

Living in the Moment (or, An Old Friend Teaches Life Lessons)

At an hour that some people might easily consider more as the middle of the night than as morning, my alarm buzzes to announce the start of the day. After an initial drowsy moment on my feet, I get my bearings and plunge into a routine that has become *de rigueur* for more than a decade: toss on season-appropriate clothes, tiptoe downstairs, put on my shoes (boots, whatever), and head out the door. Every day: walk, run, hike, bike, ski, or swim. (Yes, it is dark for much of the year.) When finished, I'm invigorated (or pooped), and it's time to do some household chores, tap away on the computer, tend to personal business, do a little "work work," or try to knock off any one of the sundry items on my ever-present, never-shrinking "to do" list. By the time I actually head to my job, I've already put four of five hours behind me. And on the back side of the workday, things are usually equally hectic, so that to have an hour of relaxation before resting my heavy head on a pillow is a real luxury.

This crammed, clock-straining day is increasingly commonplace for many of us. Leisure time is becoming endangered, going the way of hand-smocked dresses and penned letters. In our effort to whip through our catalog of chores, we rush about so wildly that the wind of our energies blurs our sight and deafens our ears to what is in front of and around us.

Last year, one more assignment was added to my sunrise roster: taking my old campaigner of a dog for his early constitutional. To walk him separately was a major shift, not only logistically, but also in my mindset. For about eleven years, our two dogs had been my ever-present companions on my treks, their pirouettes and leaps confirming that each excursion was as eagerly anticipated as the last, say, ten, twenty, or three thousand. But when the male began to show signs of his senescence, the pattern had to change. Our miles-long expeditions were reduced to a single mile, to a fraction thereof, and then to a few hundred feet; instead of going around the pond, we sauntered to it.

Under the sage and gentle guidance of our caring vet (ask me, please!), Timber has maintained—gained, perhaps—an enviable quality of life for a dog of his years, and he still greets each morning's jaunt with exuberant, albeit clumsy, orbits of delight. The long, light, floating stride of his sire sometime along the way was transformed into a sewing machine trot; the mad bolts and

dashes after squirrels and chipmunks, imaginary or real, were gradually replaced by choppy rocking-horse lopes; the rippling muscles and powerful, athletic build diminished to a shadow of their former strength. His spirit, though, remains a pup's.

Most mornings, Timber takes "going for a walk" at face value; that is, "walk" becomes the operative verb. He sets the pace. Once his metronome is calibrated, that's it; there is no cajoling or convincing him to hustle along; if he is in a moseying mode, mosey it is. His front legs now bowed with arthritis, he pads along—a biscuit-colored polar bear ambling down the path—perfectly content doing dog-things in his doggie world. Sniff, roll, mark, snort, circle, pause. His limited physical capabilities have not dampened his engagement with his surroundings . . . he circumnavigates through them with the same gusto for life, just with a new, compensating set of physical tactics.

For someone who is accustomed to perambulating through the day at the most rapid rate possible, at first it was an inner test for me to *s-l-o-w* down to match Timber's pace, to be fluid enough each outing to harmonize with his tempo de jour. Now, though, I eagerly anticipate going out with him (them, actually, as his sister joins us). These little rambles are a quiet oasis in the day, a precious jewel of time I'd never held before. There can be no hurrying: he does what he can, how he can. I relinquish contriving to control the stroll, no longer dashing to return to my litany of tasks; however many minutes we need, well take. To have this imposed relaxation has become a palliative for the rest of the day's hustle and bustle, and it has strengthened and deepened the bond between my dog and me.

I now thoughtfully note his movements, the flop of his ears, the nuances of his expressions, the sounds of his footfalls, the pendulum of his tail. Had you asked me if I did these things last year, I would have answered in the affirmative. In retrospect, I realize I was not as fully present as I thought. Not only were my legs moving briskly, but my mind was also racing as random ideas furtively competed for top billing in the circus of thoughts my brain hosted. These days, though, I try diligently to dam the flood of mental chattering, planning, and hypothesizing and to be as "in the moment" as possible, appreciating the beauty that envelopes me. Tracking the moon's travels through the sky; inhaling the muskiness of the decaying leaves; keeping an open ear for the sounds of the awakening day; noting the gravel beneath my

feet—or the frost, or the dew; focusing on deep breaths of cleansing air. There's an abundance of riches for senses and soul. More, there's the awareness of forming and changing relationships with not just my pals, but with every facet of the encircling world.

These pre-dawn shifts in attitude have created an awakening to be mindful of relationships in other situations: hiking can take on a new flavor; sitting on the porch with my husband or sister is an opportunity to relish interactions with people and nature; chopping vegetables gives rise to looking at produce in a fresh, new way. If nothing else, I have become increasingly conscious of the myriad *types* of relationships there are, let alone all the discrete ones. Usually we apply the term "relationship" to mean a connection between or among people. In actuality, though, we have a relationship with virtually everyone and everything we encounter, every day.

Think about all the relationships in your life . . . and try to take the time to savor as many as you can.