

Who's Training Whom?

Are your reptiles controlling you?

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Helmut is a master of subtlety.

I have recently recognized that Helmut, the Editorial Department Turtle, has me trained. It's a little embarrassing to admit.

Helmut occupies an aquarium in my office. He divides his time between the typical pet turtle activities of basking and sleeping, swimming, eating and excreting. I once wrote a blog titled Turtle Diary, in which I wrote down everything Helmut did over the course of a day in the office. If you read it you'll see that he's not the most imaginative or driven turtle on Earth. I about went nuts scrounging for something to jot down, and I resorted to noting every little limb movement that Helmut made while he was basking. Writing that blog was a bit of an endurance test, but I slogged it out and believe it may be the only accurate accounting of the day in the life of a pet turtle. I hope it can be used to benefit both humankind and reptilekind in some way. If nothing else, at least it provided me with a blog topic.

Lately, I have come to the conclusion that Helmut is really quite smart. He may not give that impression, considering how much he sleeps. But he knows how to get me to feed him. I'll be sitting at my desk and I'll hear him drop from his basking platform into the water. When I hear this and then look at his tank, there he'll be, swimming furiously at the front of the glass, staring out at me and sending psychic arrows into my brain that dictate it is mandatory that I feed him at that moment or else.

Maybe I'm over-thinking it and giving Helmut undue credit for cleverness, but when he drops into the water and swims at the front of the tank, I will always rise from my desk and walk over to feed him. He chows down, pokes nonchalantly around in the water for a bit, then hauls out to continue his basking regimen.

I'm sure he's learned the sequence of events that are set in motion by his dropping into the water because I've reinforced the behavior that results in him eating. Let's face it, anything that results in any animal eating will become a top priority in that animal's routine. If nothing else will ever be learned, behavior that results in food will always be. We're all like that. The fact that I like to eat is one of the main reasons I continue to come to work every day.

I think it's kind of neat that Helmut and I have worked out this bit of communication between us. I never set out to train him in any way, but he has trained me. Actually, now that I'm analyzing it a little deeper, I'm starting to feel slightly alarmed. Without paying much attention I have allowed myself to be manipulated by a turtle. If a red-eared slider is capable of such craftiness, who knows what the reptile world as a whole may be plotting? After all, I mentioned Helmut practices subtlety. Yet "subtle" can be defined as "working insidiously." Perhaps I have stumbled upon a cold-blooded conspiracy. Are you being manipulated the way I am?

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