3. *Patience* is the key. Dogs don't need something repeated 20,000 times, but if they see inconsistency or your body language not matching your voice tone, they get confused. Sometimes it takes a while for the "light globe" to come on.

So where do we go from here?
Start with positive, "soft" techniques and develop from there until you find the right balance of assertiveness (not "punishment") and reward. That there are so many well behaved dogs in spite of "right" and "wrong" training techniques is testimony to dog resilience, not proof that one training technique is right or wrong.

Remember: There is never any reason for cruelty – defined as pain from which the animal can't escape, ongoing punishment when the "crime" is past, anything which the pet thinks is life threatening; or physical pain.

What about "equipment"? No piece of equipment is "cruel" and none "humane" – all training equipment can be wonderful or dangerous depending on the trainer. An ordinary collar and leash can be cruel in the wrong hands. Again, it's about starting with minimum and working "up" from there. Collar & leash, check chain, halters, clickers, E-collars. While few people are fans of prong collars, it's a matter of finding what the dog responds to best – and then working your way "back down" the equipment ladder once the pet "works it out".

The bottom line:
Chill, folks. Forget screams to "ban" this and "avoid 'X's' training method at all costs". This just confuses owners – and insulting other trainers in front of a client damages your credibility too.

Let's recognise that some dogs are biddable, others are "stubborn little such & such'es". *Successful* training and happy clients will be about flexibility of approach, careful and educated use of equipment on a graduating scale, and realistic expectations.