

Is Your “Once In A Lifetime Dog” Holding You Back?

Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

Transcript

00:00:00

The post I created on Facebook, over 700 comments on that post. One commenter thought I was dismissing grief. It was a frenzy. People weren't just reacting to the words that they read on my post. They were reacting to the beliefs that they had in their own minds. And why were the comments so emotional?

00:00:25

Hi, I am Susan Garrett, and this is Shaped by Dog, where training makes sense at both ends of the leash. What if I was to tell you the most limiting thing about your relationship with your dog is the story you tell yourself. Not the breed of dog, not the genetics of the dog, not even your training abilities, [just the story](#).

Because once you decide ‘this dog's a slow thinker’, ‘this dog is clumsy’, ‘this dog will never be as good as my last dog’, or ‘this dog is my heart dog, my one and only heart dog’, your brain will then start looking for proof, continuously looking for proof. And that changes how you respond to the dog, how you think about the dog, how you talk about and talk to the dog.

00:01:15

And before long this story it feels true, not because it was any sort of destiny, but because it was a directive coming from you. A few weeks ago, I made a post on my personal Facebook page where I suggested that people should stop calling their dogs their “heart dogs”, or their “soul dogs”, or their “once in a lifetime dogs”. And that post, it blew up.

Not because of the words that I wrote, but because of the meaning that people attached to the words that I wrote. And that's exactly what I want to talk about today. The stories we tell ourselves and the meaning we give things.

00:01:53

This episode is not about trying to police the language people use about their dog, and it's not about judging how deeply anyone loves their dog, and it's certainly not minimizing the connection we all have with our dogs.

It's about something much more powerful than that. It's about how the human brain works, how belief shapes attention, and how attention shapes behavior, both our behavior and our dog's behavior.

Because the stories we tell ourselves and other people about our dogs doesn't define that relationship. It actually builds that relationship. The story you repeat about your dog, that becomes the lens through which you see your dog.

00:02:36

Let me share a story from 2004. I had a young puppy by the name of Encore. She would've been about four months old, and I headed down south to a big dog agility event where I ran into the icons of dog agility, JC and Hazel Thompson.

Now, they were probably 30 or 40 years older than me, I believe they were in their seventies at that time, but they owned the sport of agility with their distance work and their really well-trained Border Collies.



Is Your “Once In A Lifetime Dog” Holding You Back?

00:03:05

I ran up to them and I was so excited. I said, “I’ve got a new puppy, and I can’t wait for you two to meet her.” And that was Saturday morning, early. Of course, we got busy, walking courses, running courses, and every time I bumped into them, I tell them a little bit more about Encore. Finally, at the end of the second day I said, “I want you to meet her.”

And I brought her over. JC immediately said, “Oh, Susan, she’s a winner.” And I remember saying to him, I was so excited because I wanted to know what he saw in her. And I said, “Well, what do you see that makes you say that?”

00:03:40

He said, “It’s nothing that I see. It’s what I’ve heard for the past two days. You, talking about her. How you talk about her. I know for sure this dog’s going to be a winner.” And guess what, she was. She was both a Canadian and US National Champion of Agility. She had an amazing career in the sport of agility.

She won a gold medal at the Agility World Championships, and it all started with the stories that I talked about her to others, to myself, and of course to her. Now, before I go any further, I want to make something super clear. I understand what it feels like to have a profound connection with a dog. In truth, every dog I’ve ever shared my life with, I’ve had a ridiculous profound love to the point of heartbreak when I lost that dog.

00:04:31

Every relationship I’ve had with a dog has changed me. Every dog has taught me so many things. Every dog has stretched me, and every dog has helped disclose a new side of myself to me. I will admit some dogs have been easier to connect with than others, as some dogs have been easier to train than others, mostly because of where I was at that time in my life when that dog came into my life.

But I never ever said the deepest connection I would ever have with a dog was behind me. I’m very intentional about how I even describe my youngest red Border Collie Prophet. If I ever catch myself saying, “You’re the special red boy.”, I change myself immediately to, “You’re one of my special red boys.”

