

**ONCE UPON A TIME,
THERE WAS A LITTLE GUY
CALLED KOUMACK**



ACTIVITÉS POUR CHIENS ÉPANOUIS

CONTENT

INTRODUCTION	1
ADOPTION	2
FIRST OUTINGS	5
FELLOW DOGS	7
REACTIVITY	10
ADDICTION	15
LAMENESS	17
LIVING TOGETHER	21
ANIMAL COMMUNICATION	27
VARIOUS THERAPIES	31
BACH FLOWERS	31
CANINE MASSAGE	32
MICRO-PHYSIOTHERAPY	33
ZOOPHARMACOGNOSY	34
TURID RUGAAS	36
HABITUATION	40
PARALLEL WALKING	40
HAND SIGNAL	42
MANTRAILING	43
LEARNED HELPLESSNESS	48
DANA	50
BEING WELL SUPPORTED	57

VESTIBULAR SYNDROME	57
HIS LAST WEEK	59
OTHER MYSTERIES	63
A LITTLE CLOSER TO THE STARS	64
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	66
CONTACT	67

***“You become responsible, forever,
for what you have tamed.”***

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, The Little Prince

*** ***

***“Life is no obedience exercise,
it's a way of living together.”***

Turid Rugaas

INTRODUCTION

This is Koumack's story, and of course, it's our story by his side, too. Koumack has opened our eyes to so many things. And, through this book, perhaps he will continue to pass on his knowledge and change the way we view life with our dogs in our daily lives.

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We used to live in a small house in the Namur region with Sugus and Fripouille, two yellow Labradors, father and daughter, aged 8 and 3, and Gobbolino, a 13-year-old cat.

This house was located on a quiet little street, with no more than ten houses. The street ended in a path leading to an old quarry that had been converted into a recreational area. As the gardens bordering on the slopes of the quarry did not allow for fences to be erected, this footpath was very convenient for daily walks.

When the idea of getting a third dog began to take root, we decided that a larger house with a fenced-in garden would be more convenient for everyday life. So, we set out to find the perfect house.

ADOPTION

Once we had found, renovated and prepared our new home for this latest addition to the family, we set about looking for a breeder.

Until then, all of our cats and dogs had either been taken in as strays or born into families in private homes. We chose to get our new companion from a breeder of Old German Shepherds (Altdeutscher Schäferhund, also known as A.S.).

Koumack was born on November 15, 2011, and we went to pick him up on January 14, 2012. He was just about 9 weeks old.

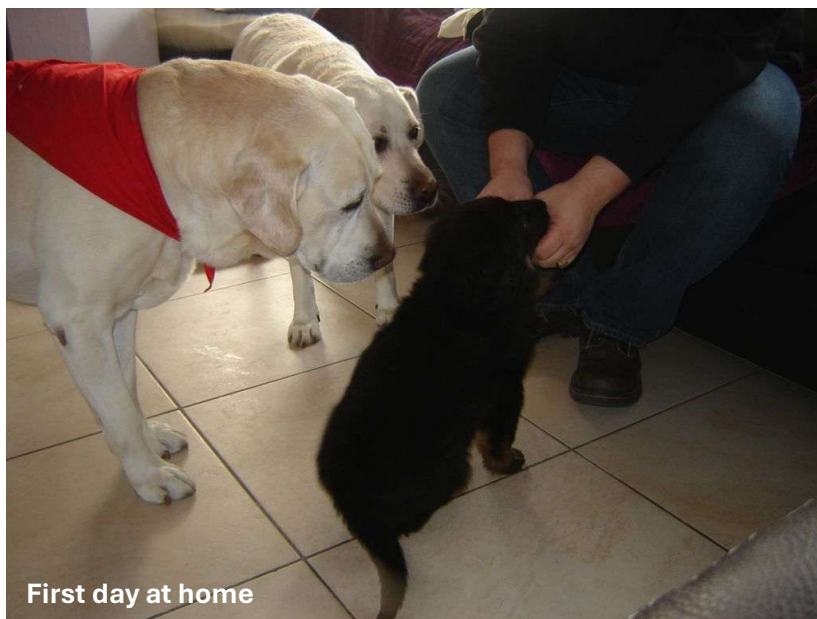


Koumack at 9 weeks old

The journey home went smoothly: Koumack, on my lap on the passenger seat, was either looking out the window on my side, or on the driver's side, his head resting on my husband's arm.

Upon our arrival, the three canines got plenty of time to get to know each other, first in the garden, then in the house.

Sugus (by then 10 years old) and Fripouille (5) adopted Koumack right away and without reservation 😊. Everything seemed to be going perfectly well.



In the beginning, Gobbolino (15) preferred to keep his distance. Eventually, he got used to Koumack's presence too. They were the same size when Koumack arrived, but of course, that didn't last very long 🥲.

Koumack was a very well-behaved puppy—too well-behaved. The biggest piece of mischief he ever got up to as a puppy was eating a gigantic amount of food intended for adult dogs.

We had a 12 kg bag delivered, which we had left in the kitchen. With the help of the aptly named Fripouille (meaning “rascal” in French)—I honestly don’t think Sugus had anything to do with it—, Koumack devoured as much of the kibble as he could. When we returned home, Koumack looked as if he had swallowed a watermelon. His little belly was bulging with the sheer amount of kibble in his stomach. Thankfully, there was no harm done.



Sugus, Fripouille and Koumack, a harmonious trio

FIRST OUTINGS

Koumack behaved quite differently inside the house compared to outside, whether in the garden or on walks.

Indoors, he wasn't afraid of anything: the television, thunderstorms, the vacuum cleaner, fireworks, objects of any kind, visitors, movements (even sudden ones) ...

However, in the garden, he was much less confident—even with the reassuring presence of Sugus, Fripouille, or ours.

In the garden, showing



Three or four days into his new life with us, I offered him a walk. At the time, he wore a collar, and I had gotten him used to being on a leash in the garden.

The moment we passed through the garden gate and stepped onto the pavement, Koumack sat down and refused to move. I waited there with him for a few moments. He remained seated. I tried to coax him: crouching down, encouraging him ... Nothing worked.

On the second attempt the next day, I came prepared: I brought some treats. But Koumack's reaction was the same. The treats didn't help.

I made a third attempt a few days later, this time equipped with a toy. Koumack decided to follow me (or rather, he was following the toy I was waving in front of him).

I would later learn that I was simply luring him. A dictionary definition of luring is "to entice (a person or animal) away from their intended course, typically into a trap". Yep, not great! Koumack was so attracted to the toy that he forgot about how difficult he found his environment. Without the toy, Koumack refused to follow me. I was frustrated to learn that I was less interesting to him than a toy ...

And what made it even more frustrating was that, at the time, I was an instructor at a Saint-Hubert dog club. The advice I gave my students every Sunday didn't seem to work with Koumack.

FELLOW DOGS

So, I was less interesting than a toy or treats.

In fact, we (the humans in the house) were also less interesting than Sugus.



Koumack liked to sleep close to Sugus. He also liked to follow him into the garden. This trust between the dogs allowed us to get out for some comfortable walks. Having Sugus around helped Koumack face the outside world. Perhaps he would overcome it, given enough time?

At 5 months old, Koumack was still regularly relieving himself indoors, even though we were following all the usual advice for house-training a puppy: we took him out into the garden before and after meals, after waking up, after playing, etc., and rewarded him with treats when he did his “business” in the right place—outside.

Once again, none of the advice I gave my students seemed to work with Koumack. I was missing something, but what?

After observing things for a while, the answer finally became clear. Koumack was actually asking to be let outside, only he wasn't asking us (humans). He was asking Sugus! 😊 Koumack approached Sugus, his snout on Sugus's lips, then licked his lips and the corners of his mouth. And since Sugus wasn't responding, after a few moments Koumack walked away to the place in the house where he relieved himself.

All we had to do was wait for him to ask Sugus, and then invite him to go out into the garden. That's all there was to it!



Eventually, Koumack realised that he could communicate directly with us (humans): "I ask Sugus, Carole responds to my request => I ask Carole directly." This was a major step. 😊

We witnessed this behaviour among dogs again later on, and this time it was Koumack who received the request from a younger dog.

During a family gathering at my sister's house, my niece's Weimar pointer asked Koumack in the same way: she put her muzzle on Koumack's lips, who then came to find me to open the door to the garden for them.

