

## [Transcript] Conversations / Seeing the world through a dog's eyes

ABC Listen.

Podcasts, radio, news, music, and more.

During the COVID pandemic, so many people I know were so utterly thankful for the presence of a dog in their lives, for the dog's companionship and steadfastness, and for the joy the dog brought into their lives.

Because dogs are the world's great enthusiasts.

They remind us how good it can feel to caper around in the surf, to feel the wind in your face, and to make a huge mess while enjoying a meal.

Dogs were the first animals to become domesticated, to throw their lot in with us humans.

They've evolved from wolfish creatures to become much more companionable and responsive to human needs.

So much so that you sometimes hear owners say that dogs are the best people.

Even when their doggy behaviour might not be hugely social or hygienic or good for the garden.

Laura Viseritas is here.

Laura is a dog behaviourist.

She has qualifications in both animal behaviour and human psychology,

because people are quite strange

and they can quite often behave in strange ways around their dogs, without ever realising how responsible they might be for their dog acting out.

Which is why Laura believes that changing dog behaviour so often starts with changing human behaviour.

Laura is the author of several books, including Dognitive Therapy,

and you might have seen her on the ABC TV series New Leash on Life.

Hi, Laura. Hello.

What kind of animals have you got at home with you at the moment?

A variety, my friend.

I've got three dogs, a cache and two goats at present, plus a whole bunch of wild birds that come and like to have breakfast with us every morning.

Now, these goats, are they rescue goats, and is there such a thing? Of course.

Yes, I did rescue these two goats.

I thought, being on a couple of acres,

why wouldn't you have goats if you were on a couple of acres

a few years ago?

And I had this crazy idea that I would like to rescue them and bring them home.

There were a couple of adult goats that came on a little truck through a rescue organisation that rescued farm animals.

And Elsa and Everest became two critical members of my family, so much so that I couldn't keep them away from me.

They form incredible bonds with you if you're kind to them.

And so what I've had to do to stop them from eating everything around my house, I've had to fence myself in and they've got the rest of the property.

I tried to fence them at, like, create a paddock, but they're like, no, no, we're not going to go with that.

So I fence myself in and they have free range of the rest of the property.

And do these animals keep to themselves or do they interact?

All of my animals, they definitely interact.

One of my rescue dogs loves to show an attempt to herd the goats and the goats think he's an idiot.

The cat loves to be involved with everything that we do.

If I go out in the garden, she's out there with the three dogs and the two goats and we're all out there together like some kind of crazy snow white.

But they all have a really healthy respect for each other and they have the freedom to be themselves and make their own choices within limitations.

And it's quite peaceful, actually, living with each other, I'd have to say.

So I get quite excited about that because you see those YouTube videos of a cat lying, sleeping sort of half across a dog and you think cats and dogs can get along.

There is a better world that can be had.

Yeah, if you can make that happen, anything is possible.

The world peace is possible if they can get along.

Now you have this dog, Chester.

Tell me about Chester.

Oh, gosh.

Chester is without a doubt the love of my life.

He's a 14 and a half year old Stafford Shibbultaria.

And from the day I met him to this moment,

I have been completely dedicated to his health and happiness.

He's my first adult dog.

## [Transcript] Conversations / Seeing the world through a dog's eyes

And even though I've always been around animals  
and they've been an imperative part of my life,  
he was the first sentient being  
that I was completely responsible for.  
And I remember meeting him at the age of nine weeks.  
And I was just completely in awe  
by this little creature that had no say, no choice  
whether he came home with me or not,  
what his future was and it all completely depended on  
who I was going to be for him.  
So I've pretty much changed my career.  
I've done everything I can to be able to offer him  
and inspire other people to be able to offer their dogs  
the best possible life that they can.  
I remember talking to the Australian journalist,  
Kate Jennings, many years ago,  
and she wrote a book about the dog that came into her life.  
And she'd been kind of this hard-bitten journalist.  
She'd written about financial misbehavior  
and Wall Street, that kind of thing.  
But when she met this little dog,  
it was a love at first sight.  
And even her talking about it,  
she could see this explosion of joy and love  
went off in her head at first sight with that dog.  
Do you get that feeling with dogs?  
And have you had that with your Steffie?  
Yeah, oh, confession time.  
I do look at him a lot.  
And tell him how beautiful he is and how incredible he is.  
And we do have this ability to communicate without words.  
And, you know, whether it's his eyes looking into mine  
or the way he leans against me  
or how I can read what he wants through his body language,  
it's a really close relationship.  
And it's the longest relationship I've ever had.  
It's 14 and a half years.  
And the best 14 and a half years of my life, that's for sure.  
So I do look at dogs,  
and I see so many incredibly beautiful traits  
that we spend billions of dollars  
in our entire lifetime trying to acquire  
and to become, you know, more loyal,  
more in the moment, more mindful, more resilient,

## [Transcript] Conversations / Seeing the world through a dog's eyes

more forgiving, more grateful,  
all these sorts of things that dogs  
are just already doing every single day.  
So I do take a leaf out of their book  
and try to be as much like them as I possibly can.  
As a behaviourist, how do you gauge  
what a dog might be thinking or feeling?  
Well, I think the first thing is to know  
that you probably won't know for sure,  
but what you can do is ask a whole bunch of questions  
with that dog by sitting back  
and observing their body language.  
So seeing what they're looking at,  
how they're responding to things,  
what their tail is doing,  
how their ears are moving,  
can you see a white part of their eye?  
Have they licked their nose?  
Are they yawning?  
Is their body shaking?  
There's a whole range of different things  
that a dog will do  
that's communicating with you  
what their emotional state is,  
and they're doing it all the time.  
So a lot of people will think,  
well, I didn't know how my dog was feeling  
or it just happened out of the blue.  
There was no warning,  
but usually if we learn to become attuned  
to the really subtle signs that dogs give us,  
there's so many of them  
and they are letting us know what's going on  
in their heads and their hearts all the time.  
When Chester is anxious,  
do you look for all kinds of different things?  
Like the anxiety,  
what the root cause of the anxiety might be,  
which could be illness as much as anything?  
Absolutely.  
I mean, he's a very sensitive soul,  
so sometimes I'll create a video for social media  
and I'll have the camera in my face  
and he's there with me

