



## The Smell of Freedom

*By Pat Blocker, CPDT-KA*

I recently saw a cartoon depicting a man walking a dog, but they weren't walking. The dog was frozen at the end of the lead intently sniffing. The cartoon was captioned, "SNIFFARI: A short walk turned into a grueling interminable trek by a hound intent on sniffing at absolutely EVERYTHING."<sup>1</sup>

I chuckled knowingly, but was saddened to think anyone might actually feel this way about walking a dog. In fact, I never say I'm walking my dogs. I say I'm walking *with* my dogs. The cartoon reflects our failure to recognize that dogs and humans experience walks differently. Humans perceive our world primarily through sight. Dogs "see" their world with their noses. It's sad to observe someone jerking their dog's leash, saying, "C'mon!" every time the dog stops to sniff. Dogs collect olfactory information with their noses like we gather information from reading. Imagine someone stopping you every 2 seconds saying, "C'mon" as you read this article.

Walks aren't the only times that dog and human viewpoints diverge. Dogs reside in our custody and we often afford them little choice or autonomy in life. It's unfair to expect dogs to live in the human world without helping them understand it. We can do so by defining boundaries, setting rules, and offering large doses of compassion and empathy. Imagine yourself dropped onto an alien planet. You don't speak the language nor do you understand the culture. You have a caretaker who seems nice enough, but he's barking commands at you, expecting you to act appropriately, and to obey the rules of this unfamiliar culture. He is frustrated when you're sometimes frightened or confused. You're not allowed to be yourself. You're labeled "ill behaved."

Why allow dogs to be dogs? Other than being compassionate toward another sentient being, allowing a dog her natural behavior makes her happier. A happier dog tends to be "better behaved" and easier to live with.

Science and advocacy brings us substantial advances in animal welfare. The UK's Farm Animal Welfare Council first developed The Five Freedoms in 1965. They are globally recognized as the gold standard in animal welfare, encompassing both the mental and physical wellbeing of animals.

The Five Freedoms:

1. Freedom from hunger and thirst by ready access to fresh water and diet to maintain health and vigor.
2. Freedom from discomfort by providing an appropriate environment including shelter and a comfortable resting area.

3. Freedom from pain, injury or disease by prevention or rapid diagnosis and treatment.
4. Freedom to express normal behavior by providing sufficient space, proper facilities and company of the animal's own kind.
5. Freedom from fear and distress by ensuring conditions and treatment, which avoid mental suffering.

I'll assume readers here want more for their beloved dogs than the bare bones of The Five Freedoms. So let's focus on Freedom #4: enhancing dogs' lives by letting them express normal behavior. More specifically, sniffing.

Sniffing is highly important and enjoyable to dogs. Research even suggests that sniffing causes dogs to think more positively<sup>2</sup>. Let's make walks about the dog by providing sufficient space and freedom to (safely) sniff. Walks needn't become an experience of sensory deprivation. Dogs must be afforded the chance to obtain vital information and move naturally from one intriguing scent to the next.

Given their freedom, dogs spend roughly a third of their time sniffing. So what *are* they sniffing? Mostly, dogs like to sniff other dogs' urine. It's an instrument of communication. It conveys news such as who has been there, when they were there, reproductive status, gender, and perhaps emotional states. We've always heard that urinating means a dog is marking his territory. Some urination may be just that, but dogs pee for other reasons such as masking the odor of another dog or to ensure their scent is the one most noticeable.

Allowing dogs to sniff is an obvious way to let dogs be themselves. Because scent is of such great importance to dogs, let's go a step further and ponder other ways we may be inadvertently restricting a dog's olfactory world.

Knowing that dogs communicate with one another through odor, we might reflect on how their individual scent is a part of their identity. Grooming products that wash away or cover up a dog's unique scent may affect communication with other dogs.

Considering a dog's highly sensitive nose, we should be aware that they might experience olfactory overload. Take into account that smells are stimulating to dogs and overexposure to strong smells may inhibit their ability to recognize other odors of significance.

I'm not saying never bathe your dog or burn incense in your home. Just be mindful of your dog's olfactory sensitivity, use good judgment...and accompany your dog on regular Sniffaris.

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<sup>1</sup> Cartoon attributed to "Rich."

<sup>2</sup> *Let me sniff! Nosework induces positive judgment bias in pet dogs* published in the journal *Applied Animal Behaviour Science*.