At first glance, the dog appeared young; maybe an adolescent. The human at the other end of the very taut leash didn’t look much older than a teenager herself—a disheveled, exhausted one, no less, that also looked like an unwilling participant in some crazy doggie extreme sport! She was having a difficult time hanging on to her young buck of a dog as he pulled toward the door exposing muscles through his taught skin as he dug in to get more traction.

The two of them were a visually taxing mix, and hard to watch as they moved closer to where I was waiting. It was a beguiling tête-à-tête—a doggie X-Game contest, if you will, which had suddenly gone awry, and this chaotic team sport was headed right toward me as I entered the woman’s home to meet them for a private consultation.

The ongoing competition between this dog and his human was the reason for the consultation. She was hoping to get her beautiful and wildly aroused lab mix “under control.”

The woman’s questionnaire read, “Pulls, lunges and is wild on leash, and jumps on people— contato!!!.” That was what was written in the section labeled “describe the behavior problem” portion of my behavior questionnaire. The additional explanation points and sad face were clearly the owner’s expression of her feelings about her dog.

“No! Sit,” the young woman said with warning and anger as Buster jumped on me hard enough to cause a colorful bruise on my upper arm later that day. She countered his movement by jerking the dog back with enough force to give me one of those Crime Scene Investigations mental pictures of small muscles and organic fibers tearing under the force of the collar as the woman yanked her dog off his feet, and slammed his butt onto the ground. “See, this is what I’m talking about,” she said with disgust, as Buster quickly arose, never missing a beat in their twisted dance and went right back to pulling her along.

I encouraged the owner to move away with Buster and quickly directed her to sit down on the couch.

It is an interesting take, that of watching humans and their dogs in relationship with one another. It’s truly a real life drama unfolding each time I witness these interactions, especially since no one can inform the dog about his or her role in what must often seem like utter madness living with humans at times.

The players are all different, and the dogs are mostly confused and/or stressed, but there is love, although it is often buried deep under anger or frustration. Helping draw out and finding that love again is what I try to do.

I instructed the owner to remove Buster’s leash from his collar to give the dog more freedom, as well as to liberate the owner from the social pressure of
having to manage her dog. This owner, like so many before her was embarrassed by her dog, and it was amplified by fear of judgment, that somehow, her dog was worse than any I might have seen before her, or that she had failed her dog.

Now that Buster was free to roam, I tried to get a few solid minutes of observation in before I began to engage either the dog or the human. It wasn’t easy since the woman and the dog both looked frazzled despite my efforts to do some obvious deep breathing to add calm to situation, all the while encouraging the owner to do the same.

Okay, it’s important to just let him relax, I suggested several times, as she tried to explain how she couldn’t go anywhere with Buster. We will go over all of that, I told her, and again suggested she sit back on the couch and take a few deep breaths. My words seemed to float around the room and fall unanswered like bubbles from a child’s bubble wand, hitting the floor and disappearing.

I tried again by saying, it’s important for you to relax and let Buster get used to me, so go ahead and sit back and take a nice deep breath. She finally leaned back and, for the first time, looked toward me, and away from Buster.

This took the pressure off Buster just long enough to allow him to direct his focus away from his human for a few seconds. It wasn’t much, but that little moment of sanity gave me a quick thumbnail glance at what might be going on with Buster.

Observing the dog is something I do with all my clients’ dogs, and in doing so, I can eventually explain to the pet parent how to “read” their dog, which serves to initiate some needed communication between them. As I watch the dog, I try to be subtle for both the dog’s sake and to allow me to watch both the dog and human during— or not. Which is exactly the information I need to know: How long does it take the dog to show any signs of relaxing, can the dog take a treat in the beginning, what is the owner doing, and is the owner even breathing? These are all indicators for the direction and counsel needed to help each dog fit better with the humans in his or her life.

I have always considered this observing similar to scrutinizing works of art, at least for me. I find that I have to look deep into the subjects to find the subtle and variable layers that create the whole picture, and these intricacies are laced together with time and daily interactions that cover a canvas known as life with a dog. Sometimes it’s a beautiful work of art, straight forward with imagery that is akin to a Master, merely needing some better light cast upon it; other times it’s deep and dark, complex and even maniacal and needs a full renovation to restore it to a state that can be properly displayed once again.

I look deep and quick because it’s the first few minutes of watching the dog and human together that provides the most usable information. It’s during what is often chaos that reveals the most information since it’s in a raw state at that point. The interactions and personalities are not shrouded or transformed into what people think I want to see or hear in those first few minutes.

From the humans I look for things that might include, but are not limited to fear, anger and embarrassment about or toward their dog. I listen for their words, for their breathing and whether or not they talk to their dog, for their dog, or at their dog. I watch to see if they reach out and touch their dog and whether they have an awareness of how their touch affects their dog. How heavy the hand on the dog is, as well as how fast the movements are?

And, I query my own thoughts as I watch and gather information about how much might the owner be adding to the problem with their own feelings and emotions about what their dog is doing that displeases them? Is it because their dog is not Lassie? Could social pressure from friends, family or neighbors have forced this meeting, or is the owner adding unrealistic demands on the dog via a lack of understanding dog behavior?

These are some of the things I try to discern early in my observations and conversations with the owner. I want to get as much in the first two to five minutes as I can—before the owner becomes defensive or apologetic about his or her dog’s behavior. Many believe they have “tried everything,” others confess, “I know I should have done more.”

