

# **Learning About Relationships and More From My Canine Teacher**

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**An International Bateson Institute Occasional Paper #2021jb1**

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This piece is dedicated to the memory of my dear friend, Mugetsu.

She was born November 18, 2010, and died at 12:30 am, June 8, 2020.

At about 9 years old, she ruptured a disk in her lower back. She was not in great pain, but her back legs would collapse at times. She still tried to play and chase rabbits, and demanded that we go out at our regular times everyday. She began physical therapy with a with a veterinary physical therapist, who she adored. During this time, her vets noticed a heart murmur, which needed to be evaluated before we undertook surgery for ruptured disk. On June 3, 2020, she went to a cardiologist. After the exam, the cardiologist, thought she had six months or so to live and maybe one and half years if we started her on some medications. We went home and started the medications. Then, at about 12:30, when I was finishing up my nightly routine in the bathroom, I heard her yelp. It sounded like her almost nightly yelp, that had meant, "Let's go outside one more time before bed." But, when I entered the bedroom, she was lying motionless on the floor. None of the preparations I had gone through in my mind of what to do when she was dying happened. I quietly freaked out. But, I did go down and hold her head in my arms, as she took her last two gasped, before dying. Her final effort to maintain the relationship.

Over a year later, it still brings tears to my eyes.

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**All photos were taken by me.**

Page 1 — a friend talking politics across racial differences in the southern United States, 1970.

Page 5 — Mugetsu shortly after we got her, January, 2011.

Page 8 — Mugetsu playing with a dear and trusted friend, March, 2016.

Page 13 — Mugetsu wondering when we were going to go out, August, 2016.

Page 14 — Mugetsu showing her age, but giving me the "when are we leaving?" look, April, 2019

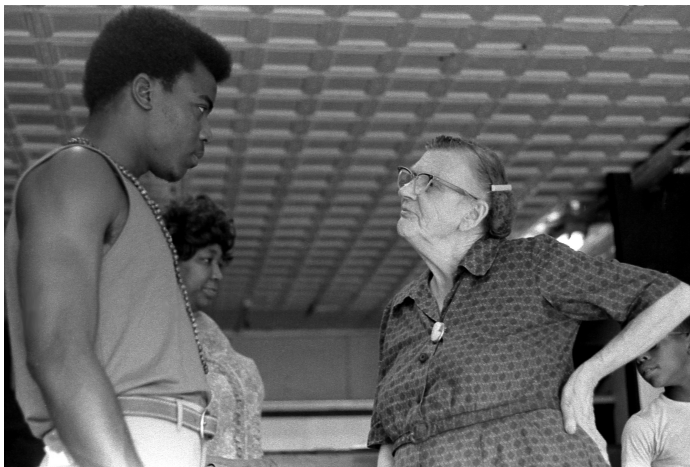
Page 16 — Mugetsu giving me the "Let's do something" look, May, 2019

**A copy of this document can be downloaded at:**

<https://internationalbatesoninstitute.wikidot.com/pub:jbloom-relationships-canineteacher2021>

I have been pondering the learning of relationships, in this case, the relationships between fellow beings for at least several decades. I realized pretty quickly that I was never taught about relationships — not how to begin them and not how to nurture, develop them, not how to tend to them, and not how to maintain them. My life has basically been learning about relationships through trial and many, many errors. These experiences have been important, but not in any way that has been easy to recollect or form into coherent and cohesive stories of learning about relationships. This particular bit of writing, however, is an attempt to begin the process of a cohesive story, with a special focus on what I learned from my previous dog, Mugetsu, a very large — in body, mind, and heart — female Doberman.

It is odd that something of such great importance — how to work with relationships — is not taught in families or schools, at least not in the western societies I have experienced. We leave it up to the winds of happenstance. In my own life, this circuitous and stumbling journey through the learning of relationships has not been easy or comfortable. Of course, as with many people I know, the worst part of stumbling my way through relationships was in the period between age 5 and 19. For me, that transitional phase of beginning to pay attention to relationships started pretty much with my 20th birthday. During that period, there was a slight shift in my degree of self-confidence and a slide into a more or less cohesive social context, which had a lot to do with the upheavals in the late 1960's and early 1970's. Between Vietnam protests, political unrest, civil rights protests and actions, women's rights, and the questioning of everything



arising from the disruptions of ego after experiencing mind-altering drugs, my life changed. And, much of that change was directly focused on relationships. There were no “answers” or definitive explanations for how to maintain relationships, but the questions were posed explicitly. It was not at all unusual to see young people, and sometimes with faculty members, sitting around

campus or other locations having in-depth discussions about the nature of psychology, social dynamics, relationships, as well as politics, sexism, racism, and even ecology,

which was just beginning to come into focus as a major issue for the survival of humanity.

Later in this transitional period, I met two remarkable people who affected my life and view of relationships. Both of these men turned my world upside-down. One was Chögyam Trungpa, a Tibetan Buddhist teacher. He was the “crazy wisdom” teacher, who captured the attention of a lot of westerners — mostly younger, but also older people. He talked about a spiritual path or practice in ways that resonated with the experiences of people in the West. And, he made a point of overturning people’s assumptions about life, spirituality, materialism, relationships, and so forth. He was the quintessential crazy wisdom guru from Tibet.<sup>1</sup> The other person, who had become friends with, but not a student of, Trungpa, was Gregory Bateson.<sup>2</sup> Gregory also turned people’s worlds upside-down, but without the dramatic flare of Trungpa. Gregory was soft-spoken, but direct and outrageous in his own way. He was the essence of the caring, but revolutionary grandfather figure. Both Bateson and Trungpa were revolutionaries in the sense of triggering the overturning of previous concepts and beliefs. They focused on many of the same issues, but with different approaches and styles. Both of these men have had lasting effects on me. I completely adored them and continue to adore their memories.

In terms of “answers” to relationships, I still had none, but I did accumulate a number of perspectives and “lenses” from which to examine and play with relationships. I suspect that with most human “questions” of any importance, there are no definitive answers. Everything is dependent upon contexts. And, contexts are continually shifting and morphing and intermingling with other contexts. So, there is no solid ground on which to establish a definitive answer to any part of our complex systems of life. Everything is relational and contextual... and slippery, fluid, dynamic, ghostly, changeable, overwhelming, underwhelming... and completely interdependent.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> There is a huge collection of Trungpa’s teachings available. His early autobiography is *Born in Tibet* (1966, Baltimore, MD: Penguin). Some biographical works include: • F. Midal’s *Chogyam Trungpa: His Life and Vision* (Boston: Shambhala) • C. R. Gimian & D. J. Mukpo’s *Dragon Thunder* (Boston: Shambhala) • G. MacLean’s *From Lion’s Jaws: Chogyam Trungpa’s Epic Escape to the West* (Mountain Pub.).

<sup>2</sup> The major writings of Gregory Bateson include: • *Naven* • *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* • *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity*. There are two others, one of which is a collection of his writings (*Sacred Unity: Further Steps to an Ecology of Mind*) and the other in collaboration with his older daughter, Mary Catherine Bateson (*Angel’s Fear*).

<sup>3</sup> Much of the writing about complexity and complex systems falls into the traps of positivism, reductionism, and mechanism. However, there are a few authors who have been pushing a more life-imbued view of complex systems. Two of the most notable happen to be Gregory Bateson’s daughters, Mary Catherine (*Peripheral Visions: Learning Along the Way* & *Angel’s Fear*) and Nora (*Small Arcs of Larger Circles: Framing Through Other Patterns*).

In addition, there was yet another teacher who affected me deeply. But, this teacher was not a human being, but rather a dog — a Doberman Pinscher named Mugetsu (the name means something like “hidden moon” in Japanese). My son who, along with his Japanese teacher, came up with this name. They say Mugetsu is pronounced *moo—gets*. Other people say it is pronounced *moo—get—sue*. She responded to both. In fact, she responded to many other names. One of her dog park people friends, who could never get her name down, called her Mugsy. Other people called her Getsy and Moogie. But, she was very good at “reading” context and intent, and responded appropriately. In fact, almost everyone, who engaged with her, used a hand signal for “sit,” which we used for “stand up.” But, she always responded to the contextual cues correctly. Another instance of contextual sense-making occurred when she was about five months old. She had already learned how to sit, shake, and lie down, but had not begun her formal puppy training. She was lying on a sofa, when I sat on the floor in front of her. At that point, I wondered if I could teach her to give me a “high-five.” So, I put up my hand and said “give me a high-five.” She looked at me quizzically, then looked at my hand, then back at me, then at my hand. At that point, she picked up her paw and gave me a “high-five.” That whole sequence took about 8 seconds.

I want to insert here a brief statement about a word I just used — “training” or train or trained. I really do not like to use this word in the context of dogs. The baggage that is carried by this word contributes to our view of dogs as some sort of mechanical, unintelligent, and unemotional being. It trivializes dogs and their intelligence. And, “training” ignores and even damages the sense of relationship that is so very important in dogs’ lives. Another realization that came to me very early in our time together was that what was taking place between Mugetsu and me not only was the development of a relationship, but also were the processes of co-learning, or mutual learning, which included a great deal of negotiation of one another’s terms. This “mutual learning” has been called *symmathesy* by Nora Bateson.<sup>4</sup> Nora defines *symmathesy* as mutual contextual learning. And, that is exactly what was happening throughout the time Mugetsu and I spent together. One of the resulting major realizations I had during this time, was that relationships are of paramount importance to dogs. And, because of the significance of relationships to dogs, they will not purposely break a relationship. They may test it, try to stretch the boundaries, and so forth, but they will not damage the

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<sup>4</sup> See pages 89—103 in Bateson, N. (2016). *Small Arcs of Larger Circles: Framing Through Other Patterns*. Axminster, UK: Triarchy Press.

relationship. This realization flips the underlying assumptions of “training.” Training is about “control.” But, mutual-learning is about relationship. I do not like the next word in parentheses either, but for the moment I will use it — when we “teach” a dog something, like “come,” “sit,” and more importantly a range of ways to greet and be around friendly people and dogs, a dog will not do anything to break the relationship. People break the relationship all too often. Sometimes it is subtle and sometimes blatant. When this happens, all bets are off for what a dog may do. I will talk more about this later.

