

Melissa Porter

With the wonders of technology, I held a ‘face-to-face’ communication with Melissa and her King Charles Cavalier Spaniel, Hugo. Melissa, who we know here in the UK for her TV presenting skills on various property and lifestyle programmes like, *BBC’s Escape to the Country*, *To Buy or Not to Buy* and *Get a New Life* which was based on her own property buying experiences. Melissa, at this time was in America where she was living, but was travelling back and forth between there and Cheshire, here in England. The reason she comes back to Cheshire is to her parents’ home, which is where the lovely Hugo still lives.



The technology for this chat was by webcam via Skype, which is a very clever telephone service through the internet. I do many ‘face-to-face’ calls like this, as it is just like talking to someone sitting in front of you, which makes the chat even more expressive and animated. So here was a conversation with Melissa in Connecticut, her dog in Cheshire, and me in Shropshire!

With everything sorted out Melissa called me, although slightly earlier than arranged as she had to get to an appointment. She is a very busy lady, and actually we had been trying to co-ordinate this call for several months. With webcams switched on, we said our greetings and then Bob, who was note-taking for me, ducked down and waved into the camera to say ‘Hi’ to Melissa. “Gosh, is he Italian?” she asked? “No... just well tanned,” was my reply, and laughed to myself thinking how exotic to be married to an Italian with that olive skin and natural sense of style they are renowned for. It turned out that Melissa’s father, Aldo, was Italian so hence the thought. Sally, our now pretty well known collie, as about every newspaper/magazine article that I have been in, her photo has appeared too, followed us into the office. So Bob thought it fit that she should wave to a celebrity too so he

lifted her up for Melissa to see! Having got to know Hugo during this communication, and had he been with Melissa at that time, I am sure that he would have insisted on being admired in this way too!

With a quick explanation like I usually do summarizing this as like talking to a child I told her that Hugo came across as loving and very sweet as when asked to say something about himself, "I am a pet to have and to hold!" was his reply. "That sounds almost like a marriage to me!" I said, but then he gave me the replay of him running along the floor to her open arms, saying, 'Mummy, Mummy, Mummy', which clearly demonstrated their bond. This, as I thought, was his greeting when Melissa had returned for a visit. Melissa smiled and said she did do that to greet him and that was his response.

Hugo declared, in a rather 'upper class' way, that he was lazy, and if lounging in his basket, he would get up, but only if it pleased him at that time! "That's so right," said Melissa, "My father says Hugo thinks he is master of the house!" Later in the conversation Hugo did admit to that by telling us he was, "Masterful, but not bossy!" Hugo then gave me a picture of him being up on something, I was guessing a chair/settee or suchlike and looking out of a window at a wonderful colourful view. Melissa immediately recognised this and said that she knew that Hugo got up on the back of one of the large settees, although he was not supposed to. Hugo said, with that 'behind the hand, (or paw should I say?) effect, that, "They didn't really mind." Melissa said that from that vantage point he had a clear view of the garden, complete with waterfall. "Very nice," I said, but hang on, let's ask about the garden from a dog's point of view. Following the pictures of the varieties of colours and of what seemed to flow from one thing into the next, I carefully said it didn't come across to me as a very formal garden. "Formal?" said Melissa laughingly, "You are right, it is anything but. Italian chintz gardening is how I would describe it! It is just like Pandora's Box - full of surprises, simply a 'mish-mash' of everything. "Oh, how funny," I said, and explained that it was only days earlier I had visited Sir Roy Strong whose formal gardens were renowned and very much of the Victorian classic design. So this was from one extreme to the other, but both very beautiful in their own way.

Whilst we were on the subject of home life with her parents, Melissa asked me to see what Hugo would have to say about her

father. I was given the picture of someone that seemed to do most things at speed (or impatience), coupled with a remark that he didn't shut cupboard doors very quietly! I put this across as tactfully as I could muster, and again Melissa laughed and said that her Dad, being Italian, was very like that. I know Italians do hold a reputation for being a bit hot headed, but as with everyone, these generalisations do not cover everybody. Hugo was quick to say that it did not bother him, he had a, 'whatever' attitude and just walks away. Talking of walking, Hugo said that he did enjoy his walks, but when he had had enough, he had had enough! I said I felt like he just came to a 'stop' and that would be it for that walk. "Oh, that would be right," Melissa said, and went on to explain to me that recently whilst she was walking him with her parents in a park, he had somehow managed to tug the extending lead out of her hand and then made haste across the grass. He ignored their calls for him to stop, and only did so when he was sat at their car door! Melissa said that she reckoned that was as clear as you could get of, 'I have had enough now – thank you!' I don't suppose Melissa could run terribly fast at this point as she is heavily pregnant and due to give birth in a few months.

