

Memoirs of a disciplinarian

Louis died recently and it grieved me that I was not with him at his passing. He was a dog, albeit a big one; a black standard poodle with a red canvas collar. Now, I am a hard man, so why should the death of thirteen year old animal have such an effect? The truth is; he was something special, something that changed me completely and many would say- for the better. But "changed from what to what?" I hear you ask. The answer is from one type of disciplinarian to another.

There is no doubt that as a race we have become soft and always ready to blame others. How often do we hear the remark "The Government should do something about it" whatever it is and corrosively, successive governments have been allowed to take more control from us and thereby leave us with less personal freedom. The death by neglect of a child leads to an outcry "Social Services should have done something." A negligent officer is identified, pilloried and then society goes on very much as before. Who in their right mind would want to be a social worker? The same could be said for teachers. Until recently teachers unions in UK had advised their members not to comfort a child who falls over in the school playground for fear that this action might be interpreted as an attempt to 'abuse' the child. Some children have been known to make frivolous allegations of sexual molestation against unpopular teachers who are then treated as guilty without trial and immediately suspended pending an investigation which can take many months to conclude that the teacher was innocent. The new Government is trying to re-inject some sanity into this mess, but old habits die hard. On 8 February there was a BBC news item "a mother has been given an official police caution for leaving her fourteen year old son in charge of his three year old brother". When I think of the situation in my own youth it is as if it was a different world. I was the eldest of six children. My father being an army officer was frequently away. Obviously my parents needed time together, but because the first of my sisters, a spina-bifida had died after ten months in a nursing home in an Ireland before free medical care my parents were penniless. So, a major event for them might be a trip to the cinema in the next village and who was left to look after his siblings? "A bit of responsibility will be good for him" my father would say. Little did he know how heavily that responsibility weighed on puny shoulders. And, if I was going to have to have that responsibility then it was going to be on my terms; my brothers and sisters were going to have to do what I said, come hell-or-high-water. A stern disciplinarian was born.

This mind-set continued on into academic life. As a resident tutor in a university hall there was more than once when I stood up to a noisy drunk who could have beaten me to a pulp. Yet I had authority on my side. This was further backed-up by the black-and-white certainty of a Roman Catholic upbringing. I had not yet realised how fragile that authority could be. Later, when I was a hall warden I had to deal with a case where someone in authority had slept with a fresher. Had it been the start of relationship it might have been okay, even if alien to the precepts of my upbringing. However, it had never been anything more than a one-night stand for him, while she suffered psychological damage as a result of the experience. When I challenged him on his behaviour he was quite aggressive in his defence. It had been consensual. He had not broken any rules and I had no right to question his actions - sad but true. Other people have different standards and for them the weight of moral authority might count for nothing. That's life.

In a lighter, but nevertheless experiential vein, there was one night when I encountered two very drunk students entering my hall carrying a sapling that they had just pulled up. They were

ordered to bed with an instruction to be in my office at 8am the next day. My hall porter, an ex-paratrooper marched them in at the appointed time where, in their hung-over state they admitted the offence. They were pretty crest-fallen when I informed them that I was applying a fine of £25 each and would require them to see the University Grounds Superintendent and explain why they had damaged one of his trees. Some days later they came back with a spring in their steps. They had apologised to the Grounds Superintendent who then discussed replacement trees with them. They agreed the type of tree and where they were to be planted on Campus. The total cost would be £5 each. The fact was that he had no right to supercede my authority and yet, here were two students who had reflected on their foolish actions and were now the guardians of four trees. Was this not true justice?