There's no doubt about it: relationships between members of the same species are essential.

REACTIVITY

As I mentioned earlier, Koumack was obedient by nature. That made it easy to teach him to sit, drop his toy, come in from the garden, let himself be brushed, have his ears checked, and so on.

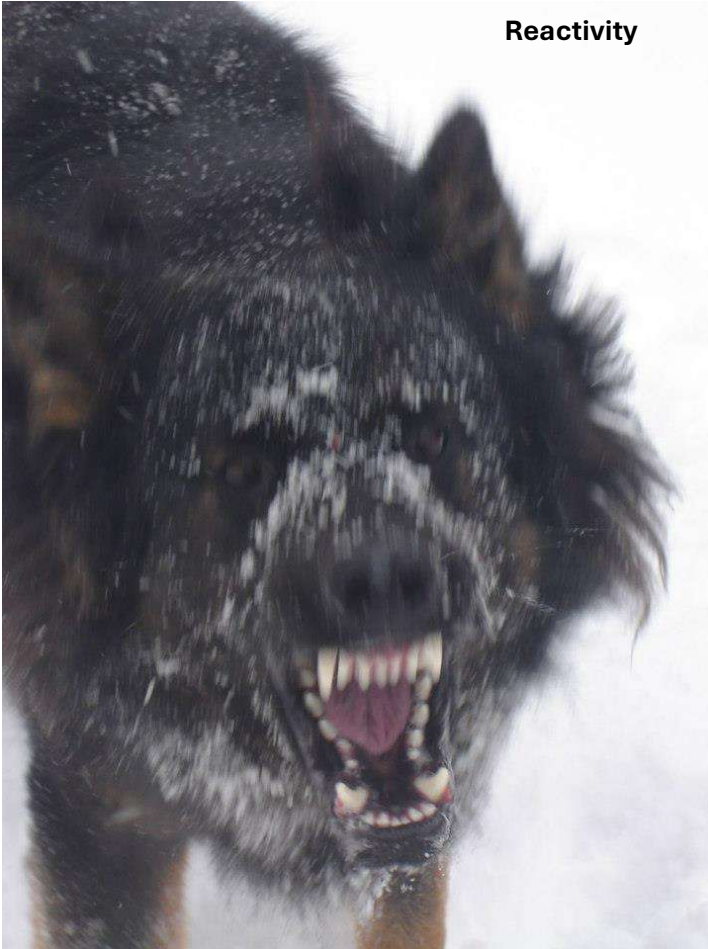
Apart from these obedience and habituation exercises, Koumack was not very keen on being touched. He simply didn't like being stroked or cuddled. When we approached him, he either froze in place or moved away as far as he could.

Until that point, I had never heard about dogs not necessarily liking to be stroked, or that walking straight towards a dog is rude or can even be perceived as threatening by them, or that repeatedly asking a puppy to sit can be harmful to their physical well-being.

At 4 months of age, he had already learned to 'go to his spot': I would ask him to and lie down on his cushion. What was especially surprising for a young dog of that age was that he stayed there until we told him he was free to go. This is not very common. The slightest noise or movement from Gobbolino, Sugus, or Fripouille could have been a good excuse to get up and leave.

In spite of this natural, perhaps even excessive obedience, our walks were becoming difficult. As long as we didn't meet anyone, everything was fine. As soon as we encountered any passer-by, jogger or cyclist, Koumack would bark, pull on his lead, try to get away, and when that wasn't possible, he would lunge forward. Sugus' presence was no longer reassuring enough.

Reactivity



Since we were walking with a short lead (two and a half metres), Koumack quickly learned that he wasn't able to get more distance between himself and the perceived threat. He eventually abandoned his attempts at distancing himself and moved straight on to trying to scare the difficulty away: the barking became more and more intense, and given his growing strength, it was becoming

difficult for me to hold on to him, especially when he lunged forward.



The situation was getting worse and worse with each passing month. Koumack was becoming increasingly reactive—at the time, we called it “aggressive”. At the same time, daily life in the house continued to be easy and pleasant.

Outings to the garden weren't always relaxed, though. Koumack had developed displacement behaviours, almost like stereotypies, such as biting a metal plate in the garden or any object he could find, or digging holes in the lawn. When we tried to stop him, he would scratch holes in his own fur instead.

We sought advice from our vet, who recommended Bach flowers and natural calming remedies, which helped a little. He also suggested psychotropic medication, but I wasn't ready for that.

We received advice from acquaintances at the dog club, friends, and family members:

- Authority and boundaries: The advice was to command him to stop barking, to walk to heel when out walking, and to make him sit and wait when we encountered difficulties during walks. I tried all of this, and it made Koumack's reactions worse.
- Obedience: Koumack was naturally obedient. He was just no longer able to obey when the situation made him lose his temper. I tried, and it hurt our relationship.
- Coercive equipment: The only rational options I could think of at the time were to either stop going for walks or to restrict Koumack's physical strength. Falls were becoming regular occurrences. However, not going for walks was not a common idea at that time. So, I tried various types of restraining equipment (different models of choke collars, corrective harnesses, heel training techniques, etc.).

We spent a lot of time and money trying to find solutions. Some of them helped a little, while others made no difference. Worst of all, some of them worsened Koumack's stress and excitement.

In all these lines of thinking about possible solutions, the nature of dogs and canine ethology were never taken into account. Some even harmed Koumack's physical and emotional integrity.

We needed help. Koumack was not well: helping him find calm and well-being became crucial.



Displacement behaviour, destroying a can



Displacement behaviour, digging holes in the lawn

ADDICTION

Since going for walks was difficult, we walked less and spent more time playing in the garden. The problem was that his stereotypical or displacement behaviours were still difficult to manage. We looked for an activity that might interest him, something to calm him down.

The only game Koumack was interested in was chasing a ball, no matter what size it was. He was able to share all the toys in the house, but not the balls.

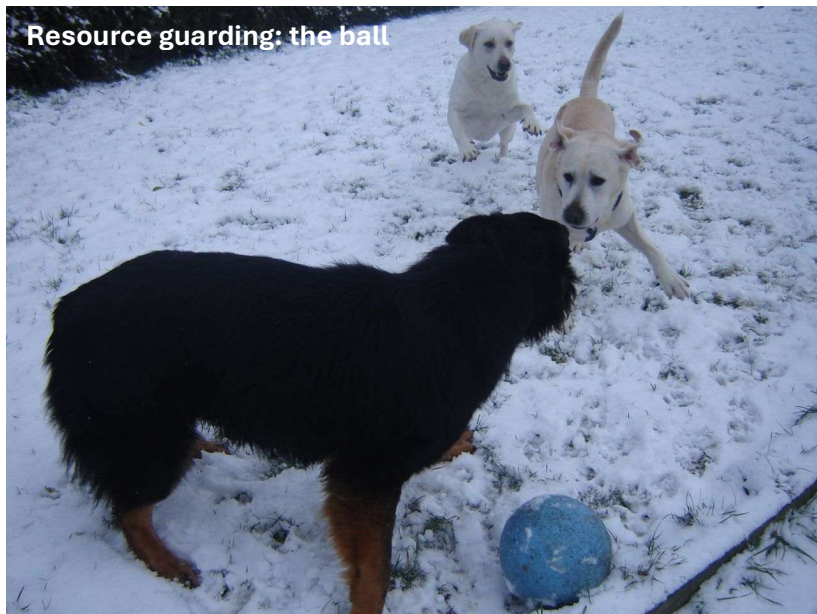
He had developed quite an addiction: his games of fetch could go on for ages. Koumack never gave up and never had enough. With his eyes bulging, his tongue hanging out, and gasping for breath, nothing could stop Koumack—he wanted more.

When we had guests over, Koumack would pester them to throw the ball for him. He would place the ball at their feet and keep asking until they (or we) responded to the request.

Sugus and Fripouille weren't very interested in toys in general, or balls in particular. And when they happened to pass by a toy, Koumack didn't even notice. But whenever there was a ball near them, it was a different story.

I would later learn that the quality of a dog's daily activities has an impact on their behaviour. If dogs engage in stressful or exciting activities every day, this overloads their nervous system with adrenaline and cortisol. The slightest difficult situation or additional incident can be the last straw.

We played fetch a lot, and it had a big effect on Koumack's nervous system. He was always on edge. The slightest difficulty during a walk would set Koumack off.



LAMENESS

Koumack regularly suffered from lameness.

I believed the cause was the intensity of the walks and ball games during which Koumack would run until he was out of breath, spin around, land heavily on the ground, etc. We would later learn the real cause of his limping.

While chatting with members of my dog club, some people recommended that we consult an osteopathic veterinarian who had worked wonders on their dogs.

Happy birthday to you, my darling! Our first appointment was on your first birthday.

The medical record from this initial visit states, *'One month ago, limping on one front leg. The next day, rear leg'*. The lameness never lasted long: by the time we got to the vet or the osteopath, it had disappeared, only to reappear in another leg, and then disappear again.

Osteopathic visits became a frequent occurrence: the following month, the month after that, two months later, and again the month after that, and so on.

At 18 months, Koumack's testicles had still not descended. He needed to be castrated, and the surgery was scheduled between osteopathy sessions. Unfortunately, our vet did not perform an ultrasound to locate the testes. When I picked up Koumack afterwards, he had three sutures from where they had probed his lower abdomen to locate them. He was prescribed complete rest for at least three weeks to allow for internal healing. Once we

resumed our walks, we found that they were more difficult than ever. Koumack's reactivity had increased even further.

Koumack was 20 months old when our osteopath suggested we have X-rays taken of his right elbow, after he had whined during an osteopathic treatment, with no medical explanation.



The X-rays finally brought us a diagnosis. I received a call from our osteopath: *'I have some good news and some bad news.'* Uh oh!

The bad news: Koumack suffered from a disease called panosteitis. The good news: It's a growth disorder, which means that the condition disappears when the dog reaches physical maturity. Koumack was 21 months old, and the disease was soon to disappear.

This condition affects the long bones in young medium to large dogs who are still growing. The veterinary reference book, consulted by our general vet at the time, stated that this disease was most commonly found in male German Shepherds. That, of course, is exactly what Koumack was.

Panosteitis can be diagnosed based on an X-ray, by the appearance of the bones on the images. It can also be targeted by pinching a long bone along its length (not at a joint).

In most cases, affected individuals show uneven physical growth. Koumack, too, was skinny and lanky.



Knowing what he was suffering helped us to support him: relieve the pain and adapt our activities.

Can you imagine what an animal with panosteitis has to endure? The pain comes and goes, without any apparent cause. If you bump into something or trip, you know why it hurts. But the pain experienced with this condition doesn't follow that logic.

Panosteitis continues to be described as an idiopathic disease: *‘a disease that appears spontaneously or whose origin is unknown.’*

LIVING TOGETHER

Following his castration and the forced three-week break, Koumack's reactivity had worsened even more. Walking had become an ordeal: I fell on a regular basis, I had pain in my hands, fingers, wrists and shoulders, and this feeling of dread whenever I even thought about going out for a walk.

I would realise later how painful it must have been for Koumack, too.

A member of my dog club sent me an email from a dog behaviour coach: Marina Gates Fleming. The subject line of the email was '*Some possible causes of stress.*' This article mentioned the following points, and a few more besides:

- *An excessive reaction to things can be caused by overly high stress levels or chronic stress:* That was true of Koumack, and me too...
- *Chronic stress can arise from games of fetch (balls, frisbees, etc.):* Oh no, his favourite activity!
- *Obedience training when the dog is unable to cope:* Oops, we were practising for our Saint Hubert social behaviour test, which I thought of as a protective shield for Koumack.
- *A lead that is too short or always under tension:* My lead was 2.5 m long and often completely tense.

The majority of the solutions offered in the article were completely at odds with our lifestyle. What if this was the key? Challenging everything we thought we knew about dogs?

After a while, I contacted Marina, who spent a solid hour on the phone with us. This conversation confirmed the content of her article: we needed to rethink our habits.

It took time for all these new ideas to sink in. I wasn't sure how to incorporate all of this into our daily routine. What's more, Marina mainly taught on Sundays, and so did I, at the dog club. Coordinating our schedules to get together for practical classes was difficult.

Koumack was nearly 22 months old when we took our first class with Marina and her colleague. Sunday, 1 September 2013, was the first day of school.

On the phone, Marina had told me that the class was conducted with the dog on a long lead (no problem, I had my 2.5-metre lead) and wearing a harness (no problem, I had a no-pull harness). We had arranged to meet in a car park outside a large store in the Brussels area.

Marina had asked me to park in a certain spot in the car park, leave Koumack in the car, and meet her and the others at the other end of the it. Why park at the far end of this vast space? I got out of the car and crossed the car park as quickly as I could.

We chatted for a little while, then walked slowly back to my car. Why slowly?

I opened the rear door of my car, and Marina met Koumack. He was panting heavily (even though it wasn't hot—it was due to stress) and limped as soon as he got out of the car. This was shortly after panosteitis was diagnosed.

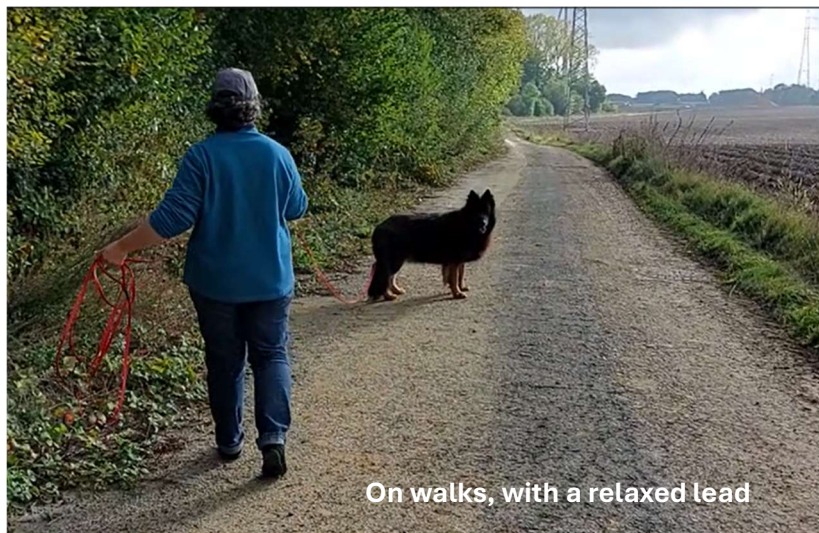
As far as Marina was concerned, anything under 3 metres didn't qualify as a long lead. It also had to be clipped onto the ring on the back of the harness (not the chest ring, which slides and prevents the dog from pulling), and the harness had to be ergonomic.

Haqihana: an ergonomic harness



So, my lead was too short and my harness was deemed coercive. Marina's colleague lent me a 5-metre lead, which I attached to the ring on the back. Panic set in: if Koumack could pull me down with a 2.5-metre lead attached to his chest, what would happen with a longer lead attached to his back? That's when they gave me a striking argument: *"You've tried everything so far, but haven't found a solution. We are here to help you, so why not try what we suggest?"* It's true, I had tried everything, even the psychotropic drugs in the end.

With 5 metres of lead, Koumack was still pulling. We tried 7 metres, and lo and behold! Koumack stopped pulling, and we had a loose lead between us. I had forgotten what it was like to experience such a thing when people were around.



Koumack stayed outside for about five minutes, then returned to the car to rest. Rest from what? I didn't understand what was happening, really. It was nothing like the dog training classes or the books I had read up to that point.

We discussed a variety of topics, including what had just happened for a few minutes. Had anything actually happened? I was confused about how the class was going.

Koumack then got out of the car and spent a few minutes on a long lead in the car park before returning to the car. I got back in the car at the end of the class, and on the way home, I just couldn't put into words what we'd covered in our first lesson. I definitely didn't understand what had happened, but somehow, we ended up with

a positive outcome: Koumack was able to walk around in a new environment, in the presence of strangers, with his lead relaxed.

Unsurprisingly, Koumack had been very obedient during the lesson. He was able to explore the planted areas around car park, but didn't make any real decisions on his own. He was just following me around.

My first bit of homework, if I wanted to continue the lessons, was to find a safe place, settle down there with Koumack free to roam, me sitting on the ground, and wait for Koumack to take the initiative to do whatever he wanted to do.

I found a field near our house, sat down on the ground, and unclipped his lead. Koumack lay down near me, behind my back. He stayed in this position for about twenty minutes, then got up and lay down again in front of me, two or three metres from where he had been. I wasn't prepared for this to take 20 minutes 😊😊😊. And Koumack was finally able to take the initiative, calmly and without fuss.



A few days later, I repeated the exercise: same field, same scenario. Koumack took about ten minutes to get up and sniff around—never far from me, though. Wow! He was able to be independent and engage in activities all on his own.

A new path was opening up before us. Things with Koumack got better with each passing day. Our new habits were bearing fruit and our daily life was improving.

ANIMAL COMMUNICATION

Our daily lives were improving, but that didn't mean everything was perfect. Koumack's reactivity had reduced, but not completely disappeared.

As Marina's classes coincided with my classes at the club, I had little opportunity to attend her practical classes. I was doing my best to follow the advice and maintain our new habits.

The biggest challenge was completely stopping the games of fetch, given Koumack's addiction. Marina had advised me to get rid of all the balls, but I decided to put them in a cupboard instead. Two entire shelves were filled with balls of all sizes, materials and colours. Koumack's resource guarding behaviour at home disappeared along with the balls.

Six months after locking them away, I decided that Koumack was sufficiently rehabilitated from his addiction and that I could give him back one or two of them. I was sorely mistaken: the resource guarding suddenly reappeared, and it was just as intense as before. Back the balls went, into the cupboard for an indeterminate period of time.

Our walks were going much better. even though there were still some problematic situations, which seemed to arise completely at random. I didn't understand what would trigger them. By observing Koumack and his environment when he became reactive, and testing Koumack's limits during classes, we finally realised that passers-by staring at him were a trigger. Another big step forward in learning about Koumack's discomfort.



Given that some delicate situations remained, even though there had been clear improvements, I continued to look for new ways to understand Koumack.

I can't remember who recommended that we try 'animal communication', also known as 'animal listening' or 'intuitive communication'. This involves asking a practitioner to communicate with an animal and is somewhat akin to telepathy. The practitioner relays a question to the animal, receives an answer, and relays it to the person who asked the question.

I contacted the practitioner who had been recommended to me. She asked me to email her a photo of Koumack, write down the question(s) I wanted to ask him, and we set up a phone call. The experiment was unsuccessful.

A month later, I made another attempt with a different practitioner. The result was the same: no concrete answers or suggestions for improvement.

Four months later, word of mouth struck again. In the same week, on two separate occasions and from two different people, I heard about a third practitioner. The first anecdote concerned this practitioner's support for a dog at the end of their life. The second anecdote was about a dog in labour whose delivery was problematic.

I found the coincidence astonishing and symbolic: within a few days, I had heard two stories about the same practitioner accompanying a dog, one during birth and one during death.

I called her to make an appointment, but this time I wanted to go to her workplace. I didn't want any more phone calls.

When we arrived in her study, Koumack sniffed everything, explored, and lay down in front of the door. There was no way I could leave without him knowing 😊.

The practitioner explained how she would proceed: she would ask Koumack questions and receive colours, images, sensations and emotions in return, which she would then interpret. Interpret? Seriously? That left a great deal of uncertainty. But hey, since we were there, I thought we might as well go through with it.

She began by concentrating and asked Koumack for permission to communicate with him. He replied that he did not wish to communicate. There, done! The first two attempts had failed. How naive of me to believe that it could work...

She insisted, explaining that now was the time to voice any concerns he had, so that we could find solutions together. And that convinced Koumack, who began to open up to us.

At first, I was rather sceptical: the practitioner mentioned my husband's back pain (who doesn't have back pain in the 21st century?), then made a general comment about me, which I found unconvincing. Then everything changed: she told me about a problem with my left foot. But I wasn't limping, and I was wearing ankle-high boots. There was absolutely no sign of my injury. At the time, since I didn't have any social media accounts, it was impossible for her to obtain any personal information about me. And yet she knew exactly what I had, and passed on Koumack's recommendations for dealing with this injury. From that moment on, I was hooked, and we chatted for an hour and a half.

During this first animal communication session, we also mentioned treatments such as micro-physiotherapy (a manual therapy that releases tension crystallised in the body following physical or emotional trauma) and watsu (shiatsu in water), for example.

We never stopped doing these animal communications sessions. And it was during our last conversation with Koumack, about forty days after his death, that he asked me to tell his story.

A famous saying describes our pets as lacking only the ability to speak. What if we gave them the opportunity to express themselves?

VARIOUS THERAPIES

At various stages of our journey, we came across different options for animal welfare-oriented care.

BACH FLOWERS

The 38 Bach Flowers correspond to 38 emotional states, divided into 7 families, such as fear, uncertainty, despondency, etc. The Flowers act on our emotional states, whether temporary or deep-rooted, to bring them into balance.

For Koumack, we started with the 'Rescue' formula, which is available in an alcohol-free version for children or animals.

Later, we met a practitioner who used cards to determine the emotional state that needed to be balanced. Obviously, Koumack didn't choose the cards himself 😊. I chose them with him in mind: three cards were selected that corresponded to fear, rigidity and the need for protection.

Up to 7 flowers can be mixed together. In our case, 5 flowers were selected. Once again, this mixture helped us a little, just as Rescue had done before.

CANINE MESSAGE

I took a course in dog massage near Liège, at the Cercle professionnel belge de massage canin (Belgian Professional Dog Massage Association). Koumack wasn't a big fan of being cuddled and petted, but he would occasionally accept a massage.



While Koumack was moderately receptive, Fripouille loved it! She was always ready for one of my practice sessions.

One day, during a session, I was applying one of the techniques from the syllabus when Fripouille suddenly got up and left the massage mat. Strange... I reread the info about the procedure, and a note mentioned that this manipulation was not recommended for dogs with hip dysplasia. To our knowledge, Fripouille did not have dysplasia, but the idea nagged at me.

When we scheduled the X-rays for Koumack's elbow, we also scheduled X-rays for Fripouille's hips.

Our vet confirmed what Fripouille had told me during the massage: she was suffering from hip dysplasia.

It's important to note that permission from the dog's vet is often required when registering the animal for massage training, as there are medical contraindications (cancer, pregnant females, fever, etc.).



MICRO-PHYSIOTHERAPY

Our animal communication practitioner recommended a specific micro-physiotherapist. I quickly made a double appointment for my husband and myself.

I was completely honest with her: we were there because our dog requested it 😊. Once the initial moment of surprise had passed, we began my session. Sitting on a bench in the sun, I waited for my husband's session to finish.

We then returned home, tired from our micro-physio sessions. A quick nap allowed the treatment to continue doing its work. When we woke up, Koumack, who was lying on his favourite blanket at the other end of the room, got up and came over for a cuddle. It was a major first: he, who didn't like cuddles and physical affection, had come to cuddle me on his own initiative.



ZOOPHARMACOGNOSY

Zoo: animal / **Pharmaco:** remedy / **Gnosy:** knowledge

This means that animals have knowledge of the remedies they need. It can also be called ‘instinctive selection’ or ‘animal self-medication’.

American ecologist Daniel Janzen is believed to be the first person to have collected observations and anecdotes on the preventive or curative self-medicating behaviour of animals: animals select plants from their environment for their stimulating, relaxing, laxative, anti-parasitic, anti-inflammatory effects, etc. They can ingest them (chew or swallow them), but also simply rub them on a part of their body, for example.

Practitioners offer plants or parts of plants (roots, leaves, flowers) or minerals in various forms. These can be essential oils, macerates, hydrolats, floral waters, dehydrated plants (or parts of plants), etc. The dog selects what they need, in the form they need it.

Koumack was four and a half years old when we had the opportunity to attend a zoopharmacognosy workshop in Belgium. He clearly indicated at what distance an essential oil should be offered to him or where on his body he wanted me to apply a floral water, under the trained eye of the instructor.

When our dogs eat large amounts of grass, is it to settle their stomachs? When they choose a stick in the woods, is the type of wood something they take into consideration?



TURID RUGAAS

Turid Rugaas is an internationally recognised Norwegian lecturer and author. For many years, she travelled the world teaching her method during her IDTE – International Dog Trainer Education.

While she doesn't travel any more, she continues to teach at her school and regularly participates in online conferences, which are attended by participants from all over the world.

During our participation in the first class taught by Marina (who is an IDTE graduate), she recommended that we read Turid Rugaas' book on dog body language entitled 'On Talking Terms with Dogs: Calming Signals.' In it, Turid shows how dogs express themselves through body language and their posture when they're in an uncomfortable or even stressful situation.

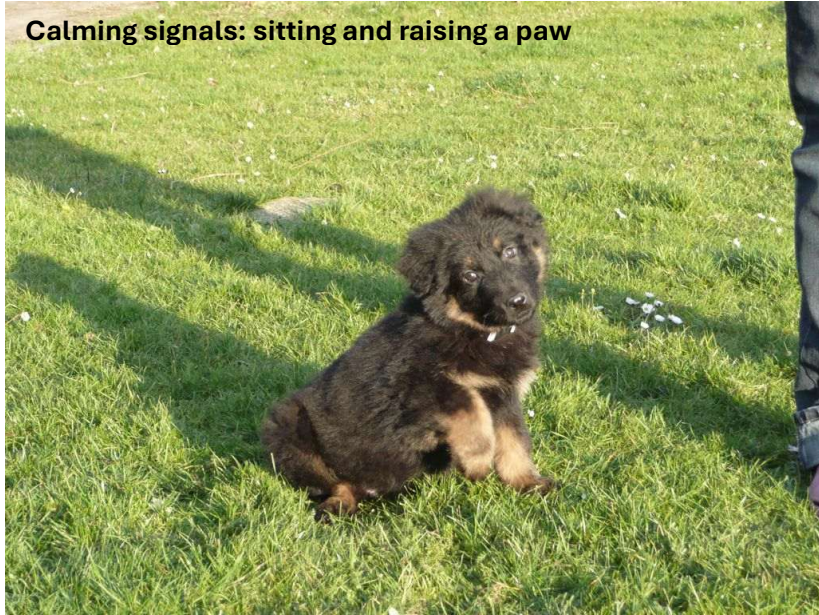
Calming signals are also referred to as communication signals by other dog professionals. Some even refer to micro-communication or macro-communication.

We often hear people talk about a dog that growled, nipped or bit without warning. In most cases, the dog has actually given off subtle signals that those around him never noticed: these are called calming signals.

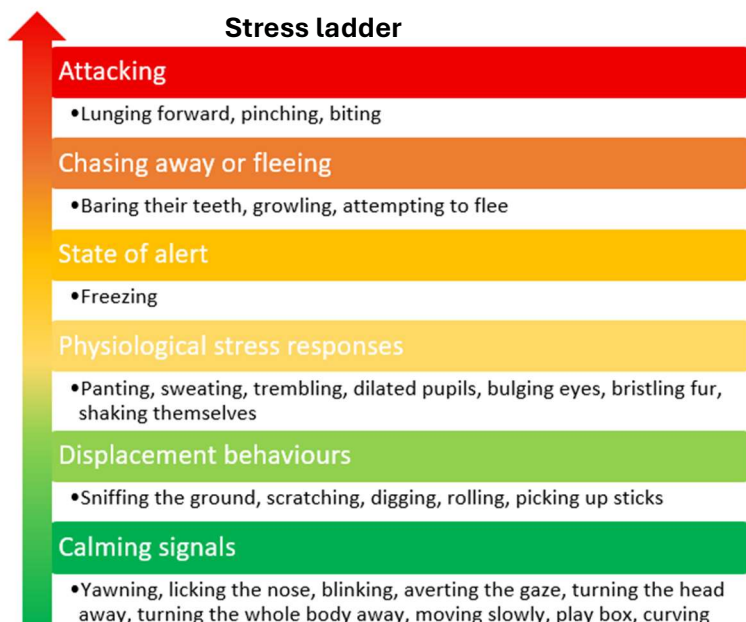
Imagine our dog is in the garden or out for a walk and we try to call them to us. Instead of returning to us as quickly as possible, they come back slowly, stop, start moving again slowly, circle around us, etc. These are calming signals.

When Koumack sat down on the pavement and refused to follow me on a walk, it was a calming signal. Since I wasn't familiar with this concept of canine body language, I used a lure to motivate

(force?) him to follow me. The best approach would have been to respect his signal of discomfort: for example, postponing the walk or replacing it with games in the garden, or even taking the car to find a place where he would have felt more comfortable.



Calming signals are the first signs of discomfort a dog expresses. If these signals are not understood and heeded, the dog will move on to the next level of its stress escalation scale. As Koumack was not listened to, he had to intensify his means of communication.



As I discovered all these concepts, and many more besides, during Marina's lessons, I had only one desire: to learn even more. An IDTE training course was organised in France from 2015 to 2016 and I simply needed to be there.

There were just under twenty of us students. The course lasted one year and was organised into seven modules, each lasting four days. To obtain this diploma, students had to meet attendance requirements, submit all assigned homework and assignments, pass a practical exam, and present a capstone project.

It was a massive undertaking. We gave it our all, and the majority of students successfully completed the training.

Thanks to the continued practical lessons with Marina and the theoretical and practical training provided by Turid Rugaas, almost all of our problems with Koumack were resolved.

Koumack finally seemed to have enough confidence in me and in himself to overcome the challenges he faced in his environment.

The locations for the walks were carefully selected: there had to be enough space to avoid other walkers, and the areas had to be more or less busy depending on Koumack's tolerance threshold, which was constantly expanding.



HABITUATION

PARALLEL WALKING

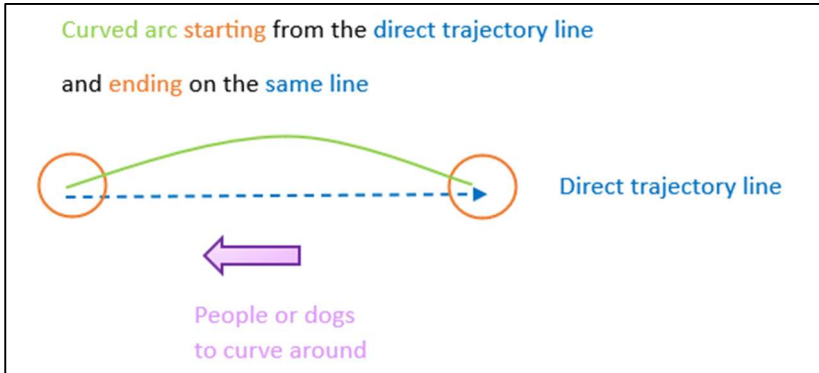
One of the tools that Turid Rugaas recommends is ‘parallel walking.’ This is a habituation technique: the dog gets used to a specific environment at their own pace. This is the technique we used when we started our sessions with Marina.

Each contextual element of the class was chosen in accordance with Koumack's tolerance threshold, whether in terms of the distance between Koumack and the disruptive element, the nature of the disruptive element (walker, jogger, bicycle, car, etc.), or the level of disruption required (calm and slow walker, fast walker, loud talking, large gestures, bicycle stationary or pushed slowly by hand, cyclist in the saddle, etc.), and the direction of movement (parallel, curving around or straight towards Koumack).

Habituation always begins with parallel walking, which is the most polite form of communication in canine language. The distance between the dog and the distracting element depends on the dog's tolerance threshold.

At a later stage, while taking into account the dog's progress, the distracting element crosses the dog's path. At this stage, either the dog walks around the distraction in a curve on their own, or the dog's handler suggests the curved path around the distraction.

Illustration of curving



The programme for each class was decided at the beginning of each session, after Marina had gathered the latest information: How is Koumack doing? How have the last few days been? How am I feeling? Medical or emotional information to share, etc.

The classes were divided into four parts:

1. First habituation session, lasting up to 10 minutes
2. A minimum 30-minute break in the car to allow Koumack time to process and analyse his experience from the first session
3. Second habituation session, up to a maximum of 10 minutes
4. Searching for pâté or treats in an enriched environment, for as long as Koumack was interested in this activity. The aim was to end the class on a pleasant note



After a parallel walking session, it is highly recommended to let the dog sleep as long as they need and rest the next day. Habituation takes a lot of energy and concentration.

We practised parallel walking and curving exercises for several months, gradually increasing the difficulty level as Koumack's tolerance threshold increased.

HAND SIGNAL

During parallel walks or curving bypasses, I developed many skills, such as handling a lead, observing my dog and adapting to the information he gives me, and of course the hand signal.

The hand signal consists of placing your hand (palm facing your dog) between your dog and whatever they are worried about. It is a visual signal that is easy for dogs to understand and easy to do in any situation.

In her book on barking entitled 'Barking: The Sound of a Language', Turid Rugaas describes several problematic situations in everyday life and how to find appropriate solutions using this hand signal.



I used the hand signal to help Koumack when something scared him ('don't worry, everything's fine'); when his interactions with Fripouille were a little rough or when I welcomed a visitor ('please be polite to them'); before getting out of the car, 'wait a moment, please'; or when I couldn't respond immediately to one of his requests (for example, retrieving a toy stuck under a piece of furniture or opening the garden gate for him). It is also very effective for dogs that jump on people.

The hand signal can be used both when the dog is not on a lead and when they are, which requires a little practice 😊.

MANTRAILING

After parallel walking and curving, the logical next step was to try mantrailing.

It involves asking a dog to find a 'missing' person based on a scent sample, by following the path taken by that person (as closely as possible 😊). The aim is to find the person to whom the scent sample belongs, not just any person who happens to be around.

How to explain the rules of the game to Koumack? In fact, there is nothing more natural for a dog than to use their nose to follow a trail in their surroundings.

These natural abilities can cause us problems in everyday life: chasing a cat or a hedgehog in the garden, a hare while out walking, chasing a bicycle, etc. In mantrailing, however, they become an exceptional asset.



Our first mantrailing session took place when Koumack was 4 years old. Marina had obtained permission from a forest ranger to use a section of the undergrowth that was rarely visited by the public. We had just met the other participants of the course, who were complete strangers to Koumack.

One of the participants (the 'victim' to be found) left an item of clothing behind, walked about twenty metres and hid behind a tree, carrying a small box full of liver pâté. I let Koumack out of the car so he could stretch his legs a bit and relieve himself if he needed to. Then, together, we approached the piece of clothing lying on the floor. And I waited, motionless and silently, giving

Koumack time to take the initiative. Koumack easily put his nose to the ground, followed the path taken by the victim, and found her behind a tree. Koumack was taken by surprise, finding himself almost nose to nose with a complete stranger: he barked. We asked the victim to move away from the tree slowly, to be more visible and in a more natural position. I took the reward box and walked away with Koumack so that he could enjoy his reward in peace and quiet.

At that point, I thought that Koumack might well be more suspicious if we repeated the game. Not at all! The victim left to hide somewhere else; Koumack and I arrived together at the scent sample; Koumack followed the trail without difficulty and found the victim. Since the encounter was no longer a surprise, Koumack didn't need to bark. He simply indicated that he had found the victim, naturally moved away, and I followed him to give him his reward.

After that, and always in line with Koumack's progress, the technical difficulty of the tracks increased, and his confidence grew more and more. As he gained confidence in himself and in me, he became increasingly more relaxed. What a joy!

We also varied the environments: scrubland, lawns, car parks, industrial parks, etc., as Koumack's technical and emotional abilities grew.

During a mantrailing session, we followed the trail along a narrow path lined with tall hedges on either side, and came out onto a car park just as a bicycle sped past us. A moment suspended in time: my breath caught in my throat, I gripped my long line as tightly as I could, waiting for the moment when Koumack would lunge forward, drawn by the bicycle. And Koumack lifted his nose from

the ground to look at the bike, put his nose back down, and continued searching for our victim of the day. Mind-blowing!



We trailed with a 12-metre-long line, which I always let dangle behind me. I later learned how to keep the rest of my long line in my hand, which is a matter of safety. The long line could get caught on something in the environment, or a passer-by could step on it, etc.

Practising mantrailing requires a lot of organisation and preparation of equipment:

- A backpack,
- Water and a bowl,
- A long line and a suitable harness
- Lickable reward boxes (licking makes for a longer-lasting reward and lowers the heart rate)

- An object with our scent, enclosed in a jar or plastic bag, which is needed when we hide for one of the other participant's dogs.

Organising mantrailing sessions requires a fair amount of theoretical and practical knowledge. And as with any activity, the organiser's approach is important.

Some will let the dog 'cheat', take shortcuts or pick up scents in the air. Others will force the dog to keep their nose to the ground on the trail, almost to the centimetre: this is another discipline called 'tracking', not mantrailing.

Choosing an ethical, caring professional who shares our values is essential.

LEARNED HELPLESSNESS

The term learned helplessness was coined in the 1960s by Martin Seligman, a behavioural psychologist.

This is a state similar to depression induced in an individual or animal experiencing failures repeatedly, and without any control over what is happening to them. In other words, by continually experiencing negative situations beyond their control, individuals eventually stop trying to find solutions to overcome them.

Animals with learned helplessness may appear calm, well-behaved or obedient, when in fact they are in deep emotional distress.

With a few good habits, we can prevent our pets from having to experience this kind of suffering in their daily lives: we should give them as many choices as possible and accept that our dogs may ask for what they need when they need it.

In Koumack's case, our first experience was our first assignment for Marina: to allow Koumack to take the initiative in a field while I sat quietly. Koumack needed time on his first attempt, but much less time on his second.

Fortunately for him (and ultimately for us 😊), Koumack expressed his distress. We avoided learned helplessness, phew!

Some ideas to consider when offering choices: allowing your dog to choose the route for the walk, responding to your dog's requests, offering a choice among several different chews, offering several types of water (tap water, bottled water, rainwater, cistern water, spring water, etc.), allowing your dog to sleep in several different places, etc.

There are many possibilities. Our imagination is the only limit.

DANA

I successfully graduated from Turid Rugaas' IDTE training course in November 2016.

The subject of my final project was 'what activities are available for dogs' and had two objectives:

- To **provide information** about canine communication, stress in dogs and why mental stimulation activities are beneficial.
- **To provide ideas for activities**

via 3 distribution channels:

- **A website:** www.activiteschiens.be
- **A book:** available for free on the website, and Koumack was already on the cover
- **Brochures:** also available for free on the website

At the beginning of this course, I was still working at the dog club on Sundays, and I attended Marina's classes as much as I could. She had started offering classes on Saturdays to accommodate us 😊.

I was lucky enough to share this adventure with a member of the dog club, who also wanted to take Marina's classes. A revelation for her!

With Turid Rugaas' diploma in hand, I hoped to continue assisting Marina, but as fate would have it, Marina broke her leg, with a long recovery period ahead of her.

It was agreed that I would take over the educational and behavioural classes, and that our friend, my fellow graduate, would take over the mantrailing sessions.

In June 2017, Marina received a phone call about an urgent situation. A couple was considering giving up their dog because of unwanted behaviour: running away, pulling on the lead when out walking, being aggressive towards the grandchildren, excessive barking, attacking the rubbish bin and other issues. This was my first home consultation since I had been filling in for Marina, who was still recovering.

Here is a summary of my intervention with this family:

- June 2017: a two-and-a-half-hour conversation at their home, during which I listened to their story and suggested possible solutions. Unfortunately, our conversation ended with ‘she just has to obey.’ Hardly a great success.
- Early July 2017: one of my emails said, *“Thank you for your phone call earlier. The first signs of progress are visible, which is good news.”*
- End of July 2017: we learned from the farm where Dana was born that the couple had finally decided to part with her
- In the days that followed, we organised an animal communication session with Dana, Fripouille and Koumack to get their opinion on Dana coming to stay with us.
- 12 August 2017: I went to pick up Dana, whom we had decided to foster.

‘Foster’, because the initial plan was to help Dana find her feet. Her stress level was so high that her body smelled like rancid oil.

When bringing the palm of the hand close to her, one could feel the heat radiating from her body up to 3 or 4 cm away.

She needed comfort, understanding, patience, and love. Above all, she needed a sense of security. As soon as she entered the house, she chose to perch on the back of a sofa tight by the window. Like on a watch tower, she was able to watch us while covering her back: it was impossible for us to get behind her.

Her intense, questioning gaze quickly won us over, and we soon decided to adopt her. Dana had touched us all deeply.



A few days after she arrived at our house, we did another animal communication session, during which she told us she was grateful for her new life at home. She loved the house, she loved her new routine, she felt she could trust me, but she wondered when it would all end. We assured her that it wouldn't end, and that we were her new family, 'Dana's tribe' - a reference to the French song "La tribu de Dana" 😊.

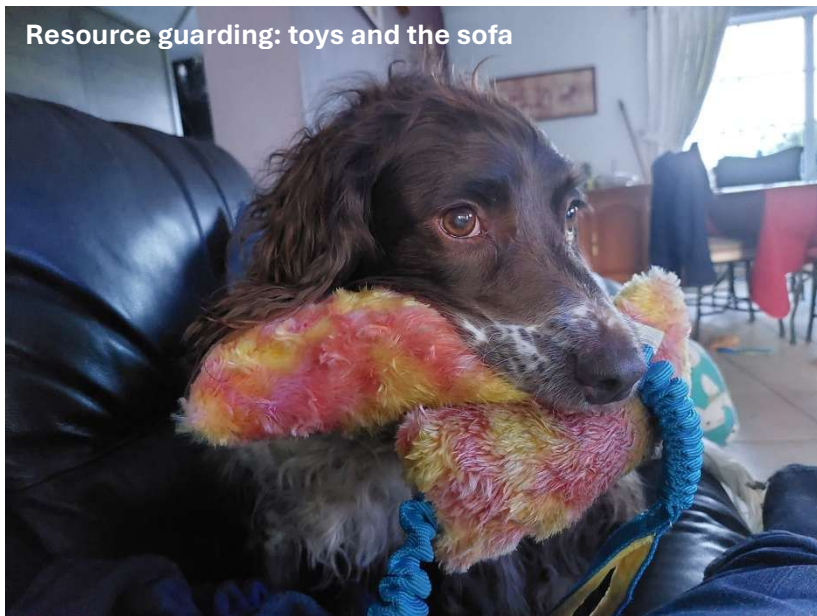
From the moment of her arrival at our home, we realised the magnitude of the task ahead: she was harassing Fripouille and Koumack and barking incessantly.

We were still very saddened by the passing of Sugus, who had died three and a half months earlier after we had nursed him through many months of ill health. We were desperately in need of sleep, and Dana's barking filled our nights as well as our days.

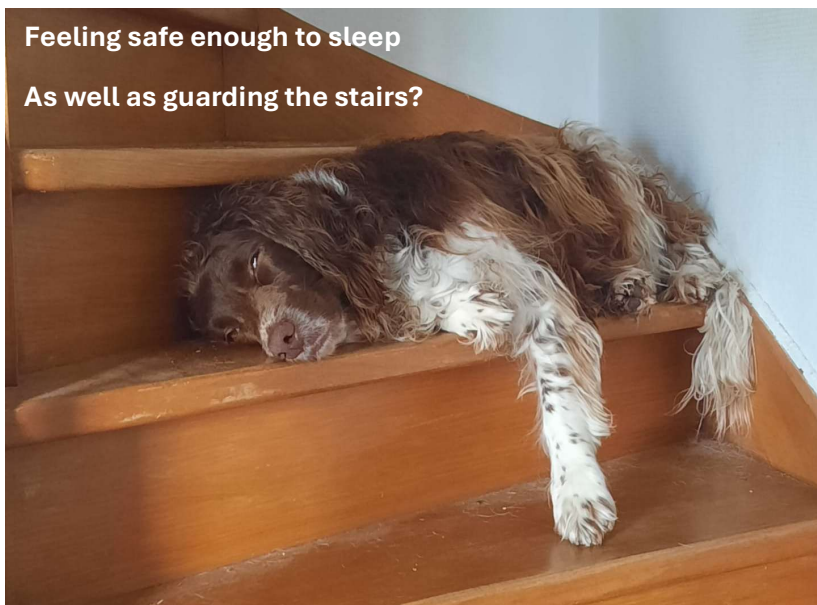
And above all, she was guarding resources (including, but not limited to: the stairs, the hallway, food, water, the armchair, toys, cushions, the bed, me 😬).

On the first day, she followed me everywhere I went. I could feel the physical contact of her body against my leg. When it was time to go to bed, she followed me there, too, curling up in my arms. Remember, it was mid-August and it was hot. With Dana in his arms, it was veeeeery hot!

Resource guarding: toys and the sofa



**Feeling safe enough to sleep
As well as guarding the stairs?**



Dana's story is important in this recounting of Koumack's life because he was an incredible source of support for her.

Dana showed very few calming signals: she mostly froze and showed the whites of her eyes (also known as 'whale eyes'). When she broke out of her motionless state, she would either relax, yawn or shake it off; or she would lunge forward and pinch or bite.

When Dana froze, we froze too. Tension was immediately evident on Fripouille's face. I analysed the situation to see how I could offer Dana an alternative: help her break out of her state of immobility by reducing the tension.

Fripouille and my husband were pinched or bitten numerous times over several months. I was only the target of such outbursts at the very beginning after we adopted Dana.

Koumack, meanwhile, was able to handle Dana's emotional rollercoaster right away. We were able to tell from Koumack's body language whether Dana was still in the orange zone or had just moved into the red zone. He also knew how to bring Dana back to the orange zone, or even the green zone:

- move slowly,
- put himself between Dana and the other family member who was likely to get pinched or bitten,
- offering her an alternative, such as moving to a different place in the house

Koumack was our barometer for Dana's emotions. When she froze, we just had to glance at Koumack to decide on our strategy.

Koumack had become Dana's mentor, just as Sugus had been his when he was a puppy. The circle was complete.



Koumack and Dana, two kindred

BEING WELL SUPPORTED

VESTIBULAR SYNDROME

For quite some time, Koumack had been unable to walk up the stairs and had been sleeping on the ground floor. We woke up one morning in September, and Koumack (two months shy of his twelfth birthday) was having a hard time standing. He staggered and swayed like a drunkard.

At 7 a.m., I was able to contact our vet who did the laser treatments. Based on my description of his symptoms (loss of balance, inability to stand, and especially the rapid side-to-side movements of his eyes) she immediately suspected that it might be vestibular syndrome.

Vestibular syndrome is a disorder of the vestibular system, which is a sensory organ located in the inner ear. It is involved in maintaining balance and spatial awareness.

Our general vet examined Koumack in the morning and confirmed his colleague's diagnosis. Koumack received prompt and excellent care. He regained very acceptable mobility and balance within a few days.

A recurrence three weeks later was again quickly and effectively treated by our general vet. The crisis was less severe, and we knew what the symptoms meant. As soon as the first signs appeared, we understood and reacted.

From that moment on, we watched Koumack like a hawk. I slept with him on the ground floor and we organised our schedules so that Koumack was left alone as little as possible. And when we were away, a camera installed for this purpose allowed us to keep an eye on him. Most of the time, he slept.



We also rearranged the house so that he could get into his chair more easily, which had become his favourite place to relax, and laid rugs on the floor to give him more freedom of movement: he could drink, eat and access different places to lie down by following the rugs.

HIS LAST WEEK

Monday, May 20th, 2024, was a public holiday: Whit Monday.

Koumack, Dana and I walked around the garden at around 7:30 a.m., as usual, before I left the house. I was teaching that morning. Koumack was taking his time; it was “one of those days”, as they say. I wasn't worried: he had relieved himself and eaten well the night before.

When I returned from class around 1 p.m., my husband was on high alert: Koumack seemed exhausted and hadn't eaten his lunch, but he went out into the garden and drank normally. He was able to contact our general vet, who recommended that he continue to monitor the situation and come in for a visit the next day.

Then my husband had to leave the house for a while.

An hour later, Koumack's breathing was short, rapid and shallow. Our thermometer read 40.5°C, which indicated a very high fever. I doubted this reading because when I tried the thermometer on myself, the temperature it showed was unlikely.

Even though the thermometer didn't seem reliable, Koumack's breathing was worrying me, so I decided to contact our general vet again. She responded once more, even though she was not on

duty and in the middle of a family celebration. She confirmed that we needed to see a vet urgently.

That's when I realised how difficult it was to find a list of veterinarians on call. The phone number listed on the Internet led to an answering machine with a message that made no sense. No one was picking up.

I then contacted two veterinary clinics in our area. As Koumack was unable to get into the car, despite the ramp we usually used, so we needed a house call from the vet. This is a service that these clinics did not provide, but they gave me the names of veterinarians on call (or not 😞).

At number 5 on the list, a vet answered and after a few moments, he agreed to come to our house at the end of the day.

During the afternoon, Koumack had asked to go to the garden. He walked slowly, but was able to relieve himself. There was no diarrhoea at that time. Around 8 p.m., he vomited for the first time.

The vet arrived at 9:30 p.m.: he confirmed that Koumack had a fever and that his stomach was tender. We took a blood sample and Koumack was given antibiotics, anti-inflammatories, Buscopan and anti-fever medication intravenously.