The reason the pregnancy came up was because, although it was 10 o'clock in the morning (3pm over here), Melissa kept yawning! She apologised and explained that it was not because she was bored, quite the opposite in fact, but that she was getting so very little sleep as could not get comfortable when lying down. She said her boyfriend described it as, 'like trying to sleep in a wave machine!' "A boy!" I clearly heard, and thought quickly to myself, I don't want to say the wrong thing here. So I asked her if she knew what she was having. "Oh yes, a boy!" I then told her that is what I am sure Hugo had said to me and, with that, I mentioned that surely it must be difficult to fly so late on. Melissa said you can fly up to thirty four weeks and she would be flying back to Britain next week anyway. She said the whole pregnancy, staying in the US/visas etc. was a sort of 'flying by the seat of your pants' thing, and they were working things out as they went along. I was sure I heard, "It could have been worse, it could have been twins!" Now a braver person might have said it 'as it is' but I thought I would be cautious as you do not know what might have happened in the pregnancy, or whether in fact, I had got it totally wrong. So I said, "Although we know you are just having one baby,

were twins in the family? “Yes,” she replied, “At first they thought I might be having twins!!” I then told her what I thought Hugo had said, but she understood my caution and was clearly surprised that her dog knew about that. Melissa said that Hugo had taken to putting his paws on her ever-expanding tummy, and yet he had never put his feet on her like that before. We had the ‘You would be amazed how much animals do know’ conversation. But, if you think of it, there are so many cases now written about how an animal picked up on someone’s cancer, others that know when someone is going to pass to spirit and many more things that we often can’t explain. But, as I say, ‘Why question it, just marvel in the fact that they can!’

Melissa wanted to check why Hugo got grumpy when she asked him to move over when he is sharing her bed. It turned out, as she had thought, to be just a ‘grumpy old man’ thing, objecting with a, ‘Do I have to?’ Well, he is nearly nine, so maybe he thinks he is entitled to be. She said his routine is always the same – at night time, at first, he will always go and lie under the dressing table in her parents’ bedroom, but the second her father sets the alarm, he gets up and goes into her room. With that, Hugo showed me a picture of lots of glass ornaments, cut crystal items, complete with a light sprinkling of dust!! I had to ask Melissa if her Mum had lots of ornate glass things there, and sure enough she did. I braved it, and said, “I don’t know how, but Hugo is showing me dust on them, would you think that’s correct?” “Oh yeah,” laughed Melissa, “My mum is a junk fiend. I went there and did a ‘de-clutter’ recently.” “Oh, there are loads more,” a little voice from, you-know-who announced. Melissa acknowledged his remark, “Oh, I know, it’s only the tip of the iceberg!” Bob, or should I say ‘Roberto’ was writing away ‘ten to the dozen’ on my left hand side but still able to join in the laughter too.

“I have been feeling the heat,” Hugo told me which, considering the unusually hot weather we had been having, didn’t seem out of the norm to mention. “It’s probably also because he is overweight too,” Melissa added. “Do you know, he had spaghetti bolognaise the other night and on another, he had the end of the fish and chips!” ‘Mmm, no surprise about his weight then,’ I thought. So for fun, I said I would ask Hugo what his favourite food was, as ‘fish and chips’ is said to be a British person’s favourite. With no hesitation whatsoever, “Steak!” was his concise reply. I passed it over to Melissa

with the same lack of hesitation, and yes, he does get steak, and not just any old steak – fillet steak!! Melissa informed me that her Mum buys it for him, and her mum, Mary, being the soft-hearted lady that she is, does spoil him but he is just so adorable she can't resist. On hearing Melissa talk about her Mum, Hugo gave me a picture of who I presumed to be Mary straightening pictures. I hesitated slightly, as this did not fit with the accumulating junk images, but Melissa confirmed that her mum does, in fact, keep re-positioning things around the house on a regular basis.