I have always been a dog lover. Even after being bit by dogs numerous times. In one instance, as a toddler, I was bit twice, on the back and then promptly on chest, by my family’s new Boxer, who did not stay in the family after that. When in high school, I was bit in the face, by my sister’s new Collie. And, I was bit again on the leg by an ankle-biter dog, while walking to school. I also was bit more recently, when my Doberman, Mugetsu, was playing with a friend in the forest. Her lower jaw got caught in the collar of her friend. She ended up twisting and slowly choking her friend. Knowing I was going to be bit by one of them, I dove in and untangled Mugetsu’s jaw, while her completely freaked out friend bit my wrist. Both dogs immediately went to the “ends of the boxing ring” — Mugetsu went up a hill and hid behind a tree trembling, while her friend trembled behind her dad’s legs. It took Mugetsu’s friend over a month to let me pet her again and even longer to feel semi-safe around Mugetsu, who desperately wanted to repair the damaged friendship.

My first encounter with a Dobie (short for Doberman Pinscher) was in my mid-twenties. I was walking up the driveway of a relatively new friend, when I saw a Dobie in the next yard. Of course, I started walking towards the Dobie, while calling it to come over. When I got to the property line, the Dobie charged and leapt at me. His chain stopped his wide-opened mouth about 12 inches from my face. After that experience, I never trusted Dobermans. They sank to the bottom of my list of dogs. But, I encountered another one, while trying to find my way out of a pine forest, one with no low branches. I heard a rustling in some shrubs and out popped a Dobie and another dog. I had nowhere to go, so I dropped to my knees. Both dogs came over, said “hi,” and went on their way. Okay, good Dobie encounter number one. Two or three decades later, I was waiting in a bus station during a snow storm for my wife’s return from a visit to her Mom’s home. She had flown in from Los Angeles and then boarded a bus to our home town. All buses were late due to the storm. After just a few minutes of waiting, a woman walked in with a Dobie. My first thought was, “they are going to sit next to me. I know it! What am I

going to do?.” And, they did. But, after a few minutes, the Dobie was fawning all over 5 me, his head in my lap while gazing into my eyes. We became very good, but short-term friends. Good Dobie encounter number two.

Then almost two decades later, I am driving my chronically ill twenty-ish son home with his new seven week old Doberman puppy. As we drove home, I glanced over at this tiny Dobie and thought, “what have we done!?” This was Mugetsu. After several months, my son realized that he could not really take care of Mugetsu, and so, my four-legged grand-daughter became my four-legged daughter, best friend, and canine teacher.



From the beginning, I was determined to apply my understandings of Gregory Bateson’s ideas,<sup>5</sup> as well as other concepts to exploring Mugetsu’s world, her mind, her emotions, and her relationships. However, this undertaking was not uni-directional or from a passive and objective position. Not only was my learning embedded in our mutual contextual experiences, but also was reciprocal. Mugetsu often took the lead to teach me.

Life with Mugetsu started as a stumbling along process. She had not fully developed her visual abilities when we first got her. From the very first night, the notion of relationship was all-consuming. My son wanted to crate-train her and had set up a huge crate that could accommodate a full grown Dobie. The only place this set-up fit was in the living room. He also added crate-like fencing around one of the doors to the crate, where Mugetsu could go out of her crate to pee and poop. The floor in the fenced area was covered with puppy pads. When in place, the crate “corner” took up one quarter of the room. On the first night, she was coaxed into her new “safe spot” with pillows, toys,

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<sup>5</sup> These ideas are discussed in Gregory Bateson’s books: • (1979/2002). *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press. • (1972/2000). *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. • (1991). *Sacred Unity: Further Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (Ronald E. Donaldson, Ed.). New York: Cornelia & Michael Bessie Book/HarperCollins.

blankets, a food dish, and a water bowl spread around. Within minutes of everyone going to bed, she started crying. I spent the next two weeks sleeping on the floor next to her crate with my fingers stuck through the openings.

Puppies live and cuddle with one another and with their mom or dad. They need the social contexts. And, as it turns out, I found that Dobermans do not like being isolated. They expect to be a part of the family, and that pretty much means being close to equal members of that family. The classic junkyard Doberman was mean and aggressive, but this was not due to some predisposition towards aggression as it was due to the breaking of relationships. They are extremely sensitive and are especially tuned into the dynamics of their relationships. Keeping them isolated in a junkyard or an empty store is a context where that sensitivity bites itself in the tail. Putting them into such contexts creates a great deal of psychological difficulty for them. And, here we were isolating little Mugetsu on her first night away from her litter and Mom. The crate pretty quickly became an open door area where she could go in and out at will. But, that set-up only lasted a couple of months, until we figured that it just took up too much room. By that time, she had assumed ownership of the beds and sofas, which she graciously allowed and even expected us to share with her.

