



## What Shamu Taught Me About Life, Love, and Marriage: Lessons for People from Animals and Their Trainers

By Amy Sutherland



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While observing trainers of exotic animals, journalist Amy Sutherland had an epiphany: What if she used their techniques with the human animals in her own life—specifically her dear husband, Scott? As Sutherland put training principles into action, she noticed that not only did her twelve-year-old marriage improve, but she herself became more optimistic and less judgmental. What started as a goofy experiment had such good results that Sutherland began using the training techniques with all the people in her life, including her mother, her friends, her students, even the clerk at the post office. Full of fun facts, fascinating insights, hilarious anecdotes, and practical tips, **What Shamu Taught Me About Life, Love, and Marriage** reveals the biggest lesson Sutherland learned: The only animal you can truly change is yourself.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

“Playful, passionate, and practical.”—*Redbook*

“A compelling argument for using techniques from animal trainers to help change bad habits and improve relationships.”—*Atlanta Journal-Constitution*

“Sutherland’s a smart, engaging writer, and her stories about the hows and whys of exotic animal training are fun and fascinating.”—*Boston Sunday Globe*

“Part self-help guide, part animal psychology textbook and part memoir . . . Sutherland has a breezy style.”—*New York Times Book Review*

“In the little, private zoo known as marriage, it helps to remind yourself that you and your partner are just two bipedal primates trying to get along in intimate co-habitation.”—*Globe and Mail*

“Wise and pragmatic advice . . . The thing I love most about this book is that every other paragraph, Sutherland’s terrific wordsmithing, compelling logic, and anecdotes about exotic animals make me feel like she’s tossed me a biscuit.”—Martha Beck, author of *Steering by Starlight* and columnist for *O: The Oprah Magazine*

“Hilarious and persuasive.”—*Good Housekeeping*

“Invaluable . . . It succeeds nicely as an animal-training guide, and amusingly as a relationship book.”—*Buffalo News*

#### About the Author

Amy Sutherland is the author of **What Shamu Taught me About Life, Love, and Marriage**; *Kicked, Bitten, and Scratched* and *Cookoff*. Her articles have appeared in *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *The Boston Globe*. She has a master’s degree in journalism from Northwestern University. Her feature piece “What Shamu Taught Me About a Happy Marriage,” on which this book is based, was the most viewed and most e-mailed article of *The New York Times* online in 2006. Sutherland divides her time between Boston and Portland, Maine.

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#### *Chapter One*

#### *People Are Animals Too*

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, hot on 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 in the hunt

while trying to soothe Scott with cheerful bromides like “Don’t worry, they’ll turn up!” Sometimes I’d offer wifely pointers on how not to lose his keys to begin with. Or, if I was cranky, snap “Calm down.” It didn’t matter what I did, Scott typically only grew angrier, and a simple case of missing keys would soon become a full-blown angst-ridden drama starring both of us and Dixie, our poor nervous Australian shepherd. Penny Jane, our composed border collie mix, was the only one smart enough to stay out of the show.

Now, I focus on the wet plate 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. With his fair skin and thick chestnut hair, he’s handsome in an angular Nordic way. He’s well read and adventurous, and does a hysterical rendition of a northern Vermont accent that still cracks me up after fourteen years

of marriage. We like many of the same things: dogs, jazz, medium-rare hamburgers, good bourbon, long walks, the color orange. But he can also get on my nerves. He hovers around me in the kitchen when I’m trying to concentrate on the simmering pans, asking me if I read this or that piece in *The New Yorker*. He finishes off boxes of cookies, especially the dense caramel bars his mother sends from Minnesota, then says “I thought you were done with them.” He leaves wadded tissues in the car. He drives through red lights, calling them “long yellows.” He suffers from serious bouts of spousal deafness, yet never fails to hear me when I mutter to myself on the other side of the house. “What did you say?” he’ll shout. “Nothing,” I’ll yell back. “What?” he’ll call again.

These minor annoyances are not the stuff of separation and divorce, but in sum they dulled my love for Scott. Sometimes when I looked at him I would see not the lean Minnesotan I adored but a dirty-Kleenex-dropping, hard-of-hearing, prickly cookie monster. At those moments, he was less my beloved husband and more a man-sized fly pestering me, darting up my nose, landing in the sauce on the stove, buzzing through my life.