On a personal note, Hugo was keen to let me know that he was very proud of Melissa (his Mummy) and said that she had done very well, and showed great integrity as, he thought, she only does things because she thinks they are right to do, not just because, 'it would be handy' as he put it. Whilst we were on the subject of best attributes etc., although what he said really covered that, but to answer it as a direct question, his answer, "Honesty!" For my next one, "What does she do that amuses you?" I asked. "Doing her hair in the mirror, like - 'yep, that's done', and then goes back minutes later and checks it again! That doesn't make any sense to me," he declared. Animals know so much more than we realise, but beauty and our little idiosyncrasies are probably not worth losing their beauty sleep over!

Knowing Melissa is a TV presenter, I asked Hugo for an alternative job he thought she would be good at. He presented me a picture of what looked like someone doing some sort of needlecraft and that type of painstaking work of attaching tiny beads etc. Melissa does crochet, and also said that she understood what he was showing me as she really likes to pay attention to detail, and, unlike me, she has the patience to do such fiddly things. So, maybe a career in fashion design/creativity for the future? If so, please remember, you read it here first!

Something that Melissa wanted to discuss was the fact that she knew he really disliked being put in kennels, but, as her parents do also need to travel (especially in October to visit the new baby) it was a necessity. I asked him his feelings. He had already told me that when Melissa leaves him at home with her parents, he does the 'sad eyes', but only because he didn't want her to think he was being unfaithful. That was nice to know, but regarding the kennels, that was entirely different. He told us that he would rather not go anywhere - he liked it

at home where he 'had got his feet under the table' (Truly, that was straight from his canine mouth!) We had a quick reminiscence of my story of the clairvoyant's dog from my *Changing Lives* book who wanted to be greeted with roast chicken when collected from kennels. This would make it seem far more tolerable, and amazingly, it worked! We decided to try the same thing with Hugo, and he obliged by showing me a picture of treats (namely biscuits - well, anything edible) being hidden under his blanket at the kennels, so a surprise for when he got there. I didn't know if this was possible to arrange, but as it turned out, Melissa worked for them when she was age fourteen and had kept in contact with them ever since. She knew that the kennels went to extra lengths to keep the dogs happy, so this would be no problem, and if they could hide some for him during his stay, that would be great too. Let's hope it makes things better for him. He did admit that he still eats while he is there, so that proves he is not that sad. Melissa said it was actually like 'Dog fit camp', as he is on portion control and plenty of exercise to help him lose a few pounds whilst he was there! He heard that, but did not comment, which was just 'so Hugo!'

Hugo said in his serious way, "Please tell her that I understand about life and that she has to go away. Please tell her I do not feel 'torn' and that she should not too." Ah bless him, what a wonderful little chap.

I asked Hugo for a statement he wished to make using this animal communication platform so I could put it in the book. He told me, "That animals rationalise things the same as people do." He went on to give the example of the fiery Italian nature that Melissa's Dad has, saying, "It is just the way he is, it is not personal to me, and so why should it be a problem?" Well put, I thought - we should not have to tiptoe around animals just because they can hear, see and feel like we do, but just treat them with respect and understanding as we would a another person. After all, some animals are louder and brasher than others, but it takes all sorts to make a world, and whatever breed we are, or they are, we are all individuals. But one thing that animals do achieve far better than we humans is how to show unconditional love. As he had shown us - it is accepting the whole person for what they are and loving them just the same!

Melissa was a joy to talk to (she is a friend of Jacky Newcomb so I wouldn't have expected anything else) and I appreciated her

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honesty when she said that she really was surprised that animals do think in this way and basically do have cognitive thoughts. So, the next time she lifts his ears to make him look like a rabbit, she will know that he adores that and finds it so funny, and how does Melissa know? Because he told us so! I hope I have brought something more into her life, and Hugo's too, which is my plan for this book to do for animals everywhere; well, everywhere that my work can reach.

With the call over, and Saturday horse racing beckoning for Bob's attention, my 'Italian Roberto' disappeared but fortunately left me with a very detailed set of notes for this story.