



The Peaceful Paws Method

Connecting Hearts, Transforming Lives • Canine Behavior Consultations
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It Didn't Come from "Fixing" Her Behavior. It Came from Understanding It.

A story about Helen Wheels, my emotional guard dog.

By Pat Blocker, CPDT-KA, FFCP, Animal Intuitive

For some time now, I've been in a challenging cycle with my German Shepherd, Helen Wheels. She's always been a vigilant dog. That's typical of her breed. But her barking had become nearly constant. Outside, it was at every little thing. Inside, the same. And for me, someone who lives with PTSD, that barking can be more than a nuisance. It can be a trigger.

So I did what I've been trained to do. I tried to address the behavior. I worked with her on coming inside when she barked. I reinforced quiet behavior. I gave her structured opportunities for success. But it wasn't working. In fact, asking her to come inside when she was barking seemed to backfire. She wouldn't come. And I couldn't figure out why. I believe now that, despite my best efforts to stay calm, she was picking up on my internal frustration—and the more I tried to "fix" it, the more the tension between us escalated.

It felt like we were stuck in a loop: she'd bark, I'd brace, she'd bark more. I was reacting, and she was reacting to my reaction. And we just kept spinning.

But beneath all of this, something deeper was happening that I was only beginning to understand.

Over time, I started noticing something curious. When I would have a nightmare—and this has happened more than once—Helen would come into the bedroom and wake me. She doesn't usually sleep in there. That spot is claimed by my other dog, Lovely Rita. But Helen is the one who shows up when something is wrong. That pattern began to quietly shape my understanding.

Little by little, I started to sense that Helen wasn't just reacting to the environment. She was reacting to me—to my internal state, my unspoken emotions. She had taken it upon herself to guard me, not just physically, but emotionally. I began to think of her as my emotional guard dog.

Helen Wheels was named after the Paul McCartney song, and there's a line that rings especially true these days:

"Ain't nobody else gonna know the way she feels."

That's Helen in a nutshell. No one else sees the depth of what she carries—but I do now.

When I connected with her intuitively, I felt it. She was deeply concerned. Not anxious in a reactive way, but actively worried. She was trying to keep the "bad" things away, even if those things weren't visible. Especially the emotional ones.

That realization didn't arrive in one clear moment. It came slowly, through many small ones. But once it finally clicked. Once I said to her, in no uncertain terms, "I see what you're doing, and I

appreciate you for it”—everything changed. Almost instantly. As if a switch had been flipped.

Her barking, both inside and out, diminished dramatically. She seemed lighter. More at ease. And I did, too.

Then came the vet visit. This is a situation that would normally push both of us to our limits. Helen usually starts barking the moment we get out of the car. She barks across the parking lot, barks at the front desk, barks through the check-in process. It's a stressful experience for both of us.

But this time, something extraordinary happened.

She gave one small woof in the parking lot. At the front desk, she did bark briefly—but I was able to gently redirect her. She stood quietly on the scale. And while we sat in the waiting room, she listened to people talking nearby and even heard other dogs barking in the exam rooms. She didn't bark. She didn't lunge. She stayed calm.

That might sound small, but for us, it was monumental. A few weeks earlier, I wouldn't have imagined it possible.

And it didn't come from trying harder to control her behavior. It didn't come from stricter cues or more repetitions. It came from finally understanding her.

Helen isn't being difficult. She's being dedicated. Her job, in her mind, has been to keep me emotionally safe. Once she knew I understood, and that I no longer needed her to carry that role so intensely, she could let go of it.

This is the heart of what I try to share through The Peaceful Paws Method: behavior is communication. If we pause long enough to listen beneath the surface, our dogs are often telling us exactly what they need. And what they feel we need, too.

Helen is still my vigilant, sensitive shepherd. But now that we're in sync, the volume is turned down. The worry isn't running the show. We're back in balance, and it started the moment I stopped trying to fix her—and chose instead to understand her.



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