00:05:21

I never want to limit in my mind what is definitively one. Because the moment I ever believe that I quietly eliminate room for any other possibility. I subconsciously start measuring all the other dogs in my life currently and any dog that may come after to that one relationship that I defined as ‘The one’.

And this is where neuroscience becomes so relevant to dog training. Because neuroscience defines something super important to us. It tells us that our brain isn’t passively recording reality. Our brain is actively defining reality. It constantly tells us what matters and what doesn’t, what we should pay attention to and what is less important.

00:06:10

And the system that does all of that filtering for us is called the Reticular Activation System, your RAS. It’s fed by our own beliefs, our own confirmations. Our own reality feeds that RAS and tells it, ‘This is important’. And the RAS has to be on top of things every second of the day. Think of everything that’s in this room. I’m trying to share a very critically important message to this camera. Yet there’s hundreds of other stimuli in this room.



Is Your “Once In A Lifetime Dog” Holding You Back?

00:06:46

The RAS in my brain tells me ‘Filter all of that out. None of it is important at this moment. The only thing that’s important is this camera. Okay, and maybe this camera, but nothing else.’ The only thing that gets through to our brain at any moment of the day is the things that we have heavily weighted as very important.

So, our brain isn’t necessarily looking for truth, it’s looking for relevancy. It’s looking for what we define as relevant to us in our life, how we live, and how we define what is and isn’t important. You may have experienced this already.

You get a new puppy, suddenly you notice other puppies in your neighborhood, maybe of the same breed, or on social media, you see things that, “Oh, that’s the same markings”, and they just pop up everywhere.

00:07:33

Is it because there suddenly is this influx of the same breed, a puppy that you have or the same markings? No, it’s your Reticular Activation System has said that “Wow. This is important because this is the puppy you love.” “Oh, I see that breed. Oh, I see that color. Oh, I see that little pink nose. It’s the same.”

The same thing happens in training. If you’ve decided your dog is [reactive](#), then anytime another dog walks by, you’re going to tighten your leash. You’re going to look for signs in your dog. If they suddenly get stiff or they shy away from something, it’s confirming for your RAS, yes, that’s your dog being reactive again.

00:08:12

And anytime in the day where your dog looks at a dog and maybe glances away, you’re less likely to notice that because that’s a sign of a dog that is making a good choice. And that’s not the dog that you’ve defined. You’ve defined a reactive dog. Well, reactive dogs don’t do this. So, let’s just look for all the reasons why this dog is reactive.

All of those moments that the dog is making good choices, they all fade to the background, not because they weren’t important, because you, your descriptions, your conversations, has already decided this is the way it is, everything in my life needs to find evidence to prove that this is the way it is.

00:09:01

So, your Reticular Activation System, it doesn’t change your reality, it changes the part of reality that you tend to notice. And that takes us to confirmation bias and confirmation bias is the tendency for us to notice things that confirm the things that we already believe.

So, if you repeat that ‘this dog is my once in a lifetime dog’, your brain will repeat all of those special moments where your dog did amazing things, or your dog did touching things, or your dog showed genuine emotion, or anything that your brain is going to serve up to you to confirm that belief, ‘yeah, this is the one.’

00:09:45

And likewise, if you believe ‘this dog is tougher than other dogs’, ‘this dog I just can’t connect with’, ‘this dog is just slower’, ‘this dog just isn’t as talented as my past dogs’, or ‘this dog just isn’t a good jumper’, your brain will too, start gathering information to support that.



Is Your “Once In A Lifetime Dog” Holding You Back?

00:10:03

And it's not because the label is true, it's because your brain is objectively gathering data to support you. And [that's why](#) in [past episodes](#) of [Shaped by Dog](#), I have warned of the [dangers of labels](#). Because labels don't define relationships. Labels direct your attention within a relationship.

These labels, these definitions we have for our dogs, they become self-fulfilling prophecies, don't they? This is where our expectations of outcomes of individual dogs start to change. If you truly believe that this dog is extraordinary, you're going to show up different.

00:10:38

If you believe this other dog doesn't quite measure up, you don't know why you just can't connect, you are going to show up very differently than for the other dog. Maybe it's, you're going to be more patient, maybe you'll be more engaged. Maybe you'll just seem to have more fun. Maybe you'll be more thoughtful with your reinforcement.

