

Routine

by Sean Sellers

Four o'clock is the darkest part of the night and if I opened my eyes, my mind raced and I felt lost in my loneliness. Consumed by the emptiness of the hour my mind spiraled out of control wondering, worrying, wishing, mentally trying to persuade the sun to peak over the horizon, I struggled to go back to sleep.

In the midst of this misery, I found myself sitting in Tompkins Square Park in the heart of the East Village of New York City watching dogs jump, run, and play. I saw people commingling and realized that we are constantly transitioning throughout life -- a new job, a lost job, marriage, divorce, family obligation, birth, and death. At that moment, I woke up and I realized many of my friends had moved on but I had not.

I decided to get a dog to help me get into a better routine -- to be active and get back to the business of living. Given the chance, I might sleep late; I would get a dog because I thought it would help get me up and out the door earlier. I guess I expected this dog to have a coffee fix like me; I confused a dog with a rooster. Actually, the reality is I was just lonely and so I decided to get my dog, Magnolia.

Then came the morning that changed everything and yet it changed very little for me. This particular morning I got up first as usual and took my shower while Maggie curled up in the warmest part of the bed. After my shower, I realized I was supposed to attend an event that evening requiring a tie. I ran down to the cleaners to pick up shirts and it was around 8:46 when our morning routine changed.

I was standing in the cleaner's business on the ground floor of the building, dealing with Maggie's unabashed energy, which was difficult. I was supposed to be at work. Hearing an airplane, I walked out onto First Avenue and Third Street and witnessed for myself a nightmare in broad daylight. I kept walking from First Avenue west and closer to Second Avenue.

As I reached the last building of the block, the second plane hit one of the towers. I saw the plume of smoke and flames and glinting confetti of debris. I ran back to my apartment and called home. It was the last phone call I was able to make before the towers fell.

Then it was just my dog and me. After talking to my father, I followed our morning routine and took Maggie to the Tompkins Square dog run where I ran into several dog park regulars. We agreed to meet every two hours to keep in touch. So, throughout the day in two-hour intervals, we walked to the park and checked in, because after the towers fell we had no other means of communication.

It was at the dog run I learned the bridges and tunnels were closed. My dog park acquaintances told me to go to the store and purchase necessities. Being from south Alabama, I went into hurricane mode and bought the things I needed. Having had Maggie for such a short time, it did not occur to me in my panicked state to purchase anything other than a supply of food for myself. She was a puppy and her energy added to the overwhelming, frenetic complexity of this day.

The afternoon dragged on and in the middle of me being overwhelmed, Maggie was full of energy. Because I did not stock up on her foods, just mine, I ran out of dog treats. She was hyper wanting to go out, and it did not help that I was feeding her the only thing I could find, a stash of Chinese fortune cookies. The two of us sat in silence in the hours before we returned to the dog park; we just sat and ate fortune cookies.

Thank goodness we were together, I might have gone out of my mind if it wasn't for that dog. That nine-month-old puppy was relentless in demanding my attention. I was dealing with so many different feelings, fear being the primary one, but she hijacked my heart. She got into my head and she kept me focused on the routine. Functioning is what one has to do in times like this. I cannot say she made me smile that day, but her nonsensical antics commanded my attention.

Our inner voice is often the voice of an inner child when we speak from our hearts, much different from speaking from the rational of our heads. Maggie taught me how to separate the two. She helped me stay focused and functioning on that devastating day.

Four o'clock is the darkest part of the night and if I open my eyes I see Magnolia sleeping peacefully. In the darkness her silhouette is small, I caress the steadfastness of her warm chest and I am conditioned by the power of routine; she has taught me to concentrate on the rhythm of my heart and to remove the wishing, the wondering, and the worrying from my head.