## [Transcript] Conversations / Seeing the world through a dog's eyes

and he'll look at the camera  
and I'm talking to something  
that doesn't exist from his point of view.  
He's, what on earth is going on here?  
And he'll start to yawn, all lick his lips,  
and I'll know that he's uncomfortable  
and he's relieving a bit of stress  
because he doesn't know what I'm doing,  
so I'll just stop and we'll chill out  
and we'll do something else.  
And I think because I've,  
I mean, this is what I do for a living,  
but because I am so aware of their inner thoughts  
and feelings, I can act upon those  
and prevent them from being in stressful environments  
whenever and wherever I possibly can,  
which makes for harmony and peace.  
How attuned are they to human feelings and human emotions?  
They do seem very attuned,  
or is that just us projecting stuff onto them?  
Probably a bit of both.  
I think we do project a lot onto our dogs.  
I think we expect a lot from them.  
I think we expect them to be our children,  
our best friends and our protectors  
and all these sorts of different things.  
I think they're very attuned to us  
in a range of different ways,  
probably for a couple of reasons.  
One is because they need us to survive,  
so they need to know what our behaviours are  
and what our patterns are.  
And also we've shaped that.  
We've selected for a dog to follow us around,  
to become an amazing companion,  
to want to know how we're feeling  
so that they can comfort us.  
So we, over 10, 15,000 years,  
have purposely selected for particular characteristics  
of a dog to be able to be the very best friend  
we could possibly ever imagine.  
We've kind of manufactured that into a domestic dog.  
In the ancient world, dogs are famously watchful,  
like Cerberus, the dog, the guards,

it sits there attentively.

I suppose over time that watchfulness for danger has also become a watchfulness for emotional instability or unhappiness in humans as well. That's a really good point.

I think they are so incredibly intuitive and perceptive of their surroundings and we are a huge part of their surroundings.

We are their survival, in essence.

So if there's something that may threaten their survival, if we're unwell, if we're volatile or unpredictable or we put them in situations that are dangerous to them, if they're not getting food, if they don't have access to water or shelter, all those things that they need, they can be on guard and become anxious and protective of their resources.

So that can be one of the reasons why dogs do show anxious behaviors like aggression or resource guarding because they're not able to feel that they can, being in control of their environment like they need to.

I think control is really important to us as humans.

If we're not in control, we become very anxious and fearful and the same thing applies to dogs.

It took a long while for scientists to accept that dogs or animals have emotional lives, which is something people who live alongside animals knew all along, of course.

Good old science.

Good old science.

I can't quite tell whether dogs are emotionally simple creatures or emotionally complex because they are capable of living in the moment.

Their joy, their joie de vivre, is something that's really so apparent and so all-encompassing. It seems simple.

I didn't even know if it even makes sense to talk about emotions in that way as well.

What's your sense of that, Laura, whether their emotional lives are complex or simple?

I think our emotional lives are unnecessarily complex in that we exist in a world that is full of stimuli that puts pressures on us that are unachievable, unrealistic, depressing, anxiety-provoking,

## [Transcript] Conversations / Seeing the world through a dog's eyes

a whole range of things we are faced with all the time  
and now more than ever.

So, for us... This is the hell we've built for ourselves.

Well, yes, for some reason, we want this.

I know, in fact, we want people to stop listening to this right now  
and just stand out and feel the sunshine on your face  
or the breeze on your face or whatever.

Indeed, and I think that those sorts of things that dogs do...

I mean, they don't have access to the cognition that we have  
to be able to create a world like this.

If they did, I don't know if they would do the same thing,  
but I think their processes  
and their ability to understand how the world works  
is simpler than ours.

Not because I don't think they're intelligent  
or as able to do things as we are.

I think they've got different skills  
and different talents compared to us.

And I think, for me, when I look at a dog,

I see them as an equal

because I may have an intellect superior to theirs,

but they have the ability to sniff out cancer,

and I don't have that ability.

So, the relationship that we have with them is really special.

And we have the capacity to be able to learn so much more  
from them, I believe, than they're learning from us.

About seven or eight years ago, I was in the city of...

Oh, nine years ago, I was in the city of Istanbul  
with my son, who was 14 at the time.

And we were staying in Sultanahmet,  
the old part of the city, near the Hajar Sophia.

And one morning we got up,  
and right in the middle of this cobblestone crossroads,  
there was a dog lying, a huge dog,  
lying right in the middle of this crossroads.

And I just felt my heart leap,  
and I told my son to stay back as I was going to look,  
because clearly the dog had been hit by a car.

Oh, God.

And so I came up to the dog to sort of see if it was all right.

It was fine.

It was just basking.

And Istanbul's a city which has given itself over  
to cats and dogs.

## [Transcript] Conversations / Seeing the world through a dog's eyes

It reveres cats and dogs so much,  
just like, well, if the dog wants to bask in it,  
why would you upset that?  
Why would you stop the dog from doing that?  
And then the cats and dogs do this thing for us.  
They teach us how to live in the moment, as you say.  
So what's their sense of time like, I wonder?  
Because they have memory as well, of course.  
Absolutely.  
It's so interesting you say that, you know,  
that they're so highly revered there.  
And my side note, my sister just got back from India,  
and she was saying that most people over there  
don't have dogs as pets,  
but the dogs that exist in the towns aren't anxious.  
They're quite relaxed.  
They all just sort of coexist with the people and each other,  
and the mental health of the dogs is far different  
to what it is here in Western society,  
where you've got these neurotic dogs  
and these dogs that can't be left alone for five minutes.  
It's just phenomenal.  
Anyway, that was a side note.  
Another thing in Istanbul is,  
they have this recycling scheme they put in.  
They have these kind of big recycling sort of hoppers,  
and they're encouraging people to learn  
how to recycle plastic bottles.  
By any time you put the plastic bottle in the thing,  
it shoots out a little bit of cat food or dog food.  
Yeah, I've seen that.  
Because that will motivate people  
to do something kind for dogs.  
It will be this kind of reinforcing behaviour.  
Yeah. It's a whole different kind of culture.  
Isn't that exactly right?  
It's a reinforcing behaviour.  
You get a sense of goodness out of doing a behaviour.  
Yeah, for that.  
So what is their sense of time, though?  
Time.  
I mean, I don't even know what our sense of time is.  
I think we're constantly perplexed by time.  
We're always living in the past or the future in our heads.