Out of the books and papers I have read about dog cognition and behavior, only John Bradshaw discusses relationships and dogs, but on only two pages. In his relating of the results from some experiments with dogs, he does show some interesting results. However, he immediately sidesteps the issues by questioning whether dogs know what relationships are or not.<sup>6</sup> Such analyses and critiques are common in the research literature on animal behavior. I suspect that a large part of this issue has to do with animal researchers' patterns of thinking that are based in the 400-year old effects of René Descartes philosophical contributions to our cultural worldviews. These worldviews are referred to as **positivism** (e.g., one objective truth), **reductionism** (i.e., if we understand the parts, we will understand the whole), and **mechanism** (i.e., that all of nature can be understood as a machine). Over the past 80 years or so, a new perspective for understanding living systems has emerged from the early work of cybernetics, which involves people from a wide array of different disciplines. This new scientific perspective can be referred to as **complex living systems** as opposed to mechanical systems. Complex living systems are not linear, simple cause and effect, and predictable systems.

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<sup>6</sup> Bradshaw, J. (2011). *Dog sense*. New York: Basic Books.



They are recursive, unpredictable systems that self-regulate, self-maintain, and self-propagate. In other words, we are complex systems, as are dogs, fish, plants, bacteria, ecosystems, social systems, etc.<sup>7</sup> However, even researchers working within the complexity sciences often quite unknowingly fall into the traps of positivism, reductionism, and mechanism. And, this latter situation may be the case with animal cognition researchers. Old habits are hard to break.

Mugetsu grew quickly to 20 pounds, 40 pounds, 80 pounds, and even to 100 for a while before she settled back down to 90 pounds. She basically house-trained herself by the time she turned 4 months old. We still left pads for her to use, if we could not let her out fast enough, but, that set-up was only needed for another month or so.

Mugetsu and I got to know each other well during our twice daily outings to the National Forest, which started a few blocks from our house, or to the dog parks, once she had all her shots. At our first home, one dog park was three blocks away and the other about 4 miles away. We stopped going to these dog parks for about a year, after Mugetsu had many bad experiences with dogs attacking her. All too often when we entered a dog park, she walked in looking to play, and out of nowhere some dog would attack her. In each of these cases, I spent the rest of the day trying to find friendly dogs for her to meet so that she was not left at the end of the day with a traumatizing memory. The problem is that many dogs become aggressive towards other dogs after they have been attacked by other dogs. These attacks can break relationships, and that is a huge problem to a dog. Relationships to other dogs and people and sometimes to other animals are critically important to their physical and psychological senses of well being.

## Play

Play is a huge aspect of developing relationships. I have seen many dog owners pull their dogs away from friendly play, because they thought the dogs were being aggressive. But, this intense play that looks like fighting is high level relationship building. Bateson regarded play fighting as requiring very abstract communication. “I look like I’m fighting,

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<sup>7</sup> • Bateson, G. (1979/2002). *Mind and nature: A necessary unity*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press. • Capra, F. (1996). *The web of life*. New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday. • Bateson, N. (2016). *Small arcs of larger circles: Framing through other patterns*. Axminster, UK: Triarchy Press.

but I'm not" is a very abstract idea to get across to another dog.<sup>8</sup> Through this rough and tumble play, dogs develop trust and enrich their relationships. Mugetsu was particularly skillful in determining just how to initiate play, to what degree of intensity was appropriate for the other dog, and what kind of play the other dog seemed to prefer. As she grew older and wiser, she became quite adept at playing with other dogs. And, having been attacked so many times, she became quite good at assessing them, as well.

In the dog park and forest, she got to know many dogs and people. With some dogs, she avoided any kind of interaction. With others, it took weeks of just getting to know another dog on a daily or almost daily basis before she initiated gentle play. While on less frequent occasions, she would meet a new dog and immediately dive into rough and tumble play. These timelines and approaches to play with other dogs were all based on her perception of the other dogs' personalities. She loved to wrestle, but she would play tug-of-war, chase, keep-away, and block, which was a game she made up where she watched a dog owner prepare to throw a ball or Frisby while she placed herself between the other dog and the likely target of the ball. She then tried to block the other dog from running after the ball. She didn't care at all about the ball, just the drama of blocking the other dog. The "drama" of tension building also was a favorite. Sometimes she stood head-to-head next to another dog, while tensing up and giving sideways glances. The drama was captivating for both dogs. They let the tension build until one of them let loose and started running or wrestling. With new dogs, I wondered if this was some sort of test of the other dog's suitability.



Watching this dynamic of play was fascinating. In general, the more she played with another dog, the more intense the play became. The building of trust allowed them to go further with the intensity of wrestling. But, after months of developing relationships, a change in the dynamic almost always occurred. The

frequency and intensity of play lessened, while the two and sometimes more friends would just stand, sit, or lie around next to each other. They were just friends hanging out in the comfort of their mutual presence.

