



Everyone has a spirit that can be refined, a body that can be trained in some manner, a suitable path to follow. - Morihei Ueshiba

On New Year's Day, I took a longer than usual walk along the Coosaw River with my beagle Toby. My mother was sick with that bronchitis-type bug that seems to have invaded Beaufort County, if not the entire country, so a trek down to Hunting Island wasn't really in order. I needed to stay closer to home and exploring new territory in my neighborhood fit the bill. As I walked down the shoreline, Toby lagged behind, gleefully rolling in something on the sand. I know Toby. He'd found something dead. He was following his instinct to mask his scent with Eau de Possum, some kind of homage to his lineage with wolves who disguise themselves when they are in the hunt. Watching him, I knew I would be spending some portion of this first morning in 2013 in the shower with a dog. How romantic.

Fast forward to January 2. Now I am walking my Mom's dog Trooper on a leash along with the free roaming Toby minutes before I am due to take my mother to the retinologist. Same wooded area close to the river. It's 8:40 a.m. My mother's appointment is at 9:00 a.m. At a minimum, I need 15 minutes to arrive promptly at the doctor's office. No Toby in sight. I call and call and know he has returned for an encore visit with the decaying possum. I put Trooper in the car and quickly make a second loop around the path calling for Toby. He appears behind me and sits down, lowering his head in a conciliatory pose. I walk up to him and lean down to examine and sniff the fur behind his ears; his favorite rubbing place for corpses and the occasional "poop pile" is the nape of his neck. Yep, Toby stinks. A quick ride home and a swift transfer to the sunroom to contain the fragrant beagle, until I can get my mom back and forth to the doctor's office, then get myself home for my second shower of the day.

January 2, a day that started with 25 sit-ups, a visit to church, accomplished errands, writing, and a few emails (I rise at 4 a.m.), was infiltrated by a smelly dog and a mother with a deep, incessant cough who needed a third doctor's appointment and a third prescription. My mood soured. My New Year's resolution for focus, a positive attitude, and attention to key areas of my

daily life was riddled by unexpected guests demanding time, attention and flexibility. The new year is quickly moving through the 16th, 20th and 29th day of January. Already, stores are accessorized in Valentine's Day paraphernalia and where will all of my good intentions to change and improve be?

I am a list person. At this very moment, I have a list on the kitchen counter with 19 tasks. The twentieth task is scratched off, and I waited for the Three Wise Men to arrive before I put my nativity scene away (scratch off!), and so I am down to 18 To-Do's. This obsessive/compulsive character is confirmed by no less than SEVEN daily meditation books in my bathroom library. As the first days of January whirled away, I read from "Prayers for Healing" given to me by my dear friend Diana. She is a breast cancer survivor and was inspired by the little book of daily "blessings, poetry and meditations." It was my January birthday present from her in 2006. As I reflected on these early days of our new year, the January 6 reading was by Morihei Ueshiba, a Japanese martial artist and founder of aikido, a synthesis of Ueshiba's martial studies, philosophy, and religious beliefs. According to Wikipedia, the encyclopedia of our age, the word aikido is often translated as "the Way of unifying (with) life energy or as the Way of harmonious spirit." As I Googled further to learn more about the man behind the meditation (my lead-in quote for this column), I understood I was receiving everything I needed for that day. I can be refined. My body can be retrained. There is a suitable path for me in this world. There are no coincidences.

The day Toby rolled in dead possum for the second time was a day punctuated by the unexpected. It was a day encased in illness, animal instinct, unfinished tasks, and self-pity. I collapsed into bed at 8 p.m. My husband opened the closed bedroom door to let Toby in, and my beagle climbed onto the bed, put his nose right up against my nose, looked at me, and whimpered. I began to cry.

I cannot force life to unfold on my terms. I cannot improve my body if I don't set it into motion. I have no control over another human being's health and recovery, but I can aid and assist. I cannot halt instinct. I can find a suitable path. Beauty is in my own back yard.

On New Year's Eve, before time's page turned, along the same banks of the Coosaw River, I stood with two dogs beside me, looking out at the vast, calm surface of a beautiful body of water. I heard the familiar sounds of a dolphin breaking the surface of the water and exhaling before another dive for food. Trooper heard it too and we stared out to watch for the next glimpse of the sleek, grey animal. This time the dolphin curled and slapped the water with her tail, and then, she was gone. The next time I saw her, she crested yards away heading out into deeper water. For me, dolphin sightings are sacred. Each time I see a solitary mammal or a school, I am gifted by the knowledge of life all around my daily lists and petty failings that goes on without my permission or control. The sightings are always random and they come at a time I need them most. I was being fortified for another year of unknown challenges.

After Days

Written by Vivian Bikulege

In 2013, I will keep driving back and forth over the McTeer Bridge to doctor's appointments. I will have more unexpected opportunities to bathe Toby after other odiferous romps. I will keep trying to improve, checking off tasks at work and at home. And I will keep trying to be flexible, to strive for patience and compassion, and to wait for the random appearance of dolphin as my spirit is refined on a path I still do not understand.

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