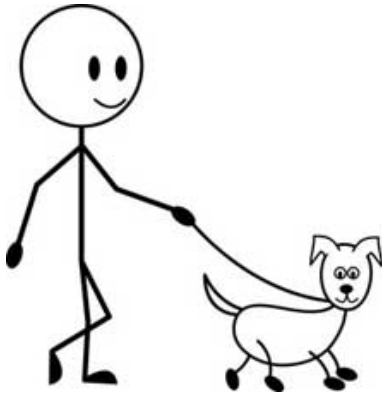


Who's Walking Who?

Written by Jack Sparacino

Wednesday, 08 May 2013 08:24 - Last Updated Wednesday, 08 May 2013 08:55



You sure can cycle plenty of thoughts through your head while walking your dog. Like this one: maybe I'm not really in control here. Dixie, our hyper friendly and enthusiastic Yorkie, like many other dogs, has a mind of her own.

One moment she's got her nose shoved in some pine straw or grass, the next she's dragging me down the street, then a blink later she wants to backtrack and dive into a shrub. Dixie's usually got a stronger sense about exactly where we should go than I do, so if the weather's nice we often follow her lead. It's a process.

Of course we all like to believe we exert at least some control over our lives and often we do. What to say, eat, wear, buy or sell; who to spend time with, ask for advice, work for; where to live, spend our leisure time. "Believe" is the key word here, and there are decent psychological tests that measure our sense of being in control in our lives. But not so fast. From mundane activities all the way up to life affirming behaviors, there's often barely a fillet knife's edge worth of difference between being in control versus being controlled. A few examples come to mind.

In my younger days, offshore fishing was a passion. About six of us from work loved to go tuna fishing out of Point Pleasant Beach, New Jersey. We'd get up at scary hours in Connecticut, grab coffee and muffins at a 7-Eleven, and drive three hours south to Clark's marina. Four hours or so later doing 20 knots and we'd be trolling the fabulous Hudson Canyon. Outriggers, downriggers, the latest electronics, great mates, you name it. Captain Phil Dulanie and the Canyon Runner crew had it all and we loved the total experience, from pesky alarm clock all the way to the best sushi and grilled tuna steaks ever. Six guys in control.

After a slow spell on one trip, Phil got a call on the radio from another boat close by. They were into a nice school. The engines growled back up to cruise speed and off we went. We

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rendezvoused with the other captain as dawn cracked the night open like a can of Bud. I hadn't slept in a day and was beat up from hours of boating in bumpy water. We took turns on the tuna and since I'd hooked the last fish, I was now 6th in line. The rotation eventually got back to me and my rod arced down fiercely toward the waterline. That fish, a 60 pound or so yellowfin, had no intention of joining us and yanked me back and forth across the stern, my thighs slamming the gunnels and breathing turning to gasping.

Phil peered down from the bridge laughing and said, "Hey Jack, who walks who when you take your dog out? That fish is beating the (stuffing, in effect) out of you." Everyone got a kick out of seeing me struggle, no longer in control of anything except not being pulled overboard (and, somehow, not losing that fish but only because of our mate's fabulous gaff work).

Others' seafaring ventures have had more serious outcomes. The cruise ship industry provides many precious trips but not every voyage stays in control despite all the regulations and precautions. One that made headlines recently involved hundreds of passengers being subject to a lack of food, the loss of air conditioning and running water, out of commission bathrooms—a harrowing mess. It took days for the disaster to be brought back under control, with some passengers unlikely to cruise again.

How about this example, even more frightening: you do everything reasonable to safeguard your health. Smart diet, exercise, regular screenings and checkups. Sensible shoes, even. Everything looks under control. Then seemingly out of nowhere comes something awful... a brain tumor, heart problem, accident or the contraction of a super virus. All that initial planning sure made sense but it just blew out the window. Then too, we have the metaphorical case of someone who is otherwise doing alright and then gets "hit by a bus." There are just so many preventive dials a person can turn.

Here's a paradoxical illustration (and aren't almost all of us unprepared for it?): winning the lottery. One day Mr. Buster Schparkle is happily plodding along, enjoying time with Mrs. Schparkle, going to work, raising their children, seeing friends and relatives, paying the bills. Then a winning lottery ticket flutters from the sky. Half a zillion dollars, the Schparkles' worries are over, life is good!

But wait a minute. Also out of nowhere come skyrocketing money management responsibilities and hoards of finance wienies eager to help them cope with their new fortune. From some of the same black holes come long lost friends, relatives, and dubious "charities" like Friends of Buster

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who sure could use a hand. What to do to stay in control? Change phone numbers, go incognito, maybe even move or pull a Howard Hughes. Perhaps write a giant check to their church or a reputable charity, open a nice bottle of wine and they're back in the saddle. For a while, at least. Maybe.

Or we can consider some can-do, industrious career folks. Well positioned and contributing nicely to their outstanding company. Everything is just dandy. Then along comes chaos as a key funding source is cut off. Or a fierce competitor makes a game changing innovation and customers bolt. Maybe their favorite boss of all time quits unexpectedly or gets fired and her replacement is awful, even says (horrors!) that they need to 'reassess their relationship with the firm.' Or maybe the company is bought out or goes bankrupt after all kinds of hard work and dedication. Egad. And to think only yesterday they were in the driver's seat.

And how about this? Maybe you've been a darned good planner (and bullet dodger) and all is well in your lovely Lowcountry niche. You've done everything to ready your home for a major storm, faithfully marched through hurricane checklists and practiced the drills, caught up on the laundry, gassed up the car or truck and stockpiled bottled water. Then along comes a tornado with 180 mile an hour winds and not much weather service warning (welcome back to 1813, future dweller). Your home is obliterated, trees ripped up, neighborhood destroyed. A sense of confidence and tranquility erased by climate change and a bad luck twister. Right, Dorothy?

Hardly anyone likes the anxiety that usually comes with being out of control, being walked instead of doing the walking, so to speak. So we pay attention, look out for our family's wellbeing, take precautions and preventive measures as if we were grabbing barbequed chicken wings at a tail gating party, buy insurance, put our faith in a higher power. After all that, take a deep breath and hope like crazy for the best. Including a fervent wish that the wonderful furry friend at the end of the leash knows exactly where she's going.

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