

Longing for Belonging

by [Larry McCloskey](#) (August 2023)



Little Girl in a Blue Armchair, Mary Cassatt, 1878

All his life he tried to be a good person. Many times, however, he failed. For after all, he was only human. He wasn't a dog. –Charles Schulz

My dogs are exemplars of human behaviour. Hell, they could give humans a workshop on how to achieve a life well-lived. Their mindless mindfulness is focused on our every word and gesture, anchoring us in their well-honed perpetual present. Even though, or perhaps because they don't understand or speak words, their listening skills are superior to any friend,

self-improvement guru, or spouse. To be clear, I am not espousing dogs become our spouse in this age of permission to become whatever we want to be by identifying as such. Still, their communication techniques are so successful, I'm considering doing psychotherapy with people whose language I don't understand in order to enhance communication. Seems counterintuitive, but listening to my dogs, it makes sense.

There is little that is deliberate or strategic about how dogs behave (stealing food off the kitchen counter being the one notable exception). And though they are pack animals, their exemplary behaviour is not simply the result of following a leader. What dog owners know that those deprived of such status do not, is that Fido's distinguishing feature is neither breed, nor colour, nor size, nor gender. What we love are our dogs' distinctive and quirky personalities that mesh, engage and wrap themselves around our lives. They don't do remote.

My dogs allow us to live with them on a dog park on a river, so they are privileged in their exposure to canine creatures great and small with whom they play and frolic their lives away. And play-playmates meeting for the first time seem to have worked out the rules of engagement in delightful ways—seems to occur irrespective of difference. That dominant Chihuahua with Napoleon syndrome has great play-date rapport with the young, shy Irish Wolf Hound. Apart from the fact that the Wolf Hound has come precariously close to squishing the Chihuahua, they have either worked out or are oblivious to their mismatched external parts. It is an achievement beyond tolerance called embracing what is.

Our boys are Portuguese Water dogs who neither speak Portuguese nor want anything to do with water, other than to drink it, almost always from the toilet. Apparently they are unfamiliar with their pre-determined identity, or in snobbish canine parlance, pedigree. Perhaps they are just refreshingly unwilling to behave according to the dictates of their tribe.

Actually, they don't have a tribe; they have a purpose, a singular determination to love and be loved, and mostly, to belong— yup, that simple, that corny, that profound and true. Their goal in life, what our human goal in life would look like if we restrained ego and ambition for a life well-lived, is easily delineated down or elevated up to the word belonging.

Though Zigo, age 9, and Winnie, age 2, are seven years apart, they look and act like litter mates, always moving in lockstep as if joined at the proverbial hip. Both are primarily black, with a dash of white on their front paws and a patch of white on their chest. Frolicking in the park they appear like scurrying waiters at a sophisticated restaurant, repeat with tuxedos and spates. In their endearing way, they look both scrupulously formal and a tad ridiculous.

But they don't care. They don't care, pay homage or defer to what they or any of their many friends look like, with one minor exception that has relevance to this present, imperfect human age. As a puppy, Zigo witnessed Sonny, our now deceased original PWD, being attacked by a red standard poodle. Sonny wasn't badly hurt, but both dogs were shook-up as evidenced by their subsequent fear of red poodles. (In my forthcoming Hollywood blockbuster *If Only Humans Acted like Dogs*, I've substituted the expected Russian villain for a red poodle. Denzel Washington and Liam Neeson action movies will never be the same).

To this day, whenever Zigo sees a standard poodle—red or otherwise—he sees red, even if being colour blind he literally can't see the colour red. Still, he likes the expression. He barks, snarls and pulls on the leash for reasons he might be at a loss to explain. And on a couple occasions while running beside me off-leash, he has bolted towards an unsuspecting poodle only to realize that being free to wreck havoc upon the world, he doesn't have it in him to do anything. Having snarled and stomped to within inches of a snarling poodle, he

stops everything, especially his aggression, and trots back to where I am trying to catch up. Reminds me of a scene from Grumpy Old Men when Walter Matthau and Jack Lemon dramatically engage in battle only to forget what in the world they have to fight about.

Young people have been lead to believe they have much to fight against: injustice, racism, misogyny, paternalism, anything conventional (with the consistent irony of unconventional protest or cancellation becoming remarkably conventional), colonialism, climate change, criticism of Greta, systemic everything whenever they run our of easily available stuff to rail against, capitalism, the lack of free stuff due to an insufficient supply of capitalism, the tyranny of free speech, episodes of Seinfeld, opinion pieces by J.K. Rowling, Hallowe'en costumes, the violence of words, the words to 'Baby Its Cold Outside,' Kid Rock, Roald Dahl, Dr. Seuss, and whatever hasn't yet been cancelled to round out a very selective list. An exhaustive list would be exhausting; suffice to say, the need to be vigilant and combative is great, and the pervasiveness of threat is everywhere.