## [Transcript] Conversations / Seeing the world through a dog's eyes

We're remembering something that happened  
that we're happy about or not happy about,  
and anticipating what's going to happen  
five minutes a day from now.  
It's so true.  
Those are so arbitrary,  
whereas the now is all we have,  
and that's all we can prove that we have  
is right now.  
I think dogs do remember.  
I think they remember.  
And dogs can have PTSD.  
If they've had really traumatic pasts,  
they can remember different types of stimuli  
that elicit those sorts of fears and anxieties,  
particularly dogs that are rescue dogs.  
I think they can predict things  
within a certain time frame.  
And an example that I have right now  
that I can think of is my dog Chester.  
He knows when it's time to eat, to the minnish.  
So, and daylight savings really messes up our routine  
because it takes us back an hour during winter.  
So he will, at 3 p.m., it's got to be dinner time.  
And probably about 10 to three, he'll start whimpering,  
and he'll start walking to the kitchen and coming back.  
And honestly, and I'm not making this up,  
it is to the minute that he's in that kitchen expecting,  
inconsolably expecting his dinner, honestly.  
And he cannot cope if it's not there past,  
just at three o'clock.  
So it's like ABC News.  
It's one of the things that's going to happen  
absolutely on the dot, right?  
He does, he tells you the time.  
It's three o'clock and it's dinner time.  
And he does the weather and he does the news  
and it's dinner time.  
So I definitely think they can predict things.  
I think they're influenced by the sun,  
by the weather, by the atmosphere, by your behaviors.  
And I think one of the many things I love about dogs  
is they're so, as I was saying before,  
so intuitive of our behaviors that they know

## [Transcript] Conversations / Seeing the world through a dog's eyes

what we're doing even before we know it.  
You know, are we getting up off the couch?  
Have we just tapped our computer a little bit more  
or have we gotten up to get a cup of coffee?  
Have we changed our shoes?  
Have we gone to the bathroom?  
All those little things probably are little predictors  
of what's to come next.  
So they're always looking out for what we're doing  
because we're telling them what the future is,  
if that makes sense.  
So they're trying to alongside us,  
but about half a step ahead of us.  
Mentally, I think so, yeah.  
Dogs are the first of the domesticated animals.  
They've got a head start on cats by many thousands of years,  
I think.  
What are some of the ways that dogs have changed,  
adapted to living alongside humans  
over the 14,000 or so years that they've been...  
It's a long time.  
...living alongside us, yeah.  
I think, I mean, there's so many theories  
as to how dogs became domesticated.  
Do we domesticate them or did they domesticate themselves?  
I think back 14,000 years ago,  
we formed a relationship with dogs that was symbiotic.  
I think they got the scraps.  
They got protection.  
We got protection.  
There may have been hunting partners.  
There may have been a good blanket to lie beside  
in terms of their fur.  
And I think, over time,  
this relationship forged into something  
that was more and more and more beneficial  
in which we then learned how to capture behaviours,  
reinforce behaviours,  
and they reinforced behaviours from us  
by getting food for doing work.  
Over time, we've slowly created this friendship  
that is remarkable.  
And yet we are the only species on Earth  
that has purposely created friendships

## [Transcript] Conversations / Seeing the world through a dog's eyes

from another species,  
which I find fascinating within itself.  
But now I find it interesting because, you know,  
thousands of years ago,  
our relationships were very different to what they are now.  
We needed them back then for different reasons.  
We need them now for very different reasons, too, I think.  
I think we have a lot of expectations for them  
to live up to being the best person.  
You know, dogs are the best people.  
That's a lot of pressure to put on a dog  
because that's lots of things that we want them to be able to do  
to fulfil our needs that they just physically and emotionally can't do.  
Yeah, does it mean to ask them to be the best people?  
They have to deny something that's essentially doggie  
about their natures.  
Yeah, and there's so much in my line of work,  
behaviour problems,  
there's a huge number of issues that we have with dogs' behaviour  
that actually aren't even problems.  
They're just dogs being dogs.  
You know, dogs bark.  
Dogs do jump up, dogs do scratch,  
dogs do pull and lead to get closer to that urine  
that they wanted to sniff on that, you know, tree that was urinated on yesterday.  
They dig they wee, they poo, they do the whole thing.  
They've got to do all that because we do as well.  
We have our own interests and hobbies and enrichment.  
We go to work, most of us.  
We have friends and family that we can choose to invite into our home.  
We have ability to access resources at the click of a button.  
Dogs don't have any of that.  
They have to completely rely on us  
and then they have to live up to our expectations as well.  
So they've got to stop doing all those normal doggie behaviours  
and at the same time be more like us,  
even though we're not consistent with those expectations anyway.  
So dogs are down if they do, down if they don't.  
And that's why, you know,  
we've got six and a half million dogs in this country now post-COVID.  
But there are more dogs in pounds than there have ever been.  
What is it that makes humans behaviour in such a silly manner  
around dogs, in particular, like put on silly voices,  
behaviour in silly ways?

## [Transcript] Conversations / Seeing the world through a dog's eyes

I mean, we don't do that for horses or for goldfish, do we?

