

## **Afraid of the Dog**

She was driving home from work early one weekday in late September, it was warm, too hot, to her way of thinking. She thought, "Why does fall never come in the Puget Sound area until it is winter in the rest of the country?" The window was rolled down, the breeze felt good, it helped a little. She didn't have air-conditioning in her beater car, but that was OK, she saved a ton of money by not having a more snazzy car, and her wonderful husband kept her old beater running.

She was rounding a curve, she was now in her own neighborhood. There were other cars ahead of her and behind her, it was well into rush hour, little kids were getting out of school. And that was just what she saw ahead of her on the side of the road, a little kid. He was a little boy, about six years old. He was clutching a piece of paper in his right hand, probably a drawing he had done that day in school. He was crying.

In front of him stood a medium-sized dog that looked like a pit bull. It was only medium-sized, but its shoulders were about chest-high on the little boy. The dog was about six feet in front of him. It stood absolutely still, no wagging tail, and its head was lowered. It was looking straight at the boy, it had come into the boy's path as he was walking home, and the dog would not move.

The little boy was so scared, he was crying so hard. She had heard him and saw him at the same time, taken the scene in, in a flash, and within less than a second made plans to turn left into the intersecting street. There were no oncoming cars, she stopped beside the curb immediately after turning left off the main road. All the cars kept zipping by, it was rush hour, everyone had places to go.

She walked across the street, trying not to run, she must seem calm. "Hello!" she hollered to the little boy as she approached him. Then she was looking down at him and reaching her hand down and taking his hand in hers. "Hi!" she said, smiling, "Don't be afraid of the dog. Come with me, don't worry about the dog, I'm a grown-up, and I'm not afraid of dogs, at all." As she said this she was walking toward the path where the dog stood, and since she was holding the little boy's hand, the little boy was propelled by circumstances to walk along with her, and around the dog, her body between him and the dog, and within ten seconds they were both beyond the dog. The dog was left behind.

Another 15 steps and they turned the corner onto the street where he lived. Far down the street a woman was standing, and when the lady driver and the little boy turned the corner, the lady down the street raised her hand way above her head and waved, and called out. The little boy immediately let go of the hand of

his adult escort, and yelled, "Mom!" and he started to run the half-block toward her. The driver stopped walking, she yelled to the mother, "There was a dog!"

"Well", she thought, "he'll tell her all about it. I hope they do something about that dog. It shouldn't be on the loose like that." She watched as the little boy continued to run, she was facing west, and the sun was in her eyes now. She shielded her eyes with her hand, she saw the little boy reach his mother, but she couldn't make out their exact movements. The two women, strangers, waved to each other.

Then the driver turned around and went back to her car. And then on to the daycare, where her own children were waiting, she needed to pick them up. There was an evening of conversation and dinner and household chores ahead, a life to get on with, a husband and children to love. On her way back to her car, she barely noticed that the dog was no longer in the middle of the sidewalk.

Years later, when she thought back on the incident, she wondered why she had ignored the whisper of fear that wafted through her consciousness when she was walking/running across the street to help the little boy bypass the pit bull. Why had she immediately dismissed that whisper of fear? She was a person with a lot of moral courage, but almost no physical courage.

The reason, she realized, was her capacity for recklessness. It was true, and a logical thing to consider, that the dog might attack any person who intruded on its personal space, and at the time, that personal space was on the sidewalk where she and the little boy needed to pass. But here was what she had thought:

"That dog is not in attack mode, it's still taking in cues from its environment. I am part of that environment, and what it's going to sense is that someone is coming close to it; and the person coming close to it is alpha. Yes, alpha. Because, any dog is going to sense that I am a dog lover, and a dog owner, I am familiar with dogs, and the one thing I exude is confidence that, as a human being, I am alpha to a dog.

I have five dogs at home, I am used to dogs, and I know what I'm doing. The dog will sense these things, in the purposefulness of my stride, in my ignoring the presence of the dog. For human beings have plans, and dogs accept that human beings do things in ways that dogs have to sit and watch, and may not understand. This action that I'm taking now, in walking toward the little boy and ignoring the dog, says to the dog, you are not as important as my plans are, because human beings frequently have plans that dogs do not understand.

I will be indicating to the dog that this is one of those times, where someone who is alpha to you is going to do something that you don't understand, you have to

observe and draw whatever doggy conclusions you can. It is the same when you are around your owner. You may not understand, but you have to accept, anyway. This is part of the tragedy of being a dog, and not a human being, it is unfair, but there is no way out of it, once you are born a dog.

I am sure of the truth of what I surmise; but even if the worst happens, and the dog, for some inexplicable reason, does not accept that I am alpha, I know what I have to do, right now, and that is, I have to help this little boy. That knowledge will somehow serve me if worse comes to worst, and I have to improvise. Just as I know that I am alpha, I know that I can improvise."

That is what the woman who had stopped for the little boy thought, in retrospect. That is what had been going on in her mind. So she had ignored the logic of fear and focused on her desire to get what she wanted, namely, to get that little boy to a place where he would no longer be afraid. She wanted gratification! And she was going to ignore logic to get it! So, she had not been courageous, she had given full rein to her capacity for recklessness.

She laughed to herself as she thought this, because every one of her three children possessed the same recklessness. That recklessness was a fearsome thing, it could lead her or her children, grown now, to do dangerous things, potentially. But that ability to make your way in the midst of danger was one of the things that had enabled human beings to survive. Yes, you could even say, one of the things that has enabled the human species to survive!

It was years later that she mulled this paradox: to survive, people have to avoid danger; but to survive, people sometimes have to ignore danger.

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