So, like many wives before me, I ignored a library of advice books and set about improving him. By nagging, of course, which usually had the opposite effect from the one I longed for—his size 11 shoes continued to pile up by the front door, he went longer between haircuts, he continued to return empty milk cartons to the fridge. I tried cheerful advice like “You are so handsome, but no one can see it behind your five o’clock shadow.” That usually resulted in another couple of razorless days. I made diplomatic overtures like “What if we each promise not to leave smelly clothes lying around?” “Okay,” my husband would agree good-naturedly, and then walk right past his reeking bike garb on the bedroom floor.

I, a modern woman, tried being direct, asking him in a voice as neutral as a robot’s, “Would you please not drive so fast?” Even this approach would backfire as in my simple question my husband might hear an accusation or an order and then push the accelerator a hair more. When all else failed, I yelled, and then we fought.

We went to a counselor to smooth the edges off our marriage. The counselor, a petite, sharp-boned woman who took notes on a legal pad, didn’t understand what we were doing there and complimented us repeatedly on how well we communicated. I threw in the towel. I guessed she was right—our union was better than most—and resigned myself to the occasional sarcastic remark and mounting resentment.

Then something magical happened. I discovered animal training.

I stumbled into the world of animal training nearly ten years ago when we brought home Dixie, an eight-

week-old herding dog, ten pounds of furry red energy. It was as if we had lit a bottle rocket in our house, the way she ricocheted from room to room, a toy or two hanging out of her mouth. I gave up meditating in the morning to begin my daily pursuit of wearing her out. It was a sunup-to-way-past-sundown job. Before I even got dressed or made coffee, I would sit cross-legged on the floor, hold a faux sheepskin rug before me, and call “Get it.” Dixie would catapult herself into the rug and rip it from my hands, her amber eyes afire, and then we’d each tug with all our might. We played that game so much, the rug was eventually reduced to a slobber-encrusted handful of fabric.

I learned to throw a ball properly for the first time in my life, and then a Frisbee. I tossed balls and Frisbees and walked so much I went down a size in pants. Dixie was either tugging, wrestling, or running, or she was fast asleep under a table where we couldn’t pet her. Should we get down on our hands and knees and reach under to pat her, Dixie would look miffed, like an Olympic athlete roused from a power nap, then pull herself to her paws and move just out of reach. Cuddling, from Dixie’s point of view, was for wuss dogs.

Though I think we were a bit of a disappointment to Dixie, the way commoners can be to royalty, we were just smart enough to know that a herding breed needed a job. So we went looking for an agility class, where you learn to run your dog through a whimsical obstacle course of tunnels, jumps, and teeter-totters. At that time, we found only one trainer around Portland, Maine, who taught this crazy skill. Before we could tackle the course, though, we were required to take a puppy training class.

If this trainer had used traditional techniques, the leash-popping and pushing your dog this way and that, I think the story would have ended there. For me, there is little magic nor imagination in that old-school approach. But it was my good luck that the trainer used progressive, positive techniques, techniques based on an altogether different philosophy. Rather than learning to boss our pups around and make them into obedient dogs, we learned to communicate and cooperate with them. She didn’t teach us just how to get our dogs to sit, but rather how to think about our canine companions.

Amid the joyful chaos of puppy class—the barking, the tangled leashes, the marital squabbles—I found an intellectual and personal challenge I hadn’t expected. I found a new me, a me with much more patience and self-control. I learned to be precise and observant. I learned to teach Dixie what I wanted rather than what I didn’t want. I learned not to take anything she did personally, not even when she ripped my shorts in a fit of overexcitement. All this from a six-week puppy training class.

I also began communicating with another species, and you can never underestimate the thrill of that. I signed us up for another class, and another class, and another class. I was hooked. So hooked that when I landed on the Paris set of 102 Dalmatians for a magazine assignment, I spent every spare moment hanging out with the animal trainers, chatting about such things as how they taught a parrot to ride atop a bullmastiff and how they got the dog not to shake whenever the bird’s wings brushed its back. The trainers, to my surprise, had all earned actual degrees in exotic animal training. They had studied at a community college outside Los Angeles. It was the go-to school, they told me, not to mention the only program of its kind. Back home, I taught Dixie to bring in the Sunday New York Times, scribbled down the name of the school, and threw the scrap of paper into my idea folder.

In 2003 I began work on a book about this school. For a year, I commuted between Maine and California, where I followed students at Moorpark College’s Exotic Animal Training and Management Program. There I spent my days watching students do the seemingly impossible: teach a caracal to offer its paws for a nail clipping, a camel to shoot hoops, a baboon to get into a crate and close the door behind her. Each day at the teaching zoo was packed with countless lessons, from how to pick up a boa constrictor to how to speak to a wolf. As I observed the students, I essentially became a student too. I learned not to look the primates in the

eye, to stride with confident ease while on a cougar walk, and never to stand close to any enclosure, especially not the big carnivores'. I learned that when Zulu the mandrill bobbed his head at me, he was saying "Back off." That when Rosie the baboon smacked her lips together, she was saying "Hello, friend." That when Julietta the emu made a thumping noise in her chest, she was worried.