I don't know. Maybe some people do.

I think that two things.

I think one reason is because you can say anything to a dog and they'll never laugh at you.

They'll never roll their eyes at you.

They'll never tell on you.

They'll never think you're an idiot.

They'll still follow you and want to be around you.

And so for you to be silly and, you know, dance like no one's watching or dance like a dog is watching, it's the same thing.

It's very much an essence of freedom, I think, being around a dog and being yourself.

I think also dogs do sort of serve that companion baby role for a lot of people.

And we have intentionally what we call neotomized dogs.

So we have shaped dogs over 10 or so thousand years to be perpetual toddlers.

Yeah, they're like anime creatures more and more.

They are. Yeah, we've selected for the cute puppy dog eyes, the neediness, the companionship, you know, all those sorts of things that...

The snout gets shorter and shorter and becomes like a button nose.

Oh, yes, yes.

In fact, the domestic dog over this period of time has developed eyebrow muscles to be able to express their facial expressions more effectively so they can manipulate us with their puppy dog eyes.

And we know that because wolves don't have those eyebrow muscles, whereas domestic dogs do.

So even those sorts of things over 10,000 years, and which is a very short time in terms of evolution, we have created an endlessly needy companion.

But they can't be too much of a dog.

They have to be sort of, you know, more of a human, but still super cute and still, you know, dependent.

And so I suppose, you know, that sort of cute voice that we give to our dogs is expecting them to be that baby character.

Oh, I think that's definitely true.

I mean, you know, my wife and I, kids, they're now much older, they're not babies, not by a long shot anymore.

## [Transcript] Conversations / Seeing the world through a dog's eyes

And having a pet in the house allows you to bring that side out and you again, enjoyed singing silly songs and being sort of... And doting, a doting side of yourself that you can't... Kids when they become teenagers absolutely will not let you indulge in, of course. That's so true. And do you feel it's nice to be needed throughout that whole time? Like, they never not need you. And so I think, you know, lots of empty nesters are people who don't have children or, you know, everything in between to have a dog that continuously is dependent upon you throughout their entire life. It does have social benefits, I think, to a lot of people. Whether or not it has benefits to the dog, however, I'm not sure. I'm always thinking of dogs as creatures that are always looking up to their owners' faces, in a way the cats absolutely never do. And if they do, you've got to be worried. Yeah, that's right. Like, if they do, that's more like, are you still here? That's the thing that's going on. I thought I told you to wait in the car. That's the type of thing. Touch me with your eyes. Yeah, but dogs are constantly attentive to us. Did you have that childhood growing up around a whole lot of animals, like the way you live now, Laura? I did, yeah. I had all sorts of different animals when we were... When I was a child growing up, my mum is a hopeless animal lover and a huge empath. And anything that walked up the driveway stayed. Usually animals. Dogs, cats, what else did we have? We had rescued cows, we had horses, we had a lot of horses. Geese, we couldn't... We had geese, which, if you know anything about geese, are incredibly territorial. So most of the year, every year for many years, we couldn't access our front door because that's where they chose to nest. What happens if you get in the goose's territory? Well, if you do, and we tried two months with an umbrella

## [Transcript] Conversations / Seeing the world through a dog's eyes

to protect ourselves, that umbrella lasted about 30 seconds.

What happened to it?

We never used the front door ever again.

What, it savaged the umbrella?

Yes, savaged the umbrella.

The dogs were terrified of the geese.

They're furiously territorial,  
particularly when they've got young.

So sorry, how does a goose chew up an umbrella  
with its beak on its claws?

They've got this serrated teeth,  
but they've got this serrated beak that,  
seriously, don't mess with the goose, my friend.

If you see a goose chasing you,  
run as fast as you can in the opposite direction.

LAUGHTER

Animal behaviorist advice.

And did you have horses around you as well?

We did, yeah.

My dad owned a horse racing transport company,  
and we had a lot of horses.

Horses were a huge part of our lives.

We didn't have any winning horses,  
but they were the ones that didn't succeed,  
ended up living out their lives with us.

So I guess you could say a lot of them were rescue horses.

And my mum's a huge horse-riding fanatic,  
and she was always involved in that,  
and would always drag me along with this little old rescue pony  
to the shows to try and get a ribbon,  
which I occasionally got,  
and I absolutely hated riding horses,  
but mum really wanted me to be heavily involved in that.

Yeah, I was wondering, like,  
the equestrian world has its own powerful lure,  
like the doggie world does, as well as the canine world does.  
Oh, yes.

Horse people are a different species,  
and dog people are a different species.

We're all a bit mad in our own way.

You stand on different sides of the room at parties  
and stare at each other. Yeah, pretty much.

Yeah, so, yeah, there were lots of animals in my life,  
and I look back at it at the time when I was younger.

## [Transcript] Conversations / Seeing the world through a dog's eyes

You know, it was a bit of a madhouse, to be honest,  
and I went to this private girls' school,  
and all my friends were so...  
Their lives were so different to mine,  
and I remember when I was little being a little bit embarrassed  
about the way that I lived with my family and the animals,  
but all my friends loved it, because it was so novel.  
But then I look back at it now and think I was such a privilege  
to be around all these creatures  
that all wanted to be part of the family,  
even though they weren't human.  
You had cows. Were they rescue cows?  
And is there such a thing? Of course.  
They were rescue cows?  
One day, my mum, her friend, and myself,  
when I was probably about seven or eight,  
went to a market, an animal market,  
and it was at that point that I realised  
where those calves were going on those trucks,  
and I had a massive meltdown and was just inconsolable,  
and so my gorgeous mum and her friend ended up taking those two calves  
that we'd happened upon when I learned what their fate would be  
when we took them home.  
So I guess they're rescue calves, and they grew up in the paddock.  
Rosie and Daisy were their names,  
and they lived out their lives with us.  
Just another couple of animals, as mum would say,  
what's another one, Laura? We'll just have another one.  
And I like that now as well.  
You know, we've got a little bit of space on the couch.  
We could probably have another one.  
Did it mean your friends were animals then?  
I don't suppose you need human friends  
if you're surrounded by so many animals, or is that not the case?  
For me, when I was a kid, Richard, I was quite shy and introverted,  
and I had siblings, but they were half-siblings,  
and they were all a lot older than me,  
so a lot of the time I was kind of on my own.  
So I spent a lot of time with the animals,  
huge amounts of time with the animals,  
and being so introverted and shy,  
that was very much my comfort space,  
because you don't have to talk to animals.  
You don't have to impress them or communicate with them verbally.