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<sup>8</sup> Bateson, G. (1979/2002). *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

At one dog park, Mugetsu had made friends with about a dozen dogs who were regulars. The dog parents also became friends. Eventually, one man decided to have a dog and people potluck party at his house. A dozen dogs and about 10 people showed up. At one point, I was standing in the kitchen and looked down, and there I saw about six marrow bones spread out across the floor. I thought to myself, “Wow, what a bad idea!! This is going to get nasty.” No sooner had that thought passed through my mind, than a dog picked up a marrow bone. Pretty soon six of the dogs had marrow bones, with the other six stealing the marrow bones out of the other dogs’ mouths. This pattern went back and forth for quite some time. The dogs loved it! And, not one fight, not one growl. They were close friends who trusted one another. Their relationships were well established. Interestingly, a couple of the dogs in this group had issues with their relationships to new dogs that entered the dog park. The owners of these two dogs, kept close eyes on occasions when new dogs entered, and would leave the park immediately if their dog started to get the least bit aggressive. But, in amongst the group of friends, aggression never occurred. This is not the antiquated concept of “pack mentality.” There was no hierarchy, no group patterns of behavior. This group of dogs was merely a cluster of friends. As time went on, people and their dogs moved or changed their dog park routines, and new dogs would come to the park. Over a relatively short period of time, maybe week or two, the new dogs would become part of the older group of friends.

## **Working**

To Mugetsu, relationships appeared to be of utmost importance. She was a mediator, peace-keeper, and protectress. Before delving into some examples of this, I need to mention a bit of history. Dobermans were bred to be protectors. Karl Friedrich Louis Dobermann (1834-1894) was, among other things, a tax collector in Germany. It was a dangerous job, as one might imagine. He bred the Doberman’s Pinscher to be a protector for himself. Over time, the Doberman Pinscher has changed a bit and the temperament softened. But, they are innately protective, but this does not mean being aggressive. Protection seems to be their self-assigned job in any household.

Mugetsu always alerted us to every person, dog, and especially rabbit who dared walk by our house. When workers came to fix something, she barked up a storm as they approached the house and rang the bell. As they entered, she continued with a few perfunctory barks of a different frequency, then she either lied down and went to sleep

on a sofa or watched them as they worked. I am absolutely sure she watched to see if there was a job for her. If there was no apparent job, she often resorted to licking the worker's neck or arms. In one case, we had a man come over to fix the underground watering system we inherited when we bought the house. There were leaks in various parts of the yard. As the worker dug holes, she followed him and dug out his holes a little further. He saw her doing this and laughingly commented about how much of a helper she was. When he was finished, he started filling in a hole. Mugetsu saw this and went to the other holes and started scraping the dirt back into the unfilled holes. At this point, we looked at each other in amazement. She was indeed helping. The same sort of helping occurred when my wife and I raked the backyard. As we piled up leaves, Mugetsu started running around the yard picking up branches and twigs while adding them to the pile. She looked exceptionally happy when helping us. Working, especially helping, seemed to be an affirmation of her relationships.

The same sort of helping as protecting occurred in many different contexts and with different people and dogs. In the dog park, there were a few occasions, where a dog, often new to the park, was being harassed by another dog with none of the social skills one would hope for. When Mugetsu saw this type of interaction, she would show up and stand in between the two dogs. If the aggressor continued to try to bother the dog, Mugetsu would step up her strategy, which usually proceeded from blocking to distracting to barking to snarling. The sequence never went beyond snarling. When fight broke out, she charged full speed to the scene, then stood there for a few seconds while assessing which dog was the aggressor. Once this status was determined, she grabbed the aggressor's tail, pulled it, and ran away. This was the intense version of distraction strategy. Mugetsu also protected people in the dog park. If a person was being harassed by a dog, she would move in between them and go through the same sequence of strategies, if necessary. To her, everyone in whatever context had to get along with one another. Aggression was not allowed. At home, my wife and I could not argue. Mugetsu would step in and break it up. Mugetsu was incredibly skillful in dealing with conflict. And, none of her strategies, none of her actions broke relationships. Relationships were sacred.

It was interesting that Mugetsu was (almost) never aggressive towards people. Taking walks with her, most people changed sides of the street when they saw us coming, but others came up and pet Mugetsu. There also were a few occasions when some "tough guys" approached to comment on how good looking she was and then ask if she was

mean. Mugetsu paid very little attention to these tough guys, but lapped up all the attention she could get from others. People who did approach almost always extended their hands for her to smell. Of course, she did not really care about sniffing them. She had already checked out these people way before they even noticed her. She was a visual assessor. She could read body language in an instant.

