

*Lessons from my dogs*  
*Socratic Dialogue with Dogs*

In *The Meno*, Plato asks the question “Can virtue be taught?” Without ever formally instructing Meno’s slave, Socrates asks him a series of questions revealing that knowledge is innate, a thing within us. Of the boy he says, “he already has the questions in his soul.” Socrates’ idea of *anamnesis*, that the knowledge within us all is simply “recollected” by the soul through proper inquiry, is one about which I’ve given much thought. Those of us who live with animals know for certain that these beings, different from us in some ways yet similar in others, are our superiors when it comes to emotional intelligence. By emotional intelligence I mean the heart’s intelligence, that ancient wisdom which has been all but squelched in our age of reason and, more recently, this age of split-second technology.

A long-time fan of Plato’s and his mentor, a man who died for his beliefs, Socrates, I decided to forgo the virtue issue, because the idea of virtue is different for different beings. For instance, stealing a plate of food from someone’s table may seem wrong in our moral sphere, but to Sasha and Chance, what could be more virtuous? In fact, in Sasha’s world this might well be the ultimate virtue.

I decided instead to see if wisdom was innate and if I could telepathically connect with my dogs and receive a daily dose of their intuitive understanding of the world. Thus started my practice of Socratic dialogue with my dogs.

I began with Sasha.

“Sasha,” I said. “What do you think is the meaning of life?”

She stared into my eyes, not used to the direct nonverbal connection. “Well, “ she hesitated. “I’ve been thinking a lot about that ice cream we ate in the summer.”

“Oh...” I had never considered that perhaps ice cream was the meaning of life. I formulated another question in my mind then “sent” it to her telepathically, reinforcing it by asking aloud, “What do you think about most of the time, Sasha?”

“Well, I think about food a lot.”

This got me thinking about my own situation and my propensity to spend unusually large portions of the day thinking about what I was going to eat for lunch or dinner and then preparing it.

“Yeah?” I said looking at her. “What kind—” But before I could finish, her face took on a dreamy expression and she continued:

“Those biscuits you gave us last week were really good. Are there more? And the cream puffs...”

“*Cream puffs?*” While I may have indulged myself in a few too many sweets over the years, I had never fed my dogs cream puffs. Even as I allowed them the occasional frozen yogurt, I was conscious to feed them healthy food, real foods.

“And Tastee-Freez,” Sasha added.

“*What?*” This was too much. I had never... but then I remembered. In a moment of weakness and nervousness, while Chance and Flash were having their teeth cleaned, Sasha and I had hit the Tastee-Freez. I had done it mostly for her because, being a bit over the weight limit required to travel in the cabin to France, she had never been allowed to fly, while Flash and Chance had each been overseas several times. Now perhaps I realized that dear Sasha was equating soft ice cream with our special times together.

Times when (although she was not in Paris eating baguettes and 465 different cheeses) she and I shared special happy outing unique unto the two of us...something as special as eating ice cream together in the truck. I also realized quickly that I could never lie around the dogs...the truth, even those truths I may have wished buried, would come out sooner or later. I turned my full attention on her.

“Okay, perhaps in the summer we could go back to the Tastee Freez.” And you’d have thought I just gave her the greatest gift on earth.

With Sasha in soft ice cream bliss I turned next to Chance. But before I could formulate a question she pushed her body up against me like a cat, so uncharacteristic of self-contained and independent Chance. “I miss Flash as much as you do.”

The tears came to my eyes then, and for a moment I couldn’t speak. But I didn’t need to speak because she remained standing up against me and I knew then that that was why she was there.

“Thank you Chance. Thank you so much,” I managed at last. When the sorrow passed I sent her a wave of light from my heart the way my friend Amelia Kinkade had taught me to do.

“Chance...what do you think is the meaning of life?”

She stretched, then walked partially away from me, turned back toward me and sat down directly before me and “spoke.”

I paraphrase as I interpret what she said to me on that day: “Maybe the meaning is no more than this. To sit on a beautiful day of the year—any day at all, for any day is a good day to be a dog—and to be with the ones you love, missing and feeling with all of your heart those around you and those who have gone on before, paving the way for us to follow into the next world. To sit and converse, though without the need for words. The meaning of life is as simple as love. Loving where you are, loving whom your with, loving yourself, and even loving the whole world. I do most of the time. Now can we go for a walk?”

And with that I stood up, wiped at my eyes and face and called them both forth to walk beneath the trees and great blue sky while the sun sparkled down its tentative light. Maybe the meaning of life was no more than a gentle walk in the late-afternoon light with a few four-legged friends you can trust and love.

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