## [Transcript] Conversations / Seeing the world through a dog's eyes

You can just be, and they're OK with that.  
And that was really lovely for me.  
Did you get a rich fantasy life?  
Because dogs will also hear your fantasy stories  
and be outplay actors in whatever fantasy you might want to come up with.  
Oh, yeah, I'd get on the imaginary stage and dress them up,  
and sometimes my friends would come over and we'd create a circus,  
and we'd put little tutus around the dog's bellies,  
and they'd just tolerate it.  
I would never do that now, but back then,  
that was just a glorious time to be alive.  
You're listening to Conversations with Richard Fidler.  
Hear more Conversations any time on the ABC Listen app.  
Or go to [abc.net.au slash Conversations](http://abc.net.au/slash/Conversations).  
You were talking about growing up on this property as a kid  
with your family and all these animals,  
different kinds of animals all over the place.  
Your dad became ill after a while.  
What do you remember of that time, him getting ill?  
Dad had brain cancer when I was about 10.  
And, I mean, obviously, that was a tough time for everyone.  
Being so young, though, I think,  
you don't have the understanding of finality and death  
like you do when you're an adult, of course.  
And I think my mum instinctively tried to protect me from that  
as much as she possibly could.  
So when dad was sick, for probably the best part of a year,  
he, you know, I was very much in denial, to be honest, Richard.  
I, you know, I still continue to live in this fantasy land  
in which everyone was happy,  
and everyone was going to be OK.  
And that was sort of my only reality that I could foresee  
in the futures that everything would be OK.  
And then he got, you know, really quite sick.  
And I do remember times in which I knew, I think, deep down  
that there was something very, very wrong.  
There were moments when he didn't know who I was  
and he'd call me into his bedroom  
and he would think I was his secretary from one of the places  
in his bedroom and he would think I was his secretary from work  
and he would start getting me to write things down.  
And he'd get frustrated at me because I wasn't, you know,  
writing down quick enough and things like this.  
Or times when he would speak but it was not,



## [Transcript] Conversations / Seeing the world through a dog's eyes

you couldn't understand what he was trying to say  
and he'd be in hospital a lot.  
So there were so many different little moments  
where I knew that something was very, very wrong.  
My mum and my youngest sister, who's a little older than me,  
probably copped the biggest brunt of that.  
With brain cancer, it was a rough, rough disease  
because it changes who the person is  
and who you thought you knew becomes a completely different human being.  
So I think for all of us it was tough.  
But for me it was a massive shock  
and I was about two weeks out of high school before he died.  
And then going into high school, it was something  
that I didn't want anyone to know.  
I didn't want to be different.  
I didn't want anyone to feel sorry for me.  
I was a bit embarrassed.  
So I just tried to get on with it,  
pretending that nothing had ever happened.  
It was actually probably for quite a while.  
Animals and pets particularly tend to be aware  
of when there's distress and grief in a house.  
I've actually seen that happen.  
I've seen a cat wail in the middle of a family argument at times.  
Do you remember the animals showing any awareness  
that all the animals that you were surrounded  
were showing an awareness that something was bad now,  
something terrible had happened?  
I'm sure there was.  
I don't really remember noticing anything in particular.  
I think probably, to be honest,  
most of the time that the dogs were somewhere,  
I was with them whilst Mum was talking to doctors  
or family members and friends in another room with the door closed.  
So I was out with the dogs being protected from the truth, I suppose.  
So we were all kind of perhaps oblivious  
to what was going on on the other side of the door.  
So I think for me, the animals were...  
They were very much a constant companion to me at that time.  
Once again, they were always there for me.  
I do think that when my dad died  
and I had these animals around  
because I didn't want to talk to anyone about what had happened,  
they were my biggest confidants and my best friends.

## [Transcript] Conversations / Seeing the world through a dog's eyes

And I do think that is probably what resulted in me wanting to do what I do now  
and wanting to be and work with animals  
and improve their lives as much as you possibly can.

Was that gratitude?

Because they saved...

I think they did sort of save me in a way  
in which what I mean by that is not literally,  
but just kept me going,  
kept giving me purpose and understanding and respect  
without actually having to say anything  
or talk about it or divulge my innermost traumas,  
which you do when you're older,  
but at the time it was just,  
let's keep going on.

Let's move in the moment.

It's mindful.

Whatever. That's the past.

That's the future.

Let's just go for a walk in the paddock and feed the ducks.

The dog needs to be fed at 3pm on the dot.

Oh, doesn't it ever?

Yeah, so it does remind you that this is what's important right now.

So when you finished school,  
you went to study animal science at Latrobe University.

It wasn't what you thought it was going to be.

I was such a 17-year-old back then.

I hadn't turned 18 at university yet,  
so I was one of the younger ones,  
and I don't think I was emotionally ready  
to actually care enough about studying.  
Perhaps that's an excuse, I don't know,  
but I do remember knowing that it wasn't for me  
when we had a three-hour prac one afternoon  
and because Latrobe had a farm next to it,  
some of the sheep for our, you know,  
our excisions and our sort of necropsies,  
I suppose, were just freshly killed,  
and they were still warm,  
and that for me was like,  
oh, God, this is not what I want to do.

I didn't realise at the time  
that that's not what animal science was.