The only exception to her non-aggression was after we moved to a new city. She had an ear infection, one of several in her lifetime. So, I did a Google search for vets in the area and made an appointment. Mugetsu never liked going to the vet for more than a few seconds. She liked to go in, greet everyone, get pets, and especially get treats, if they had any. But, then she was ready to leave. This visit was just like every other. We sat and waited, then were taken into the exam room. She was always nervous in these situations, and this occasion was no different from the dozens before. The vet tech came in and talked with us and took Mugetsu's temperature, which she absolutely hated, but would only squirm, sit down, and otherwise be annoying, but never aggressive. A few minutes after the tech left the room, the vet cracked the door open. At that instant, Mugetsu started snarling intensely. I had never seen her do this before. Her snarling towards aggressive or annoying dogs at the dog park was always much more reserved to the point of almost being subtle, like a low grumbling with a lip quiver. But, never like this. I wrapped my arms around Mugetsu. I tried calming her down, but to no avail. She looked at me occasionally as if to say, "what's wrong with you! Why aren't you paying attention! This is bad!" But, I did not catch on to what she was saying until much later. In a tiny fraction of a second of seeing this vet through the crack of the door, she determined that this person was dangerous. Thinking back, I, of course, rationalized away the subtle messages that were evident during the first few seconds of the vet entering the room. The vet was a middle-aged woman, who became increasingly condescending and aggressive. But, it was not until I got the bill for the ear infection exam that I realized what was up. After paying the \$650 bill, fortunately most of which was paid for by Mugetsu's pet insurance, I began to realize what Mugetsu saw in a tiny fraction of a second. The vet was pathological. Something was deeply amiss with her psychologically. I rationalized away the signals, but the directness and clarity of Mugetsu perception picked up on it immediately. After the vet left the room and the vet techs remained, Mugetsu returned to her normal sweet demeanor. A week later, Mugetsu got a bladder infection. We went to a different vet. I watched carefully as we went through the same sequence of vet procedures, while anxiously waiting to see how Mugetsu reacted to the new vet. When the new vet, a slightly younger woman, entered the exam room Mugetsu

reacted with what was her usual reaction to veterinarians... “yeah, you’re fine. Have any treats?” Mugetsu absolutely loved treats and would do just about anything for a treat. However, there was another level of relationship going on. She sensed who she could trust to some degree and who she could not trust. Throughout her life, she let vets do all sorts of things that she did not like. And, she was nervous and sometime frightened to be in a vets office, yet she may have offered up some resistance, she was never aggressive. She was very strong. Mugetsu could easily have broken loose of any hold and do extensive harm, but she never did. I am sure she sensed that her doctors were trying to help her. Maybe there is something with dogs’ approaches to relationship from which people could learn something. Maybe people threatening doctors is a sign of some deep pathology of relationship.

The only other major threat Mugetsu and I encountered was during a hike in the forest when she was somewhere between one and two years old. We were hiking in our regular part of the forest, but were off-trail and zigzagging up the mountainside. At one point, we ran out of open areas in which to walk. I looked around and saw a big pine tree with the lowest branches about four feet off the ground. On the other side of this tree, it looked as if the territory was more open and clear. I began crawling underneath the tree with Mugetsu next to me. We got about five feet or halfway under the tree, when Mugetsu stopped and became increasingly agitated. She did not want to keep going. I wanted to keep going, but something about her behavior stopped me. I told her, “okay, we’ll go back.” As we crawled back out from under the tree, she began to calm down. And, as we walked down the mountain and onto one of our regular paths, she returned to her normal romping around the forest behavior. I seriously suspect she sensed that a Mountain Lion was hanging around on the other side of that tree. Mountain Lions were known to be spread throughout this forest and mountain. I knew lots of people who saw them, but I never did. However, I often felt like we were being watched.

In terms of protection, I wonder how much mutual learning took place between us. When she was a puppy and even a grown dog, I protected her. I chased away numerous dogs who attacked her in the forest, dog parks, and elsewhere. In one instance, a pitbull charged out at her from an outside dining area of a restaurant. Without thinking, I flattened the pitbull against the concrete sidewalk, while yelling at the owners. When I looked over at Mugetsu her eyes were glued on me. In the forest, an aggressive golden retriever charger Mugetsu while snarling aggressively. I charged back at the golden with the loudest meanest snarl I could manage. The retriever retreated, all while Mugetsu

watched intently. At a dog park, people with an obviously aggressive pitbull came into the dog park and unhooked the dog's leash. Out of all of the dogs in the park, which numbered around 20, this pitbull charged Mugetsu. I dove through the air, while earning a reputation of someone not to mess with when bringing an aggressive dog to the park. I didn't particularly think about what I would do, if I caught the dog, but the pitbull avoided my attack and retreated to his people, who I subsequently chased out of the park while pretending to call the police. Mugetsu watched everything. She was the most observant dog I had ever encountered. In general, she had to understand everything that was going on around her, and especially with me and my behavior. When I greeted friendly dogs and people, she observed me carefully. When I was doting on other dogs, she watched me with what I thought was an attitude of, "really?! Are you serious?" while looking mildly hurt by my totally unwarranted attention to another dog.

I learned a lot about being a protector from her. Her sequence from alert to snarling and chasing away was tremendously skillful. And, it was a skill I was not particularly good at. I now try to emulate her techniques with varying degrees of success and failure. But, I also think she learned from me. I think her love of people and other dogs was, at least in part, due to her learning from me, my son, and my wife.