Just before we started a family we moved out from the University residence and as suburban dwellers we acquired a dog - an Irish Setter. Never was there a greater mistake for novices. They may look beautiful, but they are self-willed, stupid and completely ignorant of authority. So, the disciplinarian quickly became a paid-up member of the 'Hitler School of Dog Management'. The setter turned out to be a chronic epileptic, not unusual in that breed. He eventually had to be put down, and was replaced by our first standard poodle who was black and an outstandingly good example of the breed. So what to call this new dog? My wife had grown up in Blackrock south of Dublin. In the Irish language the town is called *Carraig Dubh* (Rock Black), so he was called Carraig. Looking back he had a dog's life, as there was little affection from me, just a combination of barked and roared commands. On the lighter side he was addicted to oranges and pears and it was funny to see my son train him to stand on his hind-quarters and pick pears from the tree in our garden.

When it came to the end of Carraig's days we swore "no more dogs" but shortly afterwards my youngest brother telephoned "Two people I know are in a partnership that is breaking up and there is a poodle in the middle. If someone does not take him he will have to be put down". And so, Louis arrived at our door, complete with his red collar and when he entered our living room he was so excited that he peed on our carpet. "Louis!" said my wife in a scolding tone. He looked, realised what he had done and rushed out in a state of embarrassment. To the end of his days he remained the only animal that I have ever encountered that appeared to have a conscience. He would be crestfallen if he thought that he had let you down and would skulk at the other end of the house until you came and reassured him.

He was not in great shape on arrival. Poodles must have a hair-cut every six weeks and the previous owners had done a botched DIY job. There were cuts all over his skin. Added to that, he had been neutered and the stitches had come out. He was no beauty, obviously the runt of the litter, whose life experiences up to that time had not been good. Our problems with Louis started shortly afterwards when we drove to the University Campus and let him out. In great excitement he rushed off to greet all the other dogs and their owners regardless of whether they wished to reciprocate. We called him but would he come back? Hell no! On that occasion it took five hours to get him back into the car. This continued for some time and the more that I roared the further away he would stand to avoid being caught. He wanted to come but couldn't. It turned out that there had been a clash of wills with his previous owner who would call him and when he did not come back would grab him and then hit him. One fraught day as we were walking through the woods near the Campus I was in full bellow when we first encountered Susan Knights, a short blonde lady, accompanied by an enormous Irish wolfhound and a small but

aggressive Basenji who could quite easily walk underneath the wolfhound. 'You should come to my dog-training classes' she announced 'It's not the dogs that need training. It's their owners'.

And so the transformation began. Susan trained by reward and Louis was a sucker for treats. He adapted very quickly to a set of hand-signals which he learnt to obey without question because they were associated with reward, not punishment. One day in the class he was sitting back watching me with an expectant gaze when Susan saw the scene she exclaimed 'My God, the last time someone looked at me like that I married it!' My eyes were now opened and little by little I gained the confidence to accept that the Reward School was probably more effective than the Hitler School and, as I opened to Louis he rewarded me with unquestioning love and affection.

The administrative tasks in my academic career had progressed from tutor to warden to super-warden and in 2003 I found myself appointed the Disciplinary Officer in my then-university. Had it not been for Louis I might still have been the stern disciplinarian that I had been from youth. Instead, it was a task that I completely enjoyed. To one student I wrote "Following our meeting I write to advise you that climbing a contractor's gantry crane on Campus is against University regulations. Doing so while drunk is dangerous. Doing so while drunk and naked in February is bloody madness. Please don't do it again." There were many transgressions where students had simply gone over the top and had been verbally abusive to someone who was merely doing their job. Such offenders would be summoned to my office and on hearing the facts I might say "Your manner with that secretary was quite unacceptable and I am therefore fining you £50. However if you were to draft a letter of apology, bring it to me for my approval and then present it to her in person with a decent bunch of flowers (not something cheap from a petrol station forecourt) then I will remit the fine. No student ever passed up this option and many appreciated the lesson. One day I bumped into a girl in my city. "You are the Disciplinary Officer." "was" I answered "I am retired now." "Well you did me for fire-related offence. I know that I should have been thrown out of residence, but you didn't. You just fined me. It was the best thing that ever happened to me. Thank you". And I have to say "thank you Louis."

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