It was just a part of it,  
and so I completely changed my pathway

into the most unemployable discipline imaginable,  
and that's archaeology,  
and then sort of studied a whole bunch of other things after that,  
but that was something I really enjoyed  
looking at the evolution of humanity.  
I found really fascinating how we've changed so much over time,  
and that was more my shtick, I suppose,  
rather than the dissecting animals  
that I just recently passed on.  
Yes, and how many ancient corpses have been found  
with a dog lying in the grave right beside the town?  
Yeah, many indeed.  
It's remarkable to think,  
although I think that those dogs may have been alive at the time,  
which worries me.  
Oh, of course.  
I don't think that had quite occurred to me until now.  
Yeah, but it was to take those,  
everything that you valued into the afterlife.  
What a good dog.  
What a good companion.  
Thank you.  
Oh, let's kill him now.  
Yes, yes, and move him.  
I suppose death had a very different connotation.  
Exactly, yeah.  
So what led you back into the animal world from there?  
I think it was always there.  
I think I always wanted to work with animals.  
I didn't know how and what capacity I wanted to do that.  
And it was probably when I finished archaeology  
and I ended up going, okay, can't get a job in this,  
don't really want to do a PhD in archaeology.  
So I ended up doing a grad deep in education  
and was lucky enough to work at Melbourne Zoo for 10 years.  
So I taught all the school groups  
and the university students in animal science.  
So I had that science background,  
but I had the teaching background,  
which was my bigger forte.  
And, you know, we'd have three year olds come in,  
we'd have university dental students come in,  
look at the anatomy of teeth of different species  
and do necropsies on different animals.

## [Transcript] Conversations / Seeing the world through a dog's eyes

And that was something that I loved learning about,  
not so much just animals,  
but looking at the human animal relationship  
with the people that came in to meet these animals  
and how the animals felt about that as well.

Did you get to interact with the animals  
in the zoo on a daily basis?

We did.

We mostly worked with reptiles and birds.  
I did get bitten on the bum by a wombat once.  
It was really painful.

Yes.

What, I have to ask?

It was my fault, of course.

What were you doing to, I mean,  
were you squatting near the ground or something?

I was totally asking for it.

What?

Well, obviously wombat aren't the best jumpers.

No.

So the fence was quite low  
and I was sitting on the fence talking to a group of children  
and Wattle, the gorgeous wombat, God rest her soul,  
she came up and,  
she wouldn't have thought my bottom was a carrot,  
but she might have thought it was a cabbage.

I don't know what she thought it was,  
but she got in there and chomped on and bitten the sister.

Perhaps she didn't like you.

Maybe.

Perhaps she was full of hate and rage.

Here I'm thinking it was about, you know,  
food and perhaps she just wanted to let me know  
how she really felt.

She probably just realised that, Richard.

Thank you for reminding me.

But yeah, we worked with lots of animals  
and my main passion for dogs came when I first met Chester.

Oh, okay.

So getting Chester,  
that's set you on the path to becoming a dog behaviourist?

Yeah, definitely.

Yeah.

What questions did you want to,

## [Transcript] Conversations / Seeing the world through a dog's eyes

what did you want to know about dogs?  
Everything.  
Everything.  
And the more I know about dogs  
the more I realise I barely know anything about them.  
So I've got a very long journey to go on.  
And I think as I was saying before,  
when I first met him as an adult,  
as a more mature human being,  
looking at him and knowing how much he needed me  
and knowing that he was a sentient, intelligent creature,  
I thought, God, I've got to make sure I do this properly.  
And so I went back to study.  
I did psychology.  
I've done veterinary behaviour medicine.  
I've studied and researched.  
All I do is read.  
I don't read books for fun.  
I read journals for fun.  
And that's all I think about and all I want to know  
is what do dogs need and want and how do they think?  
And we don't know,  
but we can make our best guesses through the beauty of science.  
They are aliens living right with us, right alongside us.  
They're intelligent animals that live right alongside us.  
And that old saying of George Orwell,  
sometimes the hardest thing to see is what's right in front of your nose.  
There it is.  
It's right there.  
There's this animal that's alongside us all the time  
that thinks and lives in the world very differently to us.  
Different sensory perception of the world to human beings  
and yet is right there, right alongside us.  
What's not to be fascinated about?  
Yeah.  
And they, you know, we perhaps don't notice  
that they're right in front of us, but they know that we are.  
They are so perceptive.  
And even though they see the world in a completely different way,  
the colours are different, the sense are different,  
the experience is different.  
Do you try and do that?  
Do you try and put yourself in a dog's mind  
and imagine what, how the world is to that dog

## [Transcript] Conversations / Seeing the world through a dog's eyes

with that powerful sense of smell, the different sense of colour.

All of those things.

Is the world like a beautiful fragrant garden to a dog?

I don't know.

Oh, imagine the smells.

Absolutely.

I do always.

So every interaction I have with a dog,

I'm always trying to see the world through their point of view.

And I think that's the definition of empathy.

You know, to have a great relationship with someone,

you have to be empathic and think about their needs

and how they would feel if something were to happen.

But for a dog, their experiences are completely different.

So you have to double empathy yourself really in some ways.

But I think that makes us better people

because we have to be more considerate

about someone else's feelings over our own,

even if we don't understand why they feel that way.

I really enjoy watching those British doggy shows

where you've got, it's like,

they call it a dog behaviourist

because these people have got a dog.

It's behaviour in ways that they don't like.

But really, the show isn't so much about the dog's behaviour.

It's about how strange the owner is.

The dog's fine.

The dog's fine.

It's just the owner that is completely odd

and strange most of the time.

And that's really the point of fascination.

Is this why you say often, this is your dictum,

which is that to change a dog's behaviour,

you very often have to start with changing the human behaviour.

Yeah.

And that has sort of evolved a lot in my career.

I used to be about to change a dog's behaviour.

You do need to change the way the human behaves.

And I still believe that.

But what are we trying to change,

I think is a really important question for us to ask.