I learned the language of animal trainers, what they meant when they talked about A-to-Bs (teaching an animal to move from one spot to another) or targeting (having an animal press its snout to something). If somebody told me that they had just been grooming with the squirrel monkey, I knew that they had sat close to the cage, held up their arms, and let the monkey run his black fingers over their skin. I learned what a positive count is (making sure the animal is there in its enclosure) and that B.E. stood for "behavioral enrichment," basically anything that made the animal's life more stimulating, whether it be a toy or a walk on a leash. Training, it turns out, is one of the things that make an animal's life interesting. So you could even teach an animal an A-to-B for B.E.

I soaked up their sayings, such as "Go back to kindergarten," shorthand for when an animal has trouble learning a behavior and the trainer needs to back up a few steps in the training. "Train every animal as if it's a killer whale" meant to work with every animal as if you could neither forcibly move it nor dominate it. "It's never the animal's fault" is pretty much what it says: If an animal flounders in training, it's the trainer's fault. One of my personal favorites was "Everything with a mouth bites." I wrote down that line in all caps, for my research but for myself too. Why? I wasn't sure exactly. It had a philosophical ring. It was also silly, but made such good, plain sense, a funny reminder of what a great leveler Mother Nature can be. A cute, fuzzy animal will bite you just as easily as a mean-looking one. By the same token, the animal doesn't care whether you're as angelic as Mother Teresa or as loathsome as Caligula. Shiny auras, the best intentions, and sainthood don't mean much, if anything, in the animal kingdom.

So much of what I was learning at the school had meaning beyond the front gate. This place, where the great divide between animals and humans closes, captured my imagination in a way nothing else had. Every visit drove home how complicated, weird, and fantastic the natural world is. I felt my mind crack wide open trying to take it all in.

I trailed the students to class and then out to the teaching zoo grounds where they practiced on a badger or a lion or the mysterious binturong, a rain forest animal that resembles a raccoon on steroids. I watched as one student trained an olive baboon to let her rub lotion on her hands, as another taught a capuchin monkey to unravel its long leash when it became tangled during walks, and yet another instruct the Bengal tiger to get in her kiddie pool on command. I tagged along on field trips, during which I listened, rapt, as professional trainers explained how they taught dolphins to flip or ibis to fly to them. At a private compound in Southern California, I took notes in the fading light of day as six elephants, on command, lined up in a row, urinated, turned to their left in unison, hooked trunks to tails, and, single file, swaggered into the barn for the night. In Cincinnati, I saw a leashed cheetah sit calmly on a desk next to a trainer as she lectured to a bewitched audience. At a conference in Baltimore, I listened as trainers described how they had taught spotted eagle rays to swim to a feeder.

I can't say the instant it happened, but eventually it dawned on me that if trainers could work such wonders with spotted eagle rays and baboons and dolphins, might not their methods apply to another species—humans? It was not much of a leap for me. By just watching, thinking, and reading about animal behavior, I had discovered a good deal about the behavior of my own species. In a kind of reverse anthropomorphism, I couldn't help seeing parallels, especially with the primates, but with all the animals, even the turkey vulture, which, like us, sunbathes. True, people are more complicated than animals, but maybe not as much as we assume. As the relatively nascent field of animal behavior continues to grow, more and more research

shows that animals are anything but mindless organisms driven solely by instinct. Traits that were considered unique to humans, such as tool use and collaboration, have been found among other primates and now birds and fish. Turns out groupers and moray eels hunt together, and crows are quite handy with a bit of wire.

Complicated or not, we Homo sapiens, the highest of the primates, the tippy-top of the food chain, a frighteningly successful species, are, in the end, members of the animal kingdom, like it or not. Animal trainers showed me that there are universal rules of behavior that cut across all species. Why should we be any different?

I began to take home what I learned at the teaching zoo. If my husband did something that annoyed me, I thought, "How would an exotic animal trainer respond?" If I got into a squabble with a relative, I did the same. If the clerk at the post office gave me a hard time, likewise. That may sound ridiculous. I admit it. In fact, at the start I thought of it as a kind of goofy experiment, but the early results were so convincing that I kept at it.

## **Users Review**

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#### **Leticia Brewster:**

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