

Book Review:

“The Education of Will: A Mutual Memoir of a Woman and Her Dog”

By Patricia B. McConnell, PhD, CAAB (2017)

Molly A. Jenkins

In *The education of Will: A mutual memoir of a woman and her dog*, Dr. Patricia McConnell recounts how her complex relationship with Will, a Border Collie with serious anxiety and behavioral issues, helped her to confront and cope with her own buried history of trauma. As a renowned applied animal behaviorist, McConnell had extensive experience working with aggressive, fearful, and otherwise “troubled” dogs well before adopting Will (or Willie, as she affectionately refers to him). However, young Willie’s particular behaviors – such as his tendency to abruptly startle or scramble in response to seemingly minor or invisible stimuli – resonated strongly with McConnell, challenging her to seek the source of Willie’s anxiety while revisiting her own painful past and personal feelings of fear, hypervigilance, and shame. Through this process, McConnell developed a deep connection with, and compassion for, both Willie and herself, and soon realized that his potential for healing was inextricably linked with her own.

Throughout this courageous, absorbing and ultimately hopeful memoir, McConnell speaks candidly about several distinct traumas she experienced in her youth and as a young woman, namely child sexual abuse, rape, and witnessing a man fall from above and die at her feet (accordingly, it should be noted that the contents of this book may be triggering to some readers). Needless to say, these myriad traumatic experiences had a profound impact on McConnell’s life. She writes of her puzzling fears of being alone, of entering her own home and barn

after dark, and of feeling constantly pursued by dangerous men. Outside of sheep herding and bonding with McConnell, the world was also a daunting place for Willie, filled with unfamiliar and potentially dangerous dogs and noises. However, unlike with McConnell, the presence, extent and/or nature of trauma in Willie’s history was uncertain, making it all the more difficult to help him overcome his anxiety and corresponding behavioral issues.

At one point, McConnell speculates whether her own symptoms of fear and post-traumatic stress (see above) had an unintended impact on Willie’s temperament and highly reactive behavior. She astutely acknowledges that this is a likely, if not probable, possibility. In addition, McConnell very bravely discusses how, despite their great love for each other, being in Willie’s presence was often difficult and triggering for her, particularly at the beginning of their relationship. She writes (p. 31),

...Willie would burst from silence to full-bore barking five or ten times in an evening. Even though I was soothed when we cuddled on the living room floor, his unpredictable explosions began to take a toll on me. I began to feel like I was living in a war-zone, with IEDs scattered among the furniture in the living room. Dealing with my fears had always been a challenge, but now I was living with someone who was making them worse (McConnell, 2017).

Like any significant and meaningful relationship, our connections with animals are multi-faceted, and require hard work and mutual understanding in order to thrive, especially if at least one individual has experienced trauma. In the case of human trauma recovery, research indicates that animals can provide a unique, reliable, and often subconscious sense of safety, but only if they themselves are calm and noticeably well (Julius, Beetz, Kotrschal, Turner, & Uvnäs Moberg, 2013; Tedeschi & Jenkins, 2019; Zilcha-Mano, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2012). It is not surprising, then, that the relationship McConnell shared with Willie, at least initially, wasn't always perfect, and her honesty in admitting this in a book largely intended for an audience of animal devotees is both admirable and important. That said, their powerful and tender connection, perhaps made stronger through their similar responses to stressful triggers, is clear throughout the text. According to McConnell (2017),

My relationship with Willie wasn't always pretty. At its darkest time, it barely seemed worth it. But somehow I knew that Willie was not only my connection to nature, he was my connection to my deepest self (p. 241).

At the end of Chapter 6, McConnell underscores the importance of feeling safe and secure for both her and Willie's healing processes. For Willie, this included receiving unconditional support and compassion, even when his behaviors were challenging. McConnell also discusses working closely with Willie to understand his individual stressors, and to condition him to associate potentially negative or fearful experiences with positive ones (e.g., receiving a favorite treat after remaining calm when repeatedly exposed to other dogs). Like most Border Collies, Willie also enjoyed herding sheep,

although it did take him some time and encouragement to gain confidence in this new role. Once he did, however, his ability to successfully confront and overcome his fears inspired McConnell in her own recovery work, including participating in therapy and training dogs as an animal behaviorist.

Working with Willie and her canine clients in relatively predictable situations where she felt confident and self-assured was an important component of McConnell's trauma recovery. Looking back, she notes, "It didn't occur to me at the time how important it was to find a way to face fear in an environment where I had knowledge and control on my side" (McConnell, 2017, p. 84). Feeling skilled and in control is akin to feeling safe, and may even provide one with a sense of purpose and fulfillment. This is incredibly important for people struggling with the aftermath of trauma, as their everyday lives may feel chaotic, overwhelming, and lacking in overall direction. According to Yount, Olmert, and Lee (2012), veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) who trained service dogs for fellow soldiers with combat-related physical disabilities demonstrated a greater sense of purpose, decreased startle responses, and other improvements in PTSD symptomology through leveraging their existing skills in this structured and service-oriented program. Similarly, feeling secure and confident in her professional role and via her supportive connections with dogs helped McConnell feel safe to confront her own feelings of trauma and anxiety.

This review features only a handful of the many highlights of Patricia McConnell's 2017 memoir, *The education of Will*. Those interested in trauma, canine health and behavior, human-animal relationships, and the inclusion of animals to enhance established treatment and therapeutic approaches for people with trauma histories are strongly encouraged to read the book in-

full. Besides being an informative and moving account of the neurological, psychological, and behavioral impacts of trauma for both people and dogs, this book also calls attention to the powerful healing potential of the human-animal bond. Through her love and thoughtful care for Willie, McConnell gained greater insight and empathy for him and for herself. As she states,

No matter what the cause, [Willie] behaved as though he had been psychologically traumatized. My heart broke for him every time he exploded off the carpet, startling to the quietest of sounds. The only problem was, I did, too. No wonder we were soul mates (McConnell, 2017, p. 161).

Notably, the connections between human, animal, and environmental health (also known as “One Health”) undoubtedly play an important role in trauma recovery; ultimately, healing for both McConnell and Willie hinged on the other’s growth, happiness, and evident well-being.

References

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