I also noticed a reciprocal pattern of Mugetsu wanting me to watch her. As with the psychopath vet, she wanted me to understand what she was trying to communicate. In dog parks, she often looked at me in ways that seemed to communicate "watch me." Some of these instances occurred when she was trying to pacify a situation.

## Communicating



She had a large variety of ways to communicate. Her looks, especially in her eyes, were often the most obvious to me, although other people may not have noticed the subtleties. Her eyes expressed agitation, fear, uncertainty, happiness, love, disappointment, "time to go," anticipation, neediness, and so

forth. But, she also used a variety of other ways to communicate. At one point, my wife and I were sitting on a loveseat watching TV. Mugetsu came in and started her high-pitched barking. We tried ignoring her, but finally figured that she wanted to go outside. So, I got up and started walking out of the room. But, as soon as I got up, she walked over and crawled up onto the now vacated spot on the loveseat next to my wife. I ended up sitting on the floor while leaning against the loveseat.

She had an impeccable internal clock. As our outing time approached in the morning or late afternoon, she showed up in whatever room I was in about an hour before the scheduled time. At the 30-minute mark, she moved closer to me. At 15-minutes, she started heavy breathing, followed shortly after by very heavy sighs. Then, she started very soft whining, which escalated to quiet, high-pitched barks, then loud high pitched barks and pacing. On a few occasions, she brought me my shoes. But, interestingly, she always wanted to play and made up a variety of games. The leaving—the—house—game started at a pretty young age. Although she was dying to go for a hike, walk, or dog park, she had to work in a game. So, the routine was that I went and got her harness with attached leash, then turned towards her to put it on, and she ran away. I chased around furniture, backtracking and climbing over couches, and around the whole house until she decided it was time to go or I cheated and got some treats. Then, she walked into the harness and off we went.

As she got older, she added a one-hour alarm clock for the dog park. If she wasn't busy playing with friends or chasing ground squirrels or rabbits, she started a similar routine.



It almost always started with “a look” and heavy breathing, followed shortly by pacing and heavy sighs, then she would run a few yards in the direction of the gate and back again. Eventually, she ran all the way to the gate and back again, then start her high-pitched barking. All the regulars at the dog park knew this pattern and alerted me to the first “look” and heavy breathing, if I wasn't watching.



All of this communication was part of the bigger picture of relationships. Effective communication was based on good relationships and vice versa. She understood this dynamic.

On occasions, I did get angry with Mugetsu. Such instances of anger usually arose from a situation where I got hurt. In reality, these occurrences were due to mutual issues. I knew where rabbits hung out and so did Mugetsu. In one case, we pulled into the dog park parking lot. I got out, opened her door, grabbed her leash, and bent over to pick up a backpack with a bowl and bottle of water. The moment I bent over and was not paying any attention to the surrounding context, Mugetsu spotted a rabbit and bolted after it. But, with leash in hand, she reached the limit of the leash and arm length while pulling my arm over the car door, and, as I learned a month or so later, tearing my rotator cuff. I yelled in a mixture of pain and anger, which was partly directed at me for not being alert. Mugetsu, realizing what had just happened and that I was very upset, quickly came over and grabbed the leash in her mouth. She proceeded to initiate a game of tug-of-war, which was her go-to game to smooth out all troubles. Any time, I seemed angry, sad, upset, or even distracted by the crazy moments of life, Mugetsu initiated some sort of game. However, she also initiated play with me at other times. When we'd start walking laps around the dog park, she'd excitedly jump up and grab my outstretched arm in her mouth and tug gently. It was a modified dog—human version chase and wrestling. These were bonding moments for both of us. I had to trust that her huge teeth would not puncture my skin. And, they never did.

She used similar toothy messages with her best people friends. When my sons came over or we went to visit, she jumped and wiggled, while grabbing their arms and gently biting up and down their arms. She did the same with some of our close friends, when they visited. She knew all of her people and dog friends by name. I would tell her in a flat intonation that Guy, a close friend of mine, was coming over. She immediately went into alert mode. She walked over to the window or door, if it was open, and look up and down the street. She even recognized the cars of her people and dog friends. At the dog park, she often positioned herself so that she could see the cars coming towards the park. If she spotted a friend's car, she started wiggling and pacing, then go into stalking posture as her friends walked down the hill toward the park.

Some dogs are very interested in human language, while others only care about the important words, like walk, food, treat, sit, etc. Mugetsu was very interested in human

speech. She always listened intently. I talked to her in complete sentences or in phrases that I might use with people. In the forest, I began telling her to turn right at the split in the trail. After one instance of saying something like this, I could say the same thing in a store that allowed dogs and she turned in the requested direction. I never intentionally taught her most of what I communicated, like “jump into the car,” “jump out of the car,” “I’ll be right back,” “find the cat,” or whatever. She listened and watched intently, especially when dogs and people were involved. She also sniffed and/or listened to find rabbits, rodents, and lizards. Watching and listening were her primary modes of interacting with people and dogs, while sniffing and listening were primary for tracking and finding her favorite animals to chase.