Maybe you'll be more impatient with your hands on your hips and your sighs when you're training that second dog. Maybe you'll be more willing to work through setbacks, and maybe you'll notice the smaller steps of progress in the one that you expect it from. And all of those little things add up to a different relationship.

00:11:20

One dog becomes more confident, more successful, more consistent, more talented, not because of who that dog is, but because of how our belief in that dog shaped them. Just like my belief in Encore shaped her. And I believe that's why every single dog I have ever owned has become a National or World Champion, has been on a World Team, every single dog.

Because I've been very intentional about never limiting my dogs with my own beliefs. I've always left the opening for what's possible. What you expect affects the way you show up. How you show up affects who that dog gets to become.

00:12:05

And some of you may have already said, “Dogs don't understand English. They don't know the meaning of the words that I'm saying.” And you are true. Well, except for maybe a handful of words, they don't understand English.

However, [they are the masters at understanding](#) body language, tone, inflection, energy, the passion that we carry, and the disappointment that we carry. The hint of anger or the rigidity of how we talk or walk when we're training them.

00:12:39

They understand all of that, and that is far more powerful than any spoken word ever could be. Our dogs may not understand our words, but they live inside of the emotional truth that we share with them every single day. And that's where the subtlety happens. The elevation of one dog, either a past dog or a current dog to the status of your heart dog, your soul dog, your once in a lifetime dog.

It isn't that I just don't like the phrasing. It's that I want the best for you. I want the best for dogs. I want dogs and their people to live their best lives. And your best lives, means a life without limits, especially self-imposed limits. Because one of those dogs becomes our gold standards, and every other dog is measured up to that dog.



Is Your “Once In A Lifetime Dog” Holding You Back?

00:13:30

It doesn't matter if we say it, we never say it out loud. It doesn't matter if we never speak to either dog. And I know nobody intends on being unfair, and I know you love all of those dogs, but there's a difference. And the other dogs know it. Because comparison doesn't have to be conscious to be influential.

And that's the cost of labels. And that's why this is [the second Shaped by Dog episode](#) I'm making, encouraging you to be careful and conscious of how you limit your dogs with labels. Yes, even the good ones, the moment you decide one dog is the best one ever, you immediately lower the ceiling for any other dog that follows.

00:14:14

You immediately limit the ceiling of any other dog that lives in your household. And that's exactly why the post I created on Facebook created such an emotional outburst. Over 700 comments on that post. It was a frenzy. People weren't just reacting to the words that they read on my post. They were reacting to the beliefs that they had in their own mind.

And how those words didn't fit with their own beliefs. And why were the comments so emotional? Because it was what felt like an attack on an identity that you hold. Because that's what beliefs are. Beliefs are what create the identity of who we are.

00:14:57

One commenter thought I was dismissing grief because I said I was motivated to write this when one of my students said their newest dog just didn't measure up since they lost their soulmate dog two years ago. Another person thought I was criticizing love and made the assumption that I just have never loved a dog deeply like they have.

And yet another person insisted that I wrote the post about them. The same words were read by many different people, yet wildly different meanings were assigned to those words. It's not because the people that were reading the post were foolish people. It's because of the programming of the brain.

00:15:39

It's because of the Reticular Activation System and the confirmation bias that's running in each of our brains, confirming our beliefs. We're never reacting to just words. We're reacting to the story that those words represent to us.

Let me make a distinction. There's a very big difference between saying, “This dog changed my life.” and “This dog is my one and only.” The first is gratitude for an amazing soul. The second is a limitation for both yourself, and for your dogs. The first honors what you've had. The second predicts what can never happen again.

00:16:22

One keeps a door of possibility open. One quietly closes that door forever. And that's why I love celebrating gratitude. It keeps possibility open forever. The philosophy I hold is that every dog that comes into our lives has a possibility to change our lives profoundly. Each dog brings different lessons, different gifts, different laughter, different pain.

Some dogs feel like they've been here before, like we're living another life over again. Some dogs may feel more difficult, different challenges, different gifts, different opportunity for us to grow. But extraordinary doesn't need to be a one-time event. It doesn't have to be reserved for one dog.