Well, at least that's the progressive narrative. Thing is, most young people will never be let off the progressive leash in order to discover if they would attack their metaphoric red poodle. Most don't know that if they escaped the yoke of woke and squarely faced the other they probably wouldn't attack, might well question why they ever thought attack was an option. Perhaps the other, face to face, would not appear as the nondescript other so much as like no other, with snarl dissipating into wagging tail. That's right folks, this is my canine version of that apt saying: 'the holiest place on earth is where an ancient hatred has become a present love.' We could all use relief from fear and ambiguity in discovering that the monstrous threat was really just a misplaced glance in the mirror.

There is a well known story about British and German troops,

consigned to the 1st World War trenches of 1914, dropping their weapons and spontaneously celebrating Christmas together. Soldiers along the front sung carols and exchanged rations in a distinctly unwarlike manner. This true story is moving, poignant and deeply human (or canine-like). But surly the untold story of what followed is as important as the soldiers' brief reprieve from deprivation and death. That night and next day in the trenches, just what did soldiers think about? Killing a stranger is difficult, but how do you kill someone you celebrated Christmas with 12 hours earlier? Who are you when you cannot find the other; who are you when you become the other unto yourself? You are one in the same.

We live in the age of anxiety. This is especially so for young people. The emerging statistics are frightening, but only if you believe that humans are capable of being other than what they settle for or descend into. Case in point, for decades the American College Health Association has conducted the National College Health Assessment (129 institutions, 69,131 students). These annual assessments ask students to self-assess their mental health. The percentage of students self-identifying as having poor mental health has risen from single digit to a disturbing 47% for women and 46% for men in 2019, to a post-Covid astronomical 76% for women and 66% for men in 2022! How does such a disturbing trend not illicit Congressional Hearings and a national call to arms? How is it even possible for a majority population—the new normal—to have poor mental health during the safest, most affluent time in history?

The answer may be both highly complex and startlingly simple. Technology and social media taking over our lives—and especially the lives of young people—coupled with collapsing fidelity to family, meaningful relationships and any notion of a transcendental being, are some of the complex reasons that have rocked our world. And we, who should know better, have been slow to come to grips with the tsunami of change these

markers have caused, especially for young people who have nothing in their experience with which to compare. I fear young people are longing for belonging in all the wrong places. Worse, with social media running interference, many have no understanding for what they long or why its unfulfillment pervades their dreams.

When I was in charge of several thousand university students in my previous life, I would often get calls from parents who would naively ask if Johnny, who is lacking in fragile, could be given an hour's workshop on Resiliency (the capitalized buzz word that has no meaning in the post-secondary sector). I would respond that acquiring resiliency is not the result of passively attending an hour-long workshop. I would liken resiliency to the calloused hands of a carpenter earned with the application of hard work and purpose over time.

When people ask me what was the greatest change during my decades working with students, I invariably say an emerging student passivity, the flattening of drive or their surrender of autonomy for a contrived, socially acceptable version of self, according to proper identity parts and tribal membership.

The problem is—and this is where canine wisdom is applicable—no amount of appropriate parts or tribal membership is a substitute for being our inner authentic self, or of belonging to those with whom we have a fulsome, and I would say, spiritual connection. We are more than the sum of our identity parts, we belong to more than our assigned tribe. Successfully treating poor mental health cannot happen without addressing the inherent spiritual deficiency of not belonging.

A historical heartbeat ago, it was at least the goal—however compromised our efforts—to focus on the content of character, and it was considered rude to comment or give much credence to one's immutable external qualities. My parents had life-time friends who's social, religious and political views were never

known. Among those of my transplanted Irish tribe it is widely known, even if only subversively agreed, that politics is several rungs of importance below humour. Today people often will not engage unless a new acquaintance has been vetted for having the proper progressive views. I'd rather know someone's individual values and favourite jokes than the borrowed thinking of their collective ideology.

As dogs frolic with abandon in their park, progressive dog owners stand and spew their progressive wisdom to people they don't know and wouldn't tolerate if their reluctant audience didn't silently concur. And what I silently can never figure out is how do they know, why do they assume that their passive dog owner audience is in agreement? I'm not afraid to offer a counterpoint to their progressive certainty, but being more interested in frolicking dogs than frothing owners, I desist. Besides, whatever the spewing view, it is a self-evident truth that canines don't live in the progressive prison of their owners. I know this because I've taken the canine workshop and am centred in the humour-filled holy moment.

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Larry McCloskey has had eight books published, six young adult as well as two recent non-fiction books. *Lament for Spilt Porter* and *Inarticulate Speech of the Heart* (2018 & 2020 respectively) won national Word Guild awards. *Inarticulate* won best Canadian manuscript in 2020 and recently won a second Word Guild Award as a published work. He recently retired as Director of the Paul Menton Centre for Students with Disabilities, Carleton University. Since then, he has written a satirical novel entitled *The University of Lost Causes*, and has qualified as a Social Work Psychotherapist. He lives in Canada with his three daughters, two dogs, and last, but far

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