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Of dogs and men

Peggy Drexler

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In a world where truth can be situational and trust used to calculated advantage, I'm reminded every day why I like my dogs.

Their names are Stuart and Polly. They are yellow Labs. And they're real. Their needs are simple, and their affection is constant.

They love me whether they're at home or on the road, squeezed into the back seat of the car. My daughter might be behind closed doors buried in Facebook, and my husband working the keys of his BlackBerry like Mozart. But they greet me with the same wiggling abandon whether I've been gone five minutes or five hours. They don't care what I look like, what kind of mood I'm in. They are what they are - day after day.

Polly is a 3-year-old puppy with big soulful eyes that allow her to get away with more than she should. She has plenty of what the hunting dog people call drive. She sees what she wants and goes for it - even food on the street, which I often end up prying out of her determined jaws. Hide something from her, and she's still looking for it hours later.

Stuart lets the world come to him. His repertoire of tricks peaked at sit. But only when there is food involved. Call Stuart, and he gives you that level stare that says, "Make me an offer." He's a slacker, but it works for him.

I know the argument. These critters that I have anthropomorphized into furry personalities are just doing what eons of evolution have equipped them to do so well - be exactly what I want them to be. There is truth to that. Do the math. There are 10,000 wolves left in the United States, and 60 million dogs. Dogs have learned to play the game.

But you have to own - and love - a dog to understand the insignificance of scientific explanation. Dogs are what they are. Why means nothing.

I will even argue that if more of us realized that, we might see some improvement in the fact that a third of Americans report regular and extreme levels of stress.

The recent Harris Interactive study that quantified stressed-out Americans focused on immediate and personal causes - like jobs, household budgets and dwindling personal time. And those pressures are all very real.

But those issues are spikes in an ever-elevating baseline of stress that comes from issues that are beyond our control, but impact our lives. Our stress hormones are telling us to fight or flee or both. But it's hard to choose when there is a crackling disconnect between what we hear and what we see.

A war that ranks among the greatest policy blunders in American history drags on without a hint of an exit strategy. The two men who supervised the attack that instigated that war remain free, taunting and threatening the Western world from parts unknown.

Relentlessly rising gas prices caused by the ever-mysterious and convenient "market forces" are putting companies out of business and causing consumers to choose between travel and food. Food prices have turned the simple act of feeding a family into a budget issue. A flood of easy-money mortgages ignored by the rating agencies that vouched for their quality are drowning whole neighborhoods in foreclosures. After decades of talk, blame and dithering, medical costs continue to spiral up along with the numbers of uninsured.

Through it all, our president "unnerstands" the frustrations of the American people, while taking every opportunity to blame someone else - anybody else. The Democratic Congress voted in to create change has proved to be, well, a Democratic Congress - almost comically unable to agree, organize or move forward on even the simplest issues.

As people watch forces beyond their control change their lives in ways they never anticipated, there is a creeping dread that the world is running on a basic rule: You can fool some of the people all of the time and all of the people some of the time - and that's good enough to start a war or make some money.

But when Polly and Stuart sit there in all their simple purity, giving me what our family calls "the look," I know what they are. I know how they feel about me. I bask in an artifice that extends only to snagging a piece of bread left too close to the edge of the counter.

Every day they remind me who I am. And dogs don't lie.

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