

ZEN

It's a quiet Saturday. The lingering of a fresh, morning dew evaporates with the sun's warmth. It's a stunning September day that keeps thoughts of winter at bay.

I'm sitting in my car on King Street with my right hand signal blinking, waiting for a car to pull out of a spot so I can pull in. Standard stuff.

This stretch of King Street is desperately slow moving these days. There's a population boom in the area with new condos south of the underpass and no additional lanes to accommodate more vehicles—add to that, block-long streetcars and parking. Patience is a virtue.

My dog is perched passenger side, head out the window with a generous breeze tickling his fur while his tail joyfully shows its appreciation. Walter has just returned from the doggie spa so to the outside eye, he's just another fluffy, designer city pooch, but behind the scenes he's a douche-bag with a dismissive attitude and a raging obsession with food. Hey, we were meant to be.

Whoosh. Blind-sided, two cyclists flank my car. I'm instantly reminded of those 80s movies where teenaged bullies on bikes would skid their tires and cut off their victims.

This double envelopment tactic happens in real time, in real life, right here, right now. A woman, driver's side, late 50s, yells into my window, "No parking in the middle of the street!!"

The man on my passenger side does the same, "Get out of the lane, asshole!!"

Drive-by yelling, I think to myself, as they push ahead and close ranks in front of my car. This is not my first traffic encounter of late. Road rage is alive and unwell on these city streets.

Option one: take a deep breath, avoid eye contact, let the moment pass.

Not today, Brain.

Who said that? Oh, that was me.

I discover option two by leaning out the window and state the obvious, "I'm waiting for a spot."

I quickly recognize this is futile. If these two were unable to process what was glaringly obvious in the first place, why would my offering clarity be a difference maker in any way? Of course my scowl isn't lost on them. They see it, and they welcome it.

"You suck!" He yells.

Nice. Is that the best you've got?

She inquires on a more personal level.

"Where'd you learn to drive?!"

Why thank you for asking. I went to Young Drivers of Canada when I was 17, I've driven across the country on numerous occasions and other countries and cities around the world, and I absolutely crush it on a go-kart track.

Yeah, right.

They click into their pedals and cycle ahead while the man sustains his verbal punctuation by flipping me the bird.

Now, I've been strategically angling for this 9 by 11 coveted piece of pavement for nearly five minutes, but as the driver finally pulls out of the spot, agitation has blossomed into low grade rage. (Does such a thing exist?)

I say, "f you" (the whole word) to the inside of my car. Walter doesn't speak English so he's unaffected. But I'm not.

I shift into drive.

Fortunately, these two reptile-brained cyclists who snake their way around unsuspecting city-folk on refreshingly sunny days are stopped at the intersection ahead. I'm pretty sure I saw one of them taste the air with its tongue.

I approach the light and pull up beside the woman and...look out, here it comes...I say, "He just gave me the finger!"

Ooooooh. Zingers like that'll knock the wart off the frog, girl.

I too, even now, am shaking my head wondering why? Why bother? What did I think I was going to accomplish, here? Conflict resolution? Accountability? Was it in my heart to hope for an amends between us?

Alternatively, the female of their species is revved up and spews blue streak vitriol at me with all the accompanying expletives she can muster. Surely that got it out of her system. Nope. This rancorous exchange has still one final pass.

The man—using the term loosely here—looks past Walter through my passenger side window, locks me square in the eye and yells...

"Go lick your dog's ass until your tongue bleeds!"

Wwwwow.

Now I don't know about you, but, I mean, that's pretty dam original. It's a real dilemma whether to laugh, applaud, or vomit. That's quite the sentiment. In fact, it's almost craft. It's skillful. He's made it personal by including my dog, but also visceral, visual, and demoralizing.

I'm usually pretty agile with my comebacks but, c'mon, I had acid in my face. Metaphorically. Whatever I might have expected, it wasn't verbal excrement of this variety. I mean, this guy didn't even stutter. He had that dialogue locked and loaded somewhere inside him. Had he used that line before? Or perhaps he just really loves dogs.

Of course, I could have let all this pass through me like snot in the wintertime. I could have used my yoga training to zen around those human turds. I could have found peace within from the start and gone about my perpetually happy little day with my cute ass dog.

But clearly I need more yoga.

They say we take things out on those closest to us, but the way strangers treat one another just on our streets feel like war zones and

cesspools of tragic human dynamics, there's an insidious righteousness present, and none of us have ever met.

Glennon Doyle says we can do hard things. Oprah says we all want validation. Brene Brown says vulnerability is not winning or losing, it's having the courage to show up when you can't control the outcome. I don't know, I just chose three random quotes but I'm sure I could make them all apply to the situation and they would all amount to, "find your gratitude", or "everyone is a reflection of yourself", or "there is no try, only do"...wait that's Yoda. But I'm a problem solver, so the power of "fix" compels me.

I'm sure any old know-it-all might say something about equanimity, and that one mustn't classify another's behaviour as good or bad, right or wrong, because you don't know what that person's experience is—or even just what kind of day they're having. But does it justify the venom?

The ancient Stoics were one of the first to ask, is it in our nature to be cruel? (Totally paraphrasing)

We've entered an era where we must intellectualize beyond our primal instincts. I suppose the work is to just accept it all. How much yoga does one have to do to keep it together? How many licks does it take to get to the centre of a lollipop?

Truth: The only outcome we can control is our own reaction to any given circumstance. Perhaps it's best to just live out the rage vicariously by binge watching shows where characters exhibit deplorable behaviour. Maybe that's what we pay for—to be entertained by bad choices, questionable motives, and inappropriate reactions. We pay billions of dollars to watch others behave, mostly badly, mostly because we're not allowed to—but to be out in the world, means to be effected. Interactions are part of the deal.

So, is self help helping?

Our obsession with happiness began with the self help industry and its messaging beginning in the 90s. *Think positive. Be happy.* The result was, people started to feel bad about their thoughts. To find out more

about this happiness factor, I took an online course at Yale during the pandemic, (remember the pandemic?) called *The Science of Happiness*, to confirm how, as humans, we don't even know what actually makes us truly happy.

Turns out, the dream life for many is out of whack, and no doubt, we are impacted and influenced of celebrity culture. There are the special people and then the rest of us. But hey!, gratitude is supposed to help. People started to share their gratitude on Facebook around 2011, and it didn't take long for it to become a competition between sharers and a demonstration of how elevated one was by the quality and quantity of your shared list. It was a wave that levelled out. But "I share therefore I am" is still the new meaning of life. Take it a step further to, "I share therefore I brand" when you realize that's what we are.

Brands, currency, feeding the economic machine.

It's ok. At least I think it's ok. I mean, I'm ok, are you ok?

You can read the self books, they're in the largest section of the book store as it's a 14 billion dollar industry. You can take courses or work with a coach—these days there are multitudes of life coaches and motivational talks with three steps, five steps, ten easy steps to that dream life, and coaching is a \$2.85 billion dollar industry and rising, so the weirder and tougher life gets the more we need someone, or possibly an entire team to keep us on track. That team might be a therapist, a coach, a personal trainer, a best friend (if they're willing), meditation apps, your dog or cat....but boy, it really does take a village. But the village is a self appointed and carefully selected one.

When the pandemic "hit", the messaging was "we're all in it together" which was true. The first time in human history we were ALL, every one of us affected by the exact same thing at the exact same time, but geez, did we ever divide ourselves up fast.

We're clearly not in it together. We're in it and we're in some kind of anguish or pain if this is how we choose to be. There may be kindness in strangers but we can't trust it. The kind ones, I mean. Sadly, we've learned that the perceived good guys can turn out to be monsters. But I still think we can do better. If we give it some thought, we can dig

deep and give ourselves some love, calm, and good naturedness. Because if you have thought that become words that fall trippingly off your tongue to intentionally annihilate a stranger, you have some issues with yourself. Hurt people hurt people.

I wonder if cycle guy (sounds like Psycho Guy) thinks about his behaviour that day or what he said. I wonder if either of them do. I wonder if they got home after their sunny ride and said, wow that was pretty crazy today. What did you say to her? Do you remember? I don't know something about her dogs ass. Huh. Well, you really put her in her place. Who did she think she was with her car in the road in our way that way, anyway.

Yep, I have a feeling that's how that went.

For more information on Walter, go to @sirwalteresquire