Is Your “Once In A Lifetime Dog” Holding You Back?

00:17:07

It's a specialness that can emerge over and over again if we leave our heart open to that possibility. Because every dog has the possibility of being extraordinary if we leave ourselves open to that story. So, I'm going to leave you with a question.

Have you been limiting what's possible for your dogs by a story that you've been telling yourself? How has this story served you and how by letting that story go, can you grow?

It could be defining what you see as a behavioral quirk. It could be defining by what you perceive as the dog's talent in a sport that you have. It could be defining a breed trait that you think is a limitation. And it could be defining the dog as the special one, the one and only, the love you will never, ever have again.

00:18:01

Then ask yourself, is this a story worth hanging onto? What could be possible in my life if I let go of that story? Awareness is what changes that story and the openness for gratitude and what's possible. Science continually shows us something fascinating.

What we believe shapes what we notice. What we notice shapes how we behave. How we behave shapes the life we get to have. It shapes the relationships we enjoy. It shapes how we show up for people and our dogs in our lives. So, what I was suggesting in that post, and what I'm suggesting in this episode isn't to love your dogs less. It's to love every dog without limits.

00:18:48

It's to love with full possibilities. It's to constantly be curious about if you think this might be a limitation, ask yourself, 'If that wasn't true, what else could be true?' What's another story that I could be telling myself that helps raise that dog up? Which helps raise me up, which helps both of us have the best life possible.

Because one of the greatest gifts we can give every dog that comes into our lives is to refuse to put a ceiling on how extraordinary they could become. Because the stories we tell ourselves about our dogs don't create the relationships we have with them, they create the relationships we live with them.

00:19:29

Thank you for joining me today. And as always, stay curious, stay humble, and keep making life amazing at both ends of the leash. I'll see you next time right here on Shaped by Dog.

Resources:

[Podcast Episode 13: Naming Your Puppy or Dog](#)

[Podcast Episode 168: Creating Confidence For Anxious, Stressed Or Reactive Dogs Part 1](#)

[Podcast Episode 189: All The Things That Influence Your Dog's Behavior And What Behavior Tells You](#)

[Podcast Episode 224: Unleashing Fluency In Dog Training: Cracking The Canine Communication Code](#)

[Podcast Episode 8: Get Your Dog in the Belief Loop of Awesome](#)

[Podcast Episode 71: Pro Dog Trainer's Secret to Help Your Naughty Dog](#)

[Podcast Episode 124: The Woo Side Of Dog Training: Power of Words](#)



Is Your “Once In A Lifetime Dog” Holding You Back?

About Susan

A world-leading educator of dog trainers, Susan is also one of the most successful agility competitors of the last three decades. She has won multiple Gold Medals at National or World Championship events with every dog she has ever owned over the past 30 years. Susan was one of the very first dog trainers to share knowledge online when she opened her "Clicker Dogs" website many years ago. Susan has helped hundreds of thousands of people enjoy a great relationship with their dogs through her workshops and keynote speaking around the world, award winning books, DVDs, magazine articles, blog posts, podcasts, free dog training and dog agility video series, and online dog training programs.



A natural teacher and an entertaining speaker, Susan is world renowned for her dog training knowledge and practical application of that knowledge. Her understanding of how to apply science-based learning principles to both competitive and family pet dog training has been pivotal in changing how dogs are trained.

Susan is now helping many thousands of dog owners in 82 countries have the best relationship possible with their dogs. The real joy for her comes from bringing confidence to dogs and their owner through playful interactions and relationship building games that are grounded firmly in the science of how animals learn.



Meet Us Online

- Website <https://dogsthat.com>
- Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/SusanGarrettDogAgility/>
- Instagram <https://www.instagram.com/SusanGarrettDogsThat/>
- TikTok <https://www.tiktok.com/@dogsthat>
- LinkedIn <https://www.linkedin.com/company/dogsthat>
- Pinterest <https://pinterest.ca/dogsthatcom/>
- Twitter <https://twitter.com/susangarrett>
- YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/c/DogsThat>
- YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/user/ClickerDogs>

