

Tansy's take on it: the dog as effective auxiliary in Moreno-inspired psychotherapy

Sara Crane



Tansy is a twelve-year-old Border Collie dog. When she is at home, she is a working dog and a pet, herding llamas and chickens and sometimes children, and playing with her son Mr. Brock, a Border Collie Huntaway crossbred. But Tansy has another important role. She comes with me, her pack leader, and companions me in the counselling and therapy work I do at the Urban Eden Psychotherapy Centre. In my first contact with prospective clients, I always let them know that Tansy will be there. When we go for long walks together in the hills, I often reflect out loud about my work with her. This particular kind of intimate soliloquy, that occurs when Tansy and I are outside together, is very precious and profound for me. This is our story...

Our work

Tansy

I get out of bed and stretch hello. Then outside, quick pee, back inside for breakfast biscuits. Lick floor in case the cats have left crumbs of meat. Quick run up hill with Mr. Brock. Pant. Waiting by door, ready for work. Watch pack leader get the lead. Jump in car, sit up, look out window.

Lick window. Listen while pack leader talks. Can't see her face when she's driving, so not sure if she's talking to me or not.

Squeeze in another quick pee between the car and the gate. That cat has been back. It drank my water. Look hard at water bowl so pack leader knows to fill it up. She rinses the bowl first. Maybe she knows about the cat. Brief scout around the garden. Nothing to report. Might as well lie down and be ready for the humans.

The humans come in. A big one and a little one. Sniff the big one's shoes. Cats and something else? The big human strokes my head. She remembers my name. I rub my side against her leg. She sits down and the sofa creaks. The little one stands beside her, his hand on hers. He doesn't look at me. He is so still, I can't feel him breathing. I lie down on the rug between her and pack leader. Little one is quiet. He goes to play in the small house. I follow him. I lie down and rest my head on my paws, close enough so that he can reach out and stroke me. I watch the little one stack things in all the spaces and move the dolls around. He looks at me and I look at him. He starts talking to pack leader. I go to sleep for a bit.

I can hear the yelpy noises I make. Little one says, "I'm dreaming about running fast. I'm running fast, faster." Sleeping, dreaming. I have a stretch and we look at each other, the little one and I. He leans on me a bit and puts one hand on my back. He feels warmer, less shaky. He gets up and plays with the toys on a table. They taste bad but are chewy. Watch and wait as the humans pick up the toys and move them around. When they leave the room, I follow them, wagging my tail. Wait, little one looks at me. I stand just outside the door until they leave. Inspect grass, drink water, look in main house. No one there. Lie down outside in sun.

Sara

I look at Tansy lying in the sun and wonder what is going on for her. How does she know how to be so exquisitely calm and gentle with this little boy who is terrified of everything and everyone? She did not approach him at all, simply waited, judged the distance he would need. I like that Tansy liked his Mum. It reinforced the good feeling I have about her, despite the negative view conveyed by the child protection workers.

Tansy

Pack Leader talks to me and writes on her paper. Then she leaves the room and comes back with a middle-sized human, very clean, very stiff. The human doesn't look at me. I wait. Then she looks at me, sits down. I sit down close to her and lean on her a bit. She strokes me gently and tells

Pack Leader, "Your dog likes me." I do. I like people. I like them to stroke me rather than to pat me. I like looking at them with soft eyes. I like them looking at me. This human cries. I lean on her a bit more, don't look. I lie on her feet. I lie so I cover her feet. She is telling Pack Leader something sad.

Sara

Carly is a very young fourteen. She has experienced too much death. She is afraid of more people dying. But Carly struggles to trust me. Her school counsellor, her teacher and her mother have been discussing her situation amongst themselves. In Carly's view, they have failed to maintain confidentiality. Adults cannot be trusted. But here, somehow, she begins to take me in. Perhaps this is because she sees that I am with Tansy, that Tansy and I are together. When Tansy makes contact with her, she seems able to tolerate the touch. Perhaps this is because she absolutely knows and trusts the parameters, dog and human. Tansy will not make her talk, will not talk about her, will not tease her or be intrusive. I wonder about the impact of Tansy lying on her feet. I imagine that the experience is grounding, that it allows her to be in her body more fully. Now when she looks at me directly, she cries. I notice this. Eventually Carly says that she is willing to give counselling another go.

Tansy

When the human talks to someone as if they are here too, I look towards the spot that she is looking at. I cannot see or smell who she is talking to.

My pack is home. It is me and Mr. Brock and Pack Leader and Mr. Brock's Pack Boss. And then there are the cats. The cats think that they are the boss of us. We just go along with them. Sometimes they even steal our biscuits. They are allowed on Pack Boss' and Pack Leader's bed though. My pack is also the humans I am with who want to be with me, so it changes. But I always have a pack. When I come to work my job is to be part of lots of different packs, so I have to watch carefully and smell them into the room. Sniff, herd, follow, watch.

