

The Finger is King

“It might seem like we can make choices, but I think what looks voluntary could just be a more complicated response to causes we can’t perceive. Maybe we’re just like dogs—prisoners of early conditioning.”

She laughed. “You’re just making an excuse for your bad behavior. Anyway, we can continue this debate when I get there.”

“Good, now let’s discuss directions again.”

I tried to review the dependable route to Philly from Vermont we had used for years, but she had already googled another way.

“Sarah, we’ve done the trip a hundred times. Why not just stick to what works?”

“Don’t worry, Dad, I’ve got this.”

She sped through Vermont and onto route 95. Her troubles began on the Cross Bronx Expressway, called by some, “the most notorious road in America,” where she sat with our two mini-dachshunds, Simon and Milo. Traffic was inching forward and stalling as she texted pictures, at first smiling, holding the dogs. She called with hopeful traffic reports. “We’re starting to move! Oh damn, stopped again.”

When she finally reached the upper deck of the George Washington Bridge, with eight lanes of angry bumper to bumper, she sent images of the dogs curled together like yin and yang, two furry question marks on the front seat asking, “What’s the hurry?”

In contrast, her countenance was stretched and distorted into exaggerated horror. Her text messages included descriptions of motorists who were yelling, honking, and desperately trying to cut in to gain another car length.

“Whatever you do, don’t give anybody the finger,” I reminded her on the phone, “no matter what the provocation!”

“I don’t know Dad, I was thinking about it. At least if somebody went berserk, and attacked my car, there would be some entertainment, but I won’t give a non-verbal hand gesture to a tailgating heavyweight cage fighter, especially when I’m stalled in traffic.”

“Remember what happened when you were a baby.”

“I’ll do anything you say Dad. Just don’t make me listen to that awful story again!”

So I made her promise to keep her fingers calmly wrapped around the steering wheel.

“Gotta go, starting to move a bit.”

When Sarah was three months old, Patricia and I were pushing her stroller on a graveled backroad, alongside the Brewster River in Jeffersonville, Vermont. This was our daily walking route. Traffic was very sparse, and when there was a car, it moved slowly. So we were surprised when a speeding vehicle shot across the covered bridge and barreled directly towards us.

We had passed a bend in the road, and the approaching car spun out taking the curve, spraying us with gravel as Patricia quickly pushed Sarah’s stroller out of the way. I fired both barrels, and as my right and left middle fingers sprang up, an answer popped out of every window, almost instantaneously, like trumpets responding to the conductor’s baton.

The driver, now with just one hand on the wheel, lost control, hit the guard rail, and scraped along, which slowed him down, but didn’t stop the car from going over a small embankment. It flipped and settled like a helpless turtle on its back, wheels still spinning, going nowhere.

I felt a surge of energy. My finger had been the most powerful, my righteous indignation more potent. Strip everything civilizing away, and in that instant, without the governance of reason, the finger is king. *Take that you reckless bastards!*

I looked with disbelief at the upturned vehicle. I heard screams from the car and a baby crying. Suddenly my anger turned to shame. *What have I done!*

Patricia held Sarah safely off the road, while I ran over to help. There were four teenagers in the car, a male driver and three young women. The guy and two of the women crawled quickly through the open windows to escape, scurrying out like crabs. The fourth passenger, a sobbing young mother with scrapes on her chin, handed her infant to me, then followed. The driver, who just a moment before had been my faceless mortal enemy, a depository for accumulated slights and injustices, stammered a shocked, dazed apology for driving too fast.

I have often thought about that encounter and the consequences of intemperate, explosive anger—anger that emerges suddenly without the benefit of gradual transitions, It is different than the slow boil. There is no opportunity to express annoyance, apply reason, and, if necessary, retreat.

Since that time, I have taken those powerful digits off of standby. They are no longer spring-loaded, ready to jump at the slightest provocation. Forced off the road by a reckless driver, nosed out of a parking space by an interloper who pulled into my spot—no problem. Even on those occasions when an angry motorist turns on the dome light at night, so I can see that pointed silhouette punching up and down for emphasis, I do not reciprocate.

“See, you’re not trapped,” Sarah has told me “You can overcome the years of gender brainwashing you underwent—all those winning-is-everything contests, the emphasis on being top dog. You can make a different choice, Dad.”

“But only if the conditions are right,” I have replied.

Marooned on the George Washington Bridge, Sarah looked east at the dusky skyline where the Empire State Building soared into the twilight like a giant finger.

She took particular care not to make eye contact, kept the doors locked and the windows closed. She looked away from the fingers popping up like garden weeds, ignored the blast of car horns, and the thump-thump of angry rap music. She let pushy drivers cut in and stayed in one lane.

The dogs had been dealing with their own issues related to the long confinement. It began with whining at the door, growing more frantic as the traffic lurched and stalled. I could hear the whimpering transition to barking, and finally plaintive howling as we discussed options.

“There are no choices here! This is a disaster!” she yelled.

“Don’t open the door, too dangerous,” I told her. “But by any chance did you get the *Sunday Times* today?”

She read my mind and spread the paper over the seats and floor, relying on the ~~early~~ training she gave the puppies before they learned to take their business outside. Just in time. The dachshunds had valiantly held back, but marooned on the bridge, with no exit, they finally gave up.

They showed no interest in the sad hum of world events, the momentary rise and fall of stocks, the tightening pennant races. They took no position on the opinion pages, turned up their

long noses at the urbane Arts and Leisure section, had not the slightest inclination towards the book reviews. They ignored the Travel section with its full-page color pictures of paradise. They eschewed their conditioning, instead choosing Sarah's lap, and her new designer jeans.

When she got moving again and reached the other side of the river, she rolled down her windows and inhaled the awful smell of New Jersey's oil refineries. Hours late, she finally arrived, odiferous, exhausted, but safe, after her Google-misdirected journey.

"Made it," she sighed. "I was trapped between the suffocating stink of dog shit and the stench of civilization."