Why are we trying to change that dog's behaviour?

Why do we want them to stop barking or lunging at something

or scratching or digging or, you know, all these things...

Or fighting or biting, yes.

Why? Yeah.

So we may want to change those behaviours.

But first of all, we need to realise,  
well, is it a normal behaviour for the dog or not?

And if it's not a normal behaviour for the dog,  
then why is the dog feeling like that?

So for us to be able to change behaviour,  
we need to be able to change the environment for the dog,  
to change our perspective and our behaviours as well, absolutely.

But also recognise that some behaviours,  
we need to change our expectation in our behaviours  
rather than trying to change a dog's behaviour.

I'm not sure if that makes sense.

This is why you've studied human psychology, though.

I mean, obviously, this is the first principle, really.

If we've got these animals that we've bred selectively  
to be reactive to our every want and need,  
then maybe the first principle of the dog's behaviour,  
you have to look for the centre of that at the human that's around.

Yeah, absolutely.

And, you know, it's so simple yet so complicated in so many ways.

You know, you don't want your dog to table-surf  
and take things off, jump up on the table  
and take things off the table.

We'll push all the chairs in  
and make sure that they can't get access to it.

You need to change the environment for the dog  
rather than focusing on their behaviour.

Some people might correct the dog and yell at them and tell them no.

But they're just doing a very normal behaviour.

They can see foods there and they're accessing the food.

So what do you do?

You change the environment for the dog  
so that they don't have access to that.

But then you understand that what they want is food.

So you get them to do a positive behaviour to get what they want.

So call them to their mash or get them to sit  
or to make eye contact with you.

And then they get, as a valuable reward,  
is what they would have got if they had jumped up on the table  
and taken it themselves.

How much of a factor is anxiety in a dog  
as a cause for a dog quite acting out, for example?

## [Transcript] Conversations / Seeing the world through a dog's eyes

Is anxiety very often the root of that?

It's a huge part, a huge, huge, huge part.

Anxiety is a dog's inability to be able to predict their environment.

So in this world, I don't know if you've noticed, Richard, but it's very unpredictable.

It's very uncontrollable and it's very stressful for us.

For a dog, it's just tenfold

and they can't do anything about it because they depend on us.

So I think dogs are more anxious than they've ever been

because we have shaped this needy, dependent creature over 10,000 years.

But also we're not necessarily willing to provide them with what they need as a dog.

And so you get anxious dogs that have no one to understand who they are or what they're feeling.

They can't read their body language signs.

They're not acting to prevent them from being in anxious situations.

And then when a dog does act out, we correct them and tell them no.

So I think we really need to change,

in terms of human behavior change,

we need to change the way we see dogs

and the way we see dog behavior

and realize that we have brought a different species into our lives.

We need to respect that and make...

It sounds to me like you're saying that inconsistency is a real problem here.

If humans can be more consistent for their dogs, the dog will be a lot calmer.

Yeah, because consistency is predictability.

If I do that, I know that will happen.

It's caused an effect really important for dogs.

They know that if they...

A lot of my training is what's called auto-training or capturing.

So I don't ask dogs to sit or to drop or to be calm or to not pull on lead.

I capture them when they're already doing that

and mark that behavior with yes or thank you

and reward them with something that they value.

So I'm always trying to look out

for a dog offering a behavior that is desirable.

But the only way I can get those desirable emotional states

or behaviors from a dog is to create an environment

where they feel that they can do all those sorts of things.

And yet the modern world we live in, as humans,

has allowed us to drop everything



## [Transcript] Conversations / Seeing the world through a dog's eyes

and do something different at any given moment.  
It's so different from a dog that grows up on a property,  
for example, where a farmer will live and die by the clock,  
you know, get up at exactly the same time,  
do this on a routine basis.  
But modern city-dwelling humans don't live like that anymore.  
And isn't it interesting, working dogs have purpose.  
What purpose does a keroodle have in a backyard?  
Not a huge amount, really.  
When you think about they're in a busy family,  
there's three kids, they all got to go to spores.  
The dog gets put out in the backyard.  
The dog cries and whines all day  
because they're separated from their family.  
The neighbour complains that council gets called.  
The dog gets relinquished or rehomed.  
The dog hasn't done anything wrong.  
It's just that humans' lives have not allowed  
for that dog to be a part of that.  
And it's always the dog that has to pay for it.  
And I think purpose is a huge part for behaviour change.  
Dogs that don't have anything to do or think about  
or to become, in terms of having a job,  
they become frustrated, anxious,  
and sort of express their innermost turmoil  
through behaviours that we don't like.  
I'm thinking of that episode of The Simpsons.  
It's one of the earlier episodes  
where Santa's little helper is acting out very badly.  
And so Bart takes Santa's little helper,  
this greyhound, to a dog behaviourist  
who is a lot like Margaret Thatcher in the episode,  
who talks about the beauty of choke chain, she calls it,  
yanking on the choke chain to pull up a dog  
when its behaviour is not desirable.  
Was that ever a thing and is it different now?  
It was a thing, it still is a thing,  
although people like me are trying to explain to people  
that if your dog barks or lunges or does something,  
correcting the dog, just correcting the behaviour  
for a short period of time,  
you're not changing the emotional state  
or the reason why the dog's doing it.  
So you might pause the behaviour,

but next time they've shown that scary thing,  
they're either going to internalise it  
and become more and more and more stressed  
because they know they're going to get choked  
or they'll just get worse.

And then what are you going to do then?

You've already choked them with a chain.

Where do you go from there?

So when we are punishing dogs physically,  
we are putting them in environments  
that are setting them up to fail  
and we are punishing them for failing.

And to me that's not fair.

Given that you're sometimes brought in  
to help people deal with a difficult dog,  
you would very often, I would suggest,  
just while guessing, be seeing dog owners  
who are incredibly strange human beings  
who are behaving in ways that they just don't see at all.

And then is it your job to tell them,  
you know this thing you're doing,  
that this isn't great?