I drift off a bit. But when this human begins to talk to the other humans who are not here, it gets quite exciting. I move to lie on the rug in the middle of the room, so I am in the midst of all the action. When it goes quiet again, I go back to bed. Then I notice the human becoming still. I get up and lie close to her again. Her hand rests on my back. She smells good. I sigh and snuggle into her.

Sara

Carly is a stunning young woman. She impresses me as highly self-aware and highly vulnerable. We have had a good session. Carly has enjoyed

working in action and being able to re-connect with herself. As she leaves, she rubs Tansy's ears and says she'll see her next time. This is her way of assuring me that she is coming for another session.

Tansy

The next human to enter the room does not notice me. I do not look at her. She does not understand 'the pack'. I go to bed with my back to her and have a nice doze. I like walks. I grunt.

Sara

That last one, Jordan, was hard work. It is obvious that she does not wish to be here. She did not even notice that Tansy was in the room. She is unwilling to engage and yet it seems to me that she longs to. Tansy gave me a good clue when she went to bed and turned her back. I think Jordan would like to turn her back on me. She is an older woman who is difficult to describe, medium height, middle-sized, muted colours. She does not look very well and there appears little individual expression in her presentation. I feel her suffering, her absolute conviction that she is unloveable, her deep despair that nothing will ever change for her.

At Jordan's next appointment, I am better prepared. I am genuine when I smile and say, "How lovely to see you again." She is shocked. I say, "Tansy, come and say hello. It's Jordan." Tansy obediently walks over and looks at Jordan. Jordan looks at her. Then she very tentatively puts out her hand and strokes Tansy. Tansy licks Jordan, who exclaims, "Oh." It is hard to know whether Jordan is surprised, pleased or revolted. But I do have her attention. She sits down and looks at me, really looks at me. Tansy lies down but remains watchful about whether I am going to tell her to go to bed or not. Jordan lowers her eyes and looks away, seemingly on the verge of dissociation. Tansy immediately sits up, alert, and gives Jordan a little nudge with her nose. Jordan raises her eyes, makes partial eye contact with me and holds her knees. Then she tells me that she misses her mother who died just before her husband left, that her adult children have settled overseas and that her neighbour has moved away. Her employers suggested she try counselling because she is unable to concentrate at work, but she confides that she does not see how it can help. Tansy grunts and settles down on her feet. Jordan looks at me. Our eyes meet. We see each other. She cries. We bring her mother to the empty chair. It is remarkable that her mother had a cushion just like the one that I keep in the chair. Jordan's tears increase, and Tansy leans in towards her. When Jordan gets up to enact the role of her mother, Tansy stays sitting in the same spot and looks at her. What is happening, I ask myself. Tansy seems to be enacting the role of auxiliary.

Tansy

If I move, she might disappear. I stare at her, herding her. She needs to stay so Pack Leader can reach her. Sometimes I have to stay very still and stare very hard. And it works. In fact, it is easier to herd humans than llamas. They can be a bit skittish. After the human swaps seat, she seems better, more alive. When she gets up, she does not touch me. She does not look at me or Pack Leader. She walks away quickly and bangs the gate.

Sara

I sigh. Tansy sighs. I rub her tummy, ask her if she thinks we are getting anywhere. She grunts and goes outside. Me too, I think.

Tansy

Lunchtime? Yes. We go up the road, I pee on that strong patch of ivy, it smells of me now. Pack leader gets a drink in a cup, I go inside too. Walk back. Pack Leader and I sit on the grass and listen to the birds. We breathe, both of us. I stretch. Pack leader does yoga. Then she does some weeding. I chase a blackbird. I stretch again. She rubs my back. We lie down on the grass and look up at the sky. She rolls over and picks daisies. I roll on my back and rub against the grass. It feels good. Then we go back to Pack Leader's room.

Two older humans walk slowly in, smelling old. They say hello politely to me and I sniff back, a very small sniff. I know these humans. They can get loud. I curl up in bed, wishing I was outside. I go outside, and Pack Leader opens the door quickly for me. She knows they will get loud. I hear them from outside. And then it is quiet again. I relax in the sun and listen. But it is too hot out here. I can see through the door. Two old humans and Pack Leader, talking, friendly. It is alright now. I can go back in again.

Sara

When Tansy wants to go outside, it is often at times when the session is about to get 'rough'. She hates it when people shout. It does not bother me too much. I would rather this couple, Cadence and Gerard, shouted in my room than save it for when they get home. It has taken a while for us to get to this understanding, but we now know that they are frustrated with external forces and not with each other. But Tansy cannot tell the difference. She just does not like aggression and she is alert to the times it is about to happen. If she wants to go outside, it is a good signal for me. When she wants to come in again, it is as if she is affirming that there has been some resolution. Am I imagining things? When Tansy reappears, Cadence says, "Your dog must think we're okay now." And Gerard asks,

“Well, are we? The dog says it’s okay and there is more. It’s good enough for now.”

Tansy

The older humans smell better after they have had a fight. I come inside and lie down beside Pack Leader. When there is more than one human here, they have their own pack so I do not bother to watch and smell so much. Time to go home. Car ride, play with Mr. Brock, dinner, run up hill, chase rabbits, sit on grass with Pack Leader and Pack Boss, share treats with llamas, sleep, chase possums...

