

Walking My Dog

Dale Easley's Blog

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Harold, eager for his walk.

For years, I have started most days with a cup of coffee and a walk with my dog(s). For the first two years of my elder daughter's life, such was our routine nearly every day. I started her in a chest carrier, facing me. When the weather got colder in the fall after she was born in July, I sewed a flannel sack with a drawstring top and would place her inside it, then into the carrier, topped with a fuzzy white hat that my sister had given her. We lived in New Orleans at the time, often strolling on the levees or near Lake Pontchartrain.

Morning walks with my dog have been one of the healthiest parts of my life. I have struggled off and on with depression and anxiety for much of my life, and the daily walks have helped me control it. At one time, before my wife and

kids, my daily walks seemed the only worthwhile part of my day. I had recently received tenure at the University of New Orleans, what should be a time of celebration for any academic. Instead, I plunged into one of the darkest times of my life. At the time, I was also going through some personal development courses that helped me see that I had spent my entire life jumping through other people's hoops, starting first with my mother's. I couldn't identify what I wanted for myself. I've written about the people-pleasing part of myself [here](#) .

Walking kept me going. Since then, I've read considerably about depression and exercise. Basically, for many people, regular exercise is as good as SSRIs, such as Prozac and Paxil in helping with depression. My elder daughter, Ananda, wants to be a psychologist. She's a runner, often donning a t-shirt printed with "Run Happy." She wants to pursue treatment beyond easing pain toward "life flourishing," the field aimed at increasing happiness and a better life. Exercise is a key component.

Two other components also weigh heavily—maintaining a sense of gratitude and maintaining healthy relationships. Maintaining a sense of gratitude is perhaps easier for religious people, though I haven't observed it to be the case. Regardless, we all have much to be grateful for despite whatever individual conditions we find ourselves in. No, I'm not saying that we should ignore social injustice, abuse, prejudices, etc. However, if that's all we focus on, we make ourselves angry, miserable, or impotent. Perhaps I'm bringing a geologist's long-term perspective to things—compared to an Ice Age, global warming still has potential for progress, and I'm grateful for people working on better batteries, improved solar power, etc. Yes, politics is frustrating, but as Stephen Covey says, to be effective, focus on things we can actually influence rather than just things we're concerned about. And we can all find something to be grateful for.

Personally, the area most difficult for me has been in maintaining healthy relationships. For the first 10 years or so of my adult life, I dated women with drinking problems or ones who came from families with alcoholism. When I was around 30, I read *Grandchildren of Alcoholics*. It was both enlightening and devastating. Coupled with *Bradshaw On: The family*, I finally began to see the heritage of dysfunction that I was living out. My grandfather was an alcoholic that died of cirrhosis of the liver. However, my parents didn't drink, so I didn't think the dysfunction affected me. I was devastatingly wrong. Perhaps that's for another time.

For now, let me just finish with saying that I struggle to maintain healthy relationships. My people-pleasing part takes over too often, and I disavow essential parts of myself in order to please others. And later, I grow irritable, feel taken advantage of, and either shut people out of my life or lash out. I've made progress, but not as much as I want.

In the meantime, I'll keep walking my dog, presently Harold, a mixture of rat terrier and Aussie. He isn't the very smartest dog I've had, nor the best at defending the homestead, but he is definitely the most affectionate. He can sit for hours while I'm reading if I'll occasionally give him a scratch. He's always happy when I get home, and he's eager each morning for our walk regardless of the weather. He makes me a better man. A good dog.