### **Some Additional Insights and Thoughts**

Just about everything that mattered to Mugetsu and most dogs was in one way or another about relationships. Although much of what I have described involved her relationships to me, to other people, and to dogs, her whole world was about relationships. These relationships were to the trees, rocks, and rotting branches on the ground in the forest. They were to her sofas, beds, and other furniture, to our cars, and whatever came into her contexts of experience. Once, when we drove up to one of our favorite trailheads in the forest, I parked the car, and immediately Mugetsu started barking nervously, which was not her typical response to arriving at one of her favorite places. I looked up and there, about 30 yards in front of us and just across the boundary to the forest was a huge sign that had never been there before. As we walked up towards the sign, Mugetsu got more and more nervous, but also intently curious about what this strange object was doing in her forest. After carefully sniffing and examining all parts of the sign, Mugetsu decided it was okay. The sign was a warning that a forest fire was still smoldering, but completely contained in a small part of the forest ahead.

Mugetsu had a complete map of this part of the forest in her head. She knew almost every square meter. If something changed, she noticed. A newly fallen tree, a new hole in the ground, or even a new person or dog were always assessed. Her world of relationships was intricate, complex, pulsating, intensely warm and alive, and all-encompassing.

As I mentioned earlier, relationships seem to be sacred to dogs, unless some sort of damage has occurred, such as some medical, physical, or emotional issue. Relationships are a dog's whole world. However, people often break relationships, and sometimes without even realizing it. Gregory Bateson and his colleagues coined the term *double binds* as a description of situations that can create lasting patterns of problematic relationships to oneself and others.<sup>9</sup> Double binds are created by contexts and actions that appear to have no reasonable way out without incurring some sort of unwanted consequence. A mother always yelling at her teenage son that he is bad is intensely problematic. "Why are you always coming home late!" The repetition of such a pattern of communication creates a situation where the son cannot do or say anything to make it better. If he says, "I'm sorry, I won't do it again," he is admitting he has been bad. If he says, "I wasn't late" or "I told you I was going to be late," he's been put into a position of defending himself. With dogs, I cannot even begin to list all of the double binds people have put their dogs into. One very nice man, I had known for several years from a few dog parks, just got a new hound puppy. Mugetsu loved the puppy and the puppy loved Mugetsu. The owner of the puppy would say, "go play with Mugetsu" and the two of them would start to play. As soon as his puppy bit Mugetsu's neck, he would get angry and yell at his puppy, "Stop!! Get back here." This went on for weeks. In a few months, the puppy stopped playing and actually hated coming into the dog park. People in our group of regulars began timing their stays in the dog park. Sometimes the man and his hound would reach the gate, and the hound would drag him back to the car. The average stay was about 30 seconds. His hound was so sweet and gentle, but ended up a confused and unhappy dog. And, this outcome was better than some, where the dog become out of control aggressive.

Bateson also describe three types of relationships, **complementary**, **symmetrical**, and **reciprocal**. Complementary are generally dominant—submissive types of relationships. Symmetrical relationships are more combative and competitive. Two people or a person

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<sup>9</sup> Bateson, G. (2000). *Steps to an ecology of mind*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

and a dog vying for control is a typical of a symmetrical relationship. Both of these relationships are unhealthy if they are the typical pattern of relating to one another. Such relationships either continue making both parties miserable or they collapse. Reciprocal relationships are those relationships where the parties negotiate terms, act in give-and-take patterns, and maintain a sense of mutual respect.<sup>10</sup> These types of relationships tend to last. Mugetsu and I had a reciprocal relationship. Many dog families have similar patterns of relationship, but others do not. The hound puppy seemed to be stuck in a complementary, dominant—submissive, relationship.

I am entirely biased, but Mugetsu was an amazing dog. I'm sure almost all dogs are, as well. She was the first dog I made a point of really getting to know at a level beyond anything I had done before. In my youth, we knew nothing about dogs. I cringe in the way we treated dogs, and the way I treated the dog I had while at college. We were basically nice to the dogs, but double binds abounded and reciprocity was not part of the relationship.

Dogs and people take on one another's characteristics and patterns. Gregory Bateson referred to this process as abduction,<sup>11</sup> which has been further elaborated upon by his daughter, Nora Bateson. Abduction is typically a pattern of thinking that tests hypotheses for their applicability across different contexts. However, abduction also refers to describing or reflecting certain information across contexts.<sup>12</sup> The chameleon changes colors to match its background, or the octopus changing shape and color to evade predation or to go unseen as a predator, are both cases of abduction. One context reflects the other.

Mugetsu reflected me. And, I reflected Mugetsu.

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<sup>10</sup> Bateson, G. (2000). *Steps to an ecology of mind*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>11</sup> Bateson, G. (2002). *Mind and nature: A necessary unity*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

<sup>12</sup> From conversations with Nora Bateson, as well as describe in her book (2016). *Small arcs of larger circles: Framing through other patterns*. Axminster, UK: Triarchy. Press.