Sara

As Tansy stands up and wags her tail, I experience my body lighten. I am satisfied, reflective and it is time to go home. I enjoy Tansy’s animal enthusiasm as we share the anticipation of going home and being outside. I stroke her head. She grunts and lays her chin on my knee.

Reflections on the work

These have been some glimpses into our counselling and therapy work together, my dog Tansy and me. I have presented them as a means of gaining an understanding about the mystery of human and dog meetings through the lens of psychodrama, of defining the characteristics of dogs that make them such good auxiliaries in the processes of Moreno-inspired psychotherapy and counselling, and of comprehending the ways in which we can make use of these observations in the pursuit of human healing and increased spontaneity.

So, what are the characteristics of dogs that tune them in as effective auxiliaries? As I understand it, dogs are always in their bodies. They enjoy the simple pleasures of life. The dog’s world is one of complex and interactive sensory experience, hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, touching, all experienced fully in the body without conflict. Dogs are acutely aware of the present moment, living in the ‘here and now,’ enjoying the simplest things. Whatever is happening now is what matters. As the illustrations with Tansy indicate, the dog’s capacities for embodiment and presence are an invaluable asset in the psychotherapy and counselling process. They seem to initiate bodily presence in the human, encourage the human being to enter the here and now moment, and facilitate a reduction in ruminations about the past and worry about the future.

What is it that glues packs together? We-ness, touch, unconditional regard, acceptance. As we saw with the couple above, inclusivity was less relevant for Tansy because she saw them as a pack and therefore, from her viewpoint, not isolated. I am reminded of the regard of the first

universe, universal matrix of identity. When clients arrive, the dog offers unconditional regard. It is an interesting thing as to whether they accept it or not. A mature dog is already accepted, but does the client wish to be accepted? Tansy seems to have taken on the idea she is the lead auxiliary for pack inclusion.

When Tansy and I look into each other's eyes there is mutuality, a positive tele. I feel love to her and I experience unconditional regard, which I term devotion, from her. I reckon that as we gaze into each other's eyes, we are recreating the first relationship, the experience of the infant and significant others at the stage between the universal matrix of all identity and the stage of the double. I notice that she almost always lies and positions herself so that eye contact is easy and accessible. It makes sense that she continues this pattern of behaviour with the humans she meets in my room.

She is enacting 'the pack'. Because she is an 'eye' dog, this may also be associated with her breeding and basic instincts. However, she has also lived most of her 12 years 'in being' with me. It is not surprising that we have adapted to each other in ways that are mutually beneficial. When I see dogs interacting together at the dog park and other places, I notice that they mostly stay in touch with one another, to have contact, to live as a pack.

Pack requires reciprocal touch. Tansy and I do this through our eyes a lot of the time and I think this has a positive impact on clients. They can receive the gaze from a non-threatening other, which enables them to experience themselves as not alone, belonging, as part of a clan. If I am open to it, Tansy's movements may provide me with wisdom for my assessment and interventions, particularly with clients who are bereft, lonely, lost in their inner worlds, developmentally somewhere between the universal matrix and the stage of the double. For those who feel isolated much of the time, and for fearful children, this assists the warm-up to the therapeutic relationship. In other words, we might have to consider that we are creating a pack for therapy to be effective.

In regard to Moreno's stages of human development, there is a pack rather than a social atom, a 'we' identity rather than an 'I' identity. While a dog may develop an 'I' identity, the 'we' identity remains more prominent. The centrality of the social and cultural atom in psychodrama theory and practice highlights how the 'I' and 'We' identity is in flow and flux. When working with an individual, the social aspect is always present. And when working with the group, the individual has presence.

Moreno (1959) says that people cannot role reverse with animals. It is worthwhile to consider the dog's eye view and to make use of her

responses which may act as guides in our understanding of the people we work with. There is potentially greater physicality and less complexity here than the webs of inter-relationships that humans are born into and continue to co-create with significant others. As I do with Tansy, we can make use of the dog's responses to guide us in our understanding of the clients with whom we work, especially if a client is at a similar developmental stage. This perspective might assist the client's movement from the matrix of all identity to the stage of the double.

Clearly, in my observations, when people feel positive tele towards a dog, the dog seems able to easily recognize a reciprocal telic positivity and become a tuned-in auxiliary. The dog is invariably pleased to see a human being. It never lies, teases, judges, criticizes, manipulates or bears a grudge. Dogs are not a sexual threat. Thus, for people who experience the world and other people as unfriendly or hostile, a dog can provide an alternate means of connection and a first step on the journey to healing, intimacy and encounter.

Of course, this is not just about dogs. The world is full of tuned-in auxiliaries. What if we started to notice them?



*take the hand/paw
of the strange dog in you
dance with the dog star
let the pack cradle you

and feel
in the soft breeze
a stirring

go now
and smell
life*

Reference

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