And do people want to hear you say that to them?

Sometimes.

Sometimes not.

It's very hard to change human behaviour  
for a dog to change.

It's often not people's priorities.

There is a small number of people  
that will invest all day every day  
into changing their dog's behaviour  
to make them feel more confident at home.

But most people, well, that's not fair.

A large number of people just  
aren't prepared to invest in  
the time and the effort.

And one of the problems is with social media  
and this whole positive punishment approach,  
it's so accessible nowadays  
for people to watch a YouTube video  
on how to change the world's most aggressive dog  
and all these sorts of things.

And you see it happen in five minutes  
with this guy doing a quick correction

and a tap of the backside and this and that,  
and it's all this amazing showmanship.  
And we don't see what happens with that dog.  
We don't ask the dog how they feel.  
We don't know anything about that relationship  
and then the YouTube video finishes.  
Whereas if you want to do it properly and ethically,  
that takes six months.  
Who's going to want to do that for six months?  
There's not a huge number of people  
that want to train dogs the right way and the fair way  
because it's so arduous.  
And is this why our pounds are full of dogs, as you say?  
One of the main reasons, yeah,  
because realistically it takes a huge amount of work  
to raise a dog.  
But also the other side of the dogs ending up in pounds  
is backyard breeding.  
That's just the most diabolical situation  
that we need to do something about.  
What do you mean?  
When I say backyard breeding, I mean bad breeding.  
There are some registered breeders that are terrible breeders.  
There are backyard breeders that try to be ethical.  
What I mean by that is people that have a number of dogs  
to breed for profit,  
not to breed to improve the line or the health  
of that particular breed or dog.  
They'll do it, sell them on an online website  
for a couple of thousand dollars  
and you make a reasonable living from it.  
You know, you can legally in different states  
have more than 10 breeding female dogs  
and you think about that,  
you probably breed them two or three times a year.  
Sometimes they probably do that more.  
And puppy is two thousand dollars each.  
It's an industry.  
And when you go to a pound  
or when you see all these dogs for sale online,  
they are almost invariably from unethical breeders.  
Why?  
Why are they going to be more likely to be handed into a pound  
than any other dog?

## [Transcript] Conversations / Seeing the world through a dog's eyes

There's a few reasons.  
They're very accessible these dogs.  
They're already online.  
They're already available.  
They're already cheaper.  
They're already free to good home.  
So people will be more likely to get a dog at a whim, I suppose.  
Also, I think it's complicated,  
but I think people who are more likely to get into this industry  
are more likely to not really care who the dog goes to.  
So the dog might be traumatised?  
Yeah, absolutely.  
And those particular people  
that aren't concerned about the welfare of that puppy  
will sell to someone else who's not really that concerned  
about the welfare of that puppy,  
who wants to just breed them to also make money.  
If you ask anyone at a shelter or a pound,  
they're just pulling their hair out,  
trying to understand why anyone would buy a dog online  
or would buy a dog from people like this.  
Pretend they've got this beautiful farm  
full of canola flowers and pastures and green fields  
and wonderful lifestyle,  
but the reality is these dogs are in cages being treated  
like you couldn't even possibly imagine.  
And we're perpetuating that by being naive  
and purchasing dogs whenever we want to.  
A couple of years ago, I had Bernie Shakeshaft on this program.  
Bernie is this wonderful man.  
He does this program called Backtrack YouthWorks,  
where in country New South Wales and elsewhere  
around Australia now,  
you gather together some at-risk kids  
and bring them to a property and put dogs with them.  
I mean, he gives each kid, assigns a dog to each kid.  
And it brings out something quite wonderful in these kids  
who've come from unstable, inconsistent home  
if they come from a home at all.  
And suddenly there's this creature there  
that accepts them instantly, doesn't judge them, wants help,  
brings out something tender in these kids,  
brings out feelings of competence and affection  
and all those sorts of things.

## [Transcript] Conversations / Seeing the world through a dog's eyes

Do we get more from dogs than they get from us in the long run?

I wonder.

Oh, I wish I could ask dogs that.

I don't know.

I think we get a huge amount of joy and purpose from dogs, and we have done that for many thousands of years.

I don't think we repaid as well.

I think we have the ability to understand how to be kind and empathetic and giving more than they do.

Yet we are more interested in what a dog can do for us.

We're always talking about how they can sniff out cats or provide therapy to us or be our companions or get us out of bed every day, give us purpose.

There's so many amazing things that dogs do.

But how often do we ask ourselves the question the other way around, what am I doing every day to make sure my dog is living his best possible life?

Because he only lives once as well.

He only gets one life.

So what am I doing to make sure that that's as good as I can possibly ever make it for him every single day?

I think that's an important question for us to ask.

Laura, it's been amazing speaking with you.

This has been such a fun conversation.

It's such a pleasure to have you on.

Thank you so much.

It's such a pleasure here too.

Thank you so much.

You've been listening to a podcast of Conversations with Richard Fidler.

For more Conversations interviews, please go to the website

[abc.net.au](http://abc.net.au)

slash Conversations.

It's Carl here.

I'm the co-host of the ABC's Short and Curly podcast.

Now at Short and Curly,

we're also big fans of Conversations,

especially the kind between kids and adults.

Around the dinner table or on long family car trips, the kinds of Conversations that get everyone thinking, debating and sharing their ideas.

In a world that's sometimes difficult to navigate for kids and for us adults,

## [Transcript] Conversations / Seeing the world through a dog's eyes

me and my co-hosts Molly Daniels  
and ethicist expert Matt Beard  
are here to help start those Conversations  
about the stuff we all face  
as we try to get through our lives the best way we know how.  
We've got a new season of shows out now  
that are sure to get the opinions flying at your place  
as we try to imagine the world without some pretty big things  
like a world without heartbreak or privacy  
or winning and losing and there's plenty more.  
You can find and follow Short and Curly on the ABC Listen app.