As I watch the dog, I usually see confusion and often, low-tolerance thresholds in the beginning, then quickly the learned behaviors start to manifest as the dog relaxes—if the dog can relax. I look for the dog’s ability to resolve the conflict of dealing with the owner and me, and how long it takes for him or her to relax enough to eat food treats or make any friendly gestures toward me. There is a mountain of information in those first few minutes, all of which can help the dog if I can successfully relay the information to the owner.

Lead by example is what I tell people about helping their dogs, and I take my own advice to seize the moment and take in several deep breaths while tossing food treats on the floor for Buster to find so I can glean more information about the relationship between Buster and his human.

Herein lies the art of it; learning to craft the skills allowing me to watch both the dog and human during those first few minutes as I ask the owner more questions, attempting to fill in the gaps left from my extensive questionnaire, (despite complaints that it takes “forever” to fill out).

What are the components I’m looking for? Sometimes it’s hard to say, but I know it when I see it! That’s vague, but it is the exact message I try to get across to distraught pet parents when trying to teach them to watch for the things that only the dog is able to “tell” them. “Believe the dog” is my credo, and while that may seem a bit New Age in its message, the dog always has the correct answers to the queries from the pet parent and me.

Through many years of working with thousands of dogs, I find the majority of those answers in the voids of communication between dog and human. Not, “Sit down and have a conversation, or telecommunicate with the dog,” but the gaps created by two different types of >
I try to look deep into those gorges, to see how I can augment training and strengthen relationships between all those that I come to visit. The intention is to fill those crevasses, and it is somewhere in the exploration where I find most of the answers. Whether or not the pet parents choose to follow my suggestions or not, is another subject, as it often requires a leap of faith into a world as foreign as traveling to Mars for some.

There was an enormous emptiness between Buster’s behaviors and what his owner expected; this, according to the questionnaire, this, according to her distain, and this, according to the dog’s behavior.

Sometimes it is simple denial on the part of the human, sometimes it is clearly misguided expectations about what the dog “should know,” and sometimes “it” (whatever “it” is) can be found steeped in a deep physiological fissure that is often filled with muck and mire from an on-going “at-odds” relationship with the owners’ husband or wife, parents, children, friends or siblings about how to best “raise a dog.”

It is societal pressure that often makes pet parents feel like a failure when his or her dog is not behaving. It’s personal for many pet parents, and whatever the thought process, the dog is regularly the casualty of these deficits.

And, yes, sometimes, it is the dog, burdened with genetics that exasperates the miscommunications between canine and humans. Yet, this is somehow easier to identify and treat since people are more accepting that the dog might have been born “that way.”

Buster was cautious while sniffing at the cubes of chicken and pieces of diced cheese on the floor. He didn’t (couldn’t) eat right away, but he kept his head down and occasionally glanced at his owner as we talked about Buster’s history. Each time he looked toward his owner, Buster would lick his lips; avert his eyes and turn quickly away to continue his sniffing. If the dog and owner made eye contact, or the owner reached out to touch Buster, he would jump on her and endeavor to climb up in her lap—a pointless struggle since the owner quickly pushed him away and said, “No, get off!”

It was at that point that I came to Buster’s aide and told the owner to just ignore that behavior and to not talk to Buster right then. When you make eye contact or touch Buster, you are actually inviting him to interact with you, so if he jumps up, I explained, just gently stand up, and allow him to slide off you. I also instructed her to turn your head and avert your eyes from Buster. This, I clarified, will tell Buster, in his own language, to relax and calm down. Buster’s pet parent, excused herself to get a notebook to take some notes; a good sign. Buster lay down at her feet.

She didn’t seem impressed; after all, he was just eating, but that skepticism was to be expected so early in the consultation. I had a long way to go in explaining how understanding stress is important, how training is simply a form of communication, and that the control she was seeking was really an illusion.

I explain this to people all the time and, more often than not, receive deer-in-the-headlights stares as people allow that to swim around their brains and struggle to find a place for it to land as they consider what that means in terms of their life with their own dog. Eventually, however, they seem relived that if they learn to fill the voids with positive associations, learn just a little bit about dog behavior, and teach their dogs skills that will help him or her to relax, their relationship will grow and their will dogs calm down.

Through all of my observations, I have learned that most dogs, Buster included, are pure in their communications—easy to read most of the time, and luckily, compliant when given clear instruction and guidance, and it’s my joy to bring this message to pet parents.

The exploration of all of these things helps my clients travel a path to a calmer, more relaxed dog, which, in turn, brings the love that might have been buried under the frustration back to the surface where they and their dog’s relationship can grow as they share in this dance called life with a dog.

Buster’s pet parent, excused herself to get a notebook to take some notes; a good sign. Buster lay down at her feet. Together, they had started to fill the void and step onto a new path to a calmer and happier relationship.

**Nan Arthur, CDBC, CPDT, KPA Certified Trainer has been involved in the behavior and training field for more than 14 years with dogs and over 18 with cats, and has a deep belief that her mission is to help pet parents and their animals understand and communicate clearly with one another using the science of behavior and training. Her business, Whole Dog Training, www.wholedogtraining.com, offers private in-home lessons, lectures and group classes. Nan has a forthcoming book: Relax your Dog, Exercises to Calm your Canine (Dog Wise Publishing).**