AN ESSAY

Full Bore

On dogs, doors, and how much joy a person can take in at once

BY CHRIS WYATT · A SIX-MINUTE READ

Ask me what I'm trying to do with my life and the real answer sounds like something stitched on a pillow in a lake house. I'm trying to be happy. Maximize joy. You can hear the eyes rolling from here.

The pillow has the wrong verb, though. Maximize is an investor's word, and joy doesn't behave like a portfolio. More of it, spread thinner, is not what anyone is after. What I want is the undiluted kind: joy at the strength it comes out of the tap, before anything gets added to it. I know exactly what that looks like, because two dogs demonstrate it in my front hall several times a week.

Erin and I went out to dinner on a Saturday night, which is about the least eventful sentence a marriage can produce. We were gone a little over two hours. When we came back, the house went off like a smoke detector that loves you. Coco Bear came at us sideways, the way dogs do when the front half has made a decision the back half hasn't signed off on. Tallulah, who answers to Toots, to Tooties, and in an emergency to anything at all, spun twice and peed on the floor. Not from fear. From joy. Her body took in more happiness than it had room to hold and vented the surplus through the nearest available exit.

We had been at a restaurant. We had not been at war.

Two Swedish researchers once took this scene seriously enough to film it. They left a dozen dogs home alone for thirty minutes, for two hours, and for four, then studied what happened when the owners came back through the door. After two hours the greetings ran measurably hotter than after thirty minutes: more tail, more contact, more of everything. