

Excerpt from *Finding Community:* *Entering Community Gracefully*

Like a Wolf Entering a Wolf Pack . . .

You can enter a community awkwardly, or you can stumble around a bit first before getting the hang of the place, or you can enter gracefully and easily from the beginning, triggering the least amount of subtle defensiveness in existing community members. I want it to be easy for you to enter, so I respectfully suggest you enter your new community with the attitude of a wolf joining a wolf pack.

A lone wolf can't just waltz up to a tightly cohesive wolf pack and say, in wolf body-language, "Howdy, I think I'll just join ya'll tonight and howl along." The other wolves would instinctively perceive this as a serious breach of species etiquette and drive the intruder away with growls and snarls.

So wolves who want to join a pack have to ease into the situation gradually, gracefully — and they've got a ritual for doing this. Lone wolves first let the wolves in the pack hear them howl from some distance away. The others know the new wolf is in the area, but he is not a threat; he's just announcing his presence in the general area. After awhile the lone wolf also gets upwind of the pack and lets them get a whiff of him. Now they've heard him and smelled him. Gradually, oh-so-gradually, he comes closer, and at some point in his courtship, and believe me, he's courting them just like you and I would court a community

we want to join, he lets the pack see him, but from a ways off. By this time they know who he is: he's that new guy in the neighborhood. He's not as alarming and potentially dangerous, because he's a known entity. Not "one of *us*," to be sure, but at least no longer a strange phenomenon instinctively responded to as a threat. At last comes the day the wolf asks if he can join their pack. He approaches them gradually; they know he's coming. He enters their space crouching low, his tail down, his ears laid back in a submissive, non-threatening body language. Then he flops down, legs curled up in that "I'm harmless" position, revealing his vulnerable belly and throat. While ripping out throats and bellies is what wolves *do* when they kill prey, for some reason when a wolf bares its vulnerable underside to other wolves, they usually do not attack; some wolf instinct stops them.

In growl 'n snarl language the wolves say, essentially, "You don't know anything yet. We're the ones with status here. You've got no rank and no privileges and if you ever did you'd have to earn them first. So there!" And the new wolf lying there is essentially saying in wolf body language, "I know I don't know anything yet. You're the ones with status. I've got no rank and I don't presume anything. Looky here, you've got me, here's my throat." The pack finishes up their dominance message, the new wolf rolls over and, he and the others make each other's acquaintance more thoroughly through sniffs and licks, now that pack rank order is established and everyone feels safe.

Et tu, Lupus. We'd do well to consider wolf packs when entering a community, because the same kinds of issues are at stake in our species. You're new and unknown. What kind of subtle, barely conscious threat might you potentially represent? What kind of change to the group might you potentially bring them? Are you someone who will be dominant and pushy? Will you be submissive and needy? Might you become a good pal? Might you be someone to mate with? If you're thinking, "Oh, this is stupid," that's OK too. But please know that these subtle kinds of dynamics can and often do take place when a new person joins a group, and any confident-but-humble behavior you show to your new pack can make a difference in your favor. I'd like you to *not* come across like Sonya or Randy; I'd like your experience of joining your new community to be easy and pleasant for you all. So please take a tip from the Wolf Book of Etiquette and, in human style, enter your community mildly, courteously, and yes, humbly.

—From Chapter 24: "Entering Community Gracefully"