

Walking Briskly

by Seth Marder

I grew up in New York City, the son of two teachers who emphasized the value of education, hard work and the need to be successful. While these values served me well in many ways, many times I have been blind-sided by not being able to fully distinguish between satisfaction and joy.

One profound time I experienced overwhelming joy was about 20 years ago. It was on November 14, 1998, and I was 37 years old. My wife and I picked out our new 10-week old yellow Labrador puppy who was still in his whelping box in the owner's kitchen. I got down on the floor and when the owner opened the door of the box, out bounded this white bundle of fur into my lap, licking my face. It was love at first sight! After we drove home I was lying on the floor in my hallway with him playing tug on a small piece of rope. He was totally comfortable, and me smiling ear to ear. I had decided to name him Briskly, and instantaneously, he was my best friend and a source of joy. I noticed how good I just felt being with him - and absorbed how much he enjoyed just being with me. My life changed, just like that!

Indeed, while life had appeared good on the outside, I don't think I had ever really comprehended absolute joy until that moment.

Several years before we got Briskly, in about 1994, as a result of the pressure to succeed, the pursuit of excellence, the quest for recognition, and the anxiety of never reaching the illusion of perfection, I descended into a brief, frightening, bout of depression. As I worked through the depression I came to confront my insecurities and self-doubts. This went on for a pretty short period of a few weeks, but it was eye opening and I eventually emerged with many important lessons. Like how feeling good based only upon my success was much like an addictive drug, with more and more needed to feel good. I realized that this was not sustainable, and how basing my own sense of self-esteem on external factors had caused me (and many successful friends including Nobel Prize winners) to hit a wall!

Once Briskly was in my life, I'd come home and he'd be waiting at the door, shaking and wagging with joy, panting with expectation that *his* boy was *finally* home. I'd see that and give him a big hug and all the trials and tribulations of the day would melt away as we'd play tug or just lie together on the couch.

With these moments I could see how my life began to stabilize and I understood how interconnections between *balance*, *energy*, and *focus* could keep me both motivated and fulfilled in the long run. Over holidays I would just spend time walking Briskly or in my family room with him lying on my chest on our couch with my wife reading in a chair, and me reading or watching TV. I could feel and listen to his breath and have such a sense of peace and things being just right. I didn't learn or discover anything in particular, or wow anyone with my brilliance or wit. However, I did take the profound lessons learned from *these times* into my future.

As I navigated the world deciding what I might do with my MIT and Univ. of Wisconsin degrees in chemistry and various X, Y and Z awards, I had to make many decisions where I was going and what I wanted to do. Inevitably, it was the next proposal, or paper, that soaked up my time and effort, but I came to realize that none made me feel quite the same way that my boy Briskly did. They brought me recognition and satisfaction and some joy, but not the pure joy of being in Briskly's presence. You see, Briskly gave me unconditional love and I loved his purity of spirit in a way I don't think I had experienced growing up.

It really didn't take long after getting Briskly for the lessons I learned from him to crystalize. I realized that at least on the professional side of my life, teaching and service served more as cornerstones of my life than even my research, because I realized they were actually the things that I am not only passionate about, but that also bring me great *joy*.

With all this said, at 57 years of age, while I have achieved some level of professional success, I still often struggle with insecurity, self-doubts, expecting and striving for perfection, and confronting the reality of what I am as compared to what I aspire to be. Nonetheless despite all of these issues I'm still continuing to grow, and I am so much better off because there once was a sweet yellow lab named Briskly who came into my life and passed away in 2012. Briskly has been gone for a while now and I still miss him tremendously and daily, but if I close my eyes, I can still see his warm eyes, and hear and feel him breathing, and cherish how much he did for me. Thanks my sweet boy.