



Growling Monsters and Evil Eyes

A dog owner ponders the psychology of scary skateboards, hostile hats, and other oddities

by KETZEL LEVINE

It happened on a sunny Monday. Or was it a cloudy Thursday? We were in the front garden. Scratch that. We were in the car. Of one thing I'm certain: The moment was tectonic, as a fiery abyss opened beneath our feet. Our ears roared with the sound of wheels on pavement, as we descended into Skateboard Hell.

Zoe Mae, my (alleged) labradoodle companion, has always been a generally unflappable canine. She's oblivious to vacuum cleaners, bicycles, and motorcycles—all highly ranked nemeses among dogs. Unfamiliar household objects have never posed the problem they can for others. (Stories about cowboy hats and bowling balls ahead.)

But skateboards? Whoa! Not even the mail carrier could cause such apoplexy: her split-second reaction to the four-wheeled creatures, however vaguely glimpsed or heard; the lunging, leaping, and barking; the very ferocity of her outrage! Scary.

In our heavily pierced and tattooed neighborhood, skateboards swarm like mosquitoes and disrupt our lives willy-nilly, whether we're on a morning stroll or tucked in for the night. Indeed, the unpredictability of these rumbling menaces is their greatest weapon. My terror alert level is permanently tangerine.

Someone was going to get hurt, I reckoned, whether skateboarder, dog, or the middle-aged biped at the other end of the leash.

"General, we are under attack!" I recently whined to animal behaviorist Patricia McConnell, highly ranked among those who safeguard the sanity between humans and canines. "How shall we proceed?"

"Round up all the skateboards and burn them!" she cried. Clearly, she knew the score. And that's when I realized the

enormity of our problem: We were poorly strategized and sorely outnumbered by my dog's No. 1 enemy.

FRIEND OR FOE?

Lots of dogs chase fast-moving things (file under "Duh"), and among their favorites are human-powered vehicles. Yet Zoe Mae has never lost her composure when bikes, roller skates, or scooters wheeled by.

People say that sharing your life with a dog gives you a new view of the world. So it was that under Zoe Mae's influence I began to perceive the especially obnoxious qualities of the mini-surfboard on wheels.

We all know that the sound of a skateboard is distinct and inescapable. We can only imagine how provocative it is to a dog. Cognitive scientist Alexandra Horowitz

speculates that because of its relative position, right at dog level, sound from a skateboard bouncing off the ground lands all the more loudly in a dog's ears.

We also know that people on skateboards look different than people on bikes and trikes, as if they're standing on moving conveyor belts. It's really quite bizarre. I often wonder if Zoe Mae even processes that there's a human being atop the board or experiences the two objects as a single construct, a solitary growling monster.

And let's not forget the way humans ride skateboards, often facing sideways instead of straight ahead. That could be another trigger, says Camilla Welhaven of Ain't Misbehaving in Portland, Ore., a trainer who does a lot of work desensitizing overwrought dogs. Whatever the stimulus, Welhaven explains, the response goes by the same name: reactive behavior.

"*There it is!*" she shouts, doing her best terrier impersonation. "*'Charge!* Reactive dogs may sound crazy out of control to us," she says, "but for them it's a burst of adrenaline, like shushing down a slope or seeing a squirrel in a tree. So they go back and do it again and again. *'Where's that thing? This is fun!*"

"It's not clear to me that dogs despise skateboards," concurs Horowitz. "For dogs especially bred to herd, flush, or retrieve prey, the motion of a skateboard seems to trigger that bred 'self.'" Does that mean Zoe Mae sees the skateboard as prey? Such a conclusion is "not entirely wrong," Horowitz writes in her book, *Inside of a Dog*, "but is mightily incomplete." Instead, the skateboard triggers the same physiological response as prey would.

I KNOW BOWLING BALLS, AND YOU'RE NO BOWLING BALL!

Of course, not all prey ride a skateboard. In fact, not every high-arousal stimulus moves. There are way more things in heaven and earth when

it comes to our pets' peeves.

When Newcastle, Wash., resident Jeff Skocelas was growing up in Michigan, the family had a dog named Koko. The poor pup hated bowling balls. Koko wouldn't dare come into the living room if the shiny black orb was on the rug.

"He barked and stalked and fussed until my dad put it away in the bowling bag. Then everything returned to normal."

Of a shape and color that often scares dogs, the ball suggested potential aggression, a foolproof trigger for high arousal, says McConnell. "My Luke barked at a man with knee pads on, two big round black circles at eye level to Luke that looked like big round eyes that were threatening him."

Hats are a very popular item among pets' peeves. Headgear can be mighty confusing to a canine, causing him to not even recognize his human. But Portland, Ore., animal advocate Reed Coleman's newest rescue, Royce, loves her in her new cowboy hat. Just stand back from the young pup when that same hat hangs on the banister at the top of the stairs.

"His hackles went up like never before," says Coleman. "He had a full mohawk all the way down his back."

Welhaven's take on the inanimate antagonist? Anomaly: something outside the animal's frame of reference.

"I remember when my Posey Alice was one and a half," she says. "It was around Halloween. On someone's fence was a Raggedy Ann-looking straw thing. Posey Alice freaked."

Both Welhaven and Coleman used



the same approach to overcome their dogs' fears: desensitization and counter-conditioning.

"I had her sit," explains Welhaven. "Posey Alice went, 'OK, I can do that!' And [sitting] snapped her out of it. Then we walked towards the doll, stopping whenever she got scared. We did that over and over again, until I was close enough to touch the thing. Posey Alice sniffed it, started wagging her tail, and finally got all goofy puppy."

Anomalies abound in a dog's world. Witness the list amassed after I asked my Facebook friends about their pets' peeves: electric cars and buggy-riding Amish farmers; statues and silver SUVs; saran wrap, baby strollers, and the La-Z-Boy; plastic bags dancing in the wind and the jar of sun tea.

Time and again, though, what causes the most chaos? *Skateboards*. But now, as they say, there's hope.

THE ENEMY IS MET

It's a sunny Sunday. I'm about to borrow a skateboard. I'll put Zoe Mae's favorite treats on it, move it around, and ask a friend she adores to ride it a few feet at a time. Over time, I'll break it all down for her: the noise, the movement, the human on top. We'll create new associations, and the demon will lose its power. Then, miraculously, hell *will* freeze over, and we'll sit back and wave as the skateboards glide by.

► **FORMER NPR CORRESPONDENT** Ketzell Levine and her sidekick Zoe Mae are now in Ecuador working with the animal rescue group ARCA. For more information on how to help your pet overcome her fears, visit humanesociety.org/allanimals.