The next day, Tuesday, at 8:00 a.m., the on-call vet contacted us again to check on Koumack. We were very touched by this gesture. He contacted our general vet and provided him with all the necessary medical information. That same evening, we received the results of the blood test: the liver and pancreas markers were slightly elevated, but it was not a life-threatening emergency. Koumack's body temperature was still 40°C. No diarrhoea, no further vomiting.

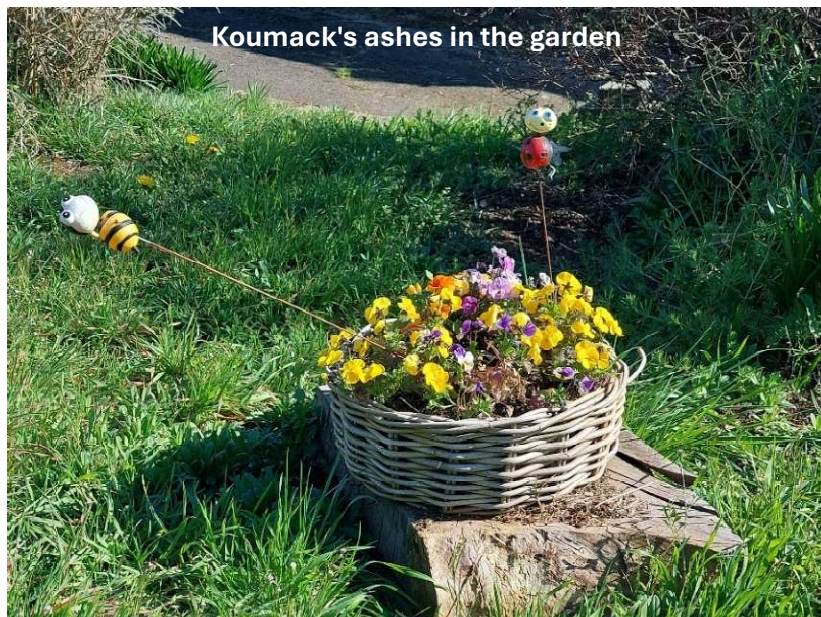
On Wednesday, his temperature finally began to drop (39.5°C). Our general vet came by that morning. Koumack's belly was soft. She noticed a small amount of matter (faecal?) at the base of the small intestine, even though he had last eaten on Sunday evening. With the help of the vet, I managed to get him to go for a little stroll in the garden. Later that day, when we tried again with my husband, Koumack refused to move. No vomiting, only very slight diarrhoea.

On Thursday, his body temperature was normal, at 38.5°C. However, Koumack still refused to move. No vomiting, but the diarrhoea was starting to become severe. The auscultation of his abdomen still revealed nothing obvious. As he refused to get up, we brought him water to drink. He also refused to eat.

We requested an emergency animal communication session. Koumack told us that if we insisted on further tests, he would go along with it, but that it was pointless: he was ready to leave... Dana was ready too, and so was I.

Our vet and my husband were inclined to run some tests, as there was no clear clinical explanation for Koumack's condition. So, we made an appointment for Friday morning with the vet who had helped us on the public holiday on Monday, for an ultrasound and an X-ray.

The night from Thursday to Friday was very difficult: several bouts of diarrhoea, excessive salivation, short and rapid breathing. When my husband got up on Friday morning, he only had to glance at us to realise what was happening. Medical tests were no longer on the agenda: Koumack's suffering was written all over his face. We called our vet to arrange Koumack's final journey.



OTHER MYSTERIES

After Koumack's departure, we noticed new changes in Dana, but also in myself.

Dana had still occasionally been relieving herself in the house when a situation caused too many intense emotional changes. 'It had to come out' without delay, as she had told us during animal communications.

After Koumack was gone, it never happened again.

For as long as I can remember, I have always been afraid of spiders. A first anecdote, which has nothing to do with Koumack, helped reduce this phobia. Since Koumack passed away, this fear has diminished even more significantly. I can be in the same room as a spider without feeling paralysed. That's certainly a significant change.

Most people find the chirping of birds very charming. That wasn't the case for me; I always found that repetitive little noise very annoying.

Ever since Koumack left, I've been enjoying this little tune.

A LITTLE CLOSER TO THE STARS

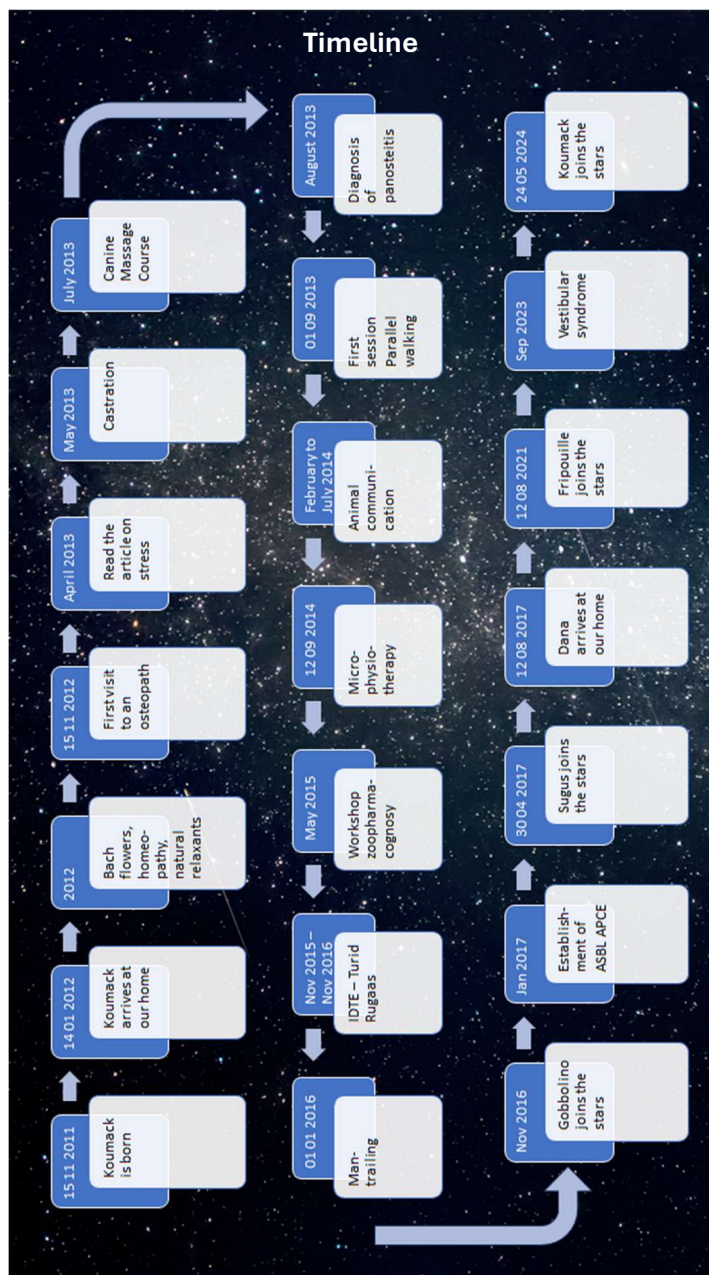
We were lucky that Koumack's path crossed ours.

We were fortunate that he expressed his discomfort. If he had slipped into learned helplessness, he would have suffered in silence, and we would still be practising so-called “classic” dog training, supposedly positive and benevolent.

We were fortunate that Koumack was the catalyst for a move, a career change, an open-mindedness towards spiritual practices, a respect for the true nature of dogs, incredibly enriching friendships and professional encounters, and so much more.

One thing led to another, and we met many other caring practitioners. If they are not mentioned in this account, it is because these encounters were more the doing of Sugus, Fripouille or Dana than Koumack: hydrotherapy, fresh food, shiatsu, laser treatment, etc.

I hope you welcome into your life a companion who will bring you the greatest enrichment.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks go first and foremost to Koumack, who was an extraordinary companion in my life.

I would also like to thank our osteopathic vet for all the excellent care he gave Koumack throughout his life, and to all the other members of the family 😊. Thank you also for providing me with Koumack's complete medical records, which were a cornerstone of the documentary research necessary for this book.

Thank you to Marina Gates Fleming for sharing her knowledge in the past and continuing to do so today. Marina also contributed greatly to the documentary research, thanks to her phenomenal memory.

And finally, a huge thank you to all the practitioners, regardless of their area of expertise, who took care of Koumack throughout his life.

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