Greetings from Joe | May 26, 2020
Joe Fenbert, Program Director – Association of Washington Student Leaders

Gifford the wonder-puppy was at it again teaching me a life lesson. We were heading up the hill for walkies. He came zooming around the corner chasing me after he had decided I wasn't asking him to do anything he didn't want to do. Gifford is a little hesitant about hitching himself to the train until he knows the destination. As he ran passed, I noticed he had something in his mouth. I decide based on what is in his mouth whether I want to press the issue regarding getting the object out of his mouth. It was my fancy respirator mask I use to work under the house, sand drywall, cut boards…all the things an asthmatic should not do without protection. I've learned the hardway it is best to practice “safety first” with my lungs. I decided I didn't want tiny teeth holes as decoration or chunks ripped out of my mask.

I picked up a stick, a great stick, probably one of the greatest sticks I had ever picked up in my life…and tried to convince Gifford that this great stick was way more interesting than a silly respirator. He ran in and out around me while putting the death shake on the respirator. I had snacks in my pockets as I always do to lure Gifford into doing what a “good boy” should be doing. Giff wasn't buying the snack option. Zoom. Chase. Shake. Zoom. Chase. Sometimes when dogs are being naughty, just praising them throws them off the scent. So I tried that. “You are a good boy, Gifford. Yes, good boys stay still so I can get my respirator. Are you a good boy? Are you?” Zoom. Chase. Shake. Zoom. Chase. Shake. Finally, just when I started to get a little angry and the fun challenge of getting my respirator was not fun anymore, I said. “Gifford. Drop it.” He did, and then wiggly bounced over to me for some scratches, a snack and a stick.

The incident reminded me of how many times in our lives we meander all around a message and twist ourselves into pretzels sending out cryptic codes trying to express what we want or need. Instead of the mercurial–“I'm wondering if the trash is getting so full the dog might be getting into it and I'm worried about the digestion of plastic because he seems to like…”–to the direct: “Please take out the garbage.” I think in education sometimes we also forget to just say in clear, simple terms, what the expectation is for the learners. We try so hard sometimes to bring choice into the equation with Jedi motivational language we wind up confusing kids. Instead of–“Respect is both given and earned in this classroom to honor the learning styles of all while maintaining high academic standards so…”–when a concise ask would do: “Stop talking, please.”

As we continue to move through the pandemic, simple expressions of our needs and wants might be the way to go. It is interesting that when you are learning a new language the direct approach is the only way you can communicate. There is no room for nuance and subtly in language, because you don't know the words. “Yes” is “Yes” and “No” is “No.” There is no “Well, perhaps, maybe when, if…”

Gifford probably knew the entire time what I wanted of him. He was just waiting for me to ask. People often know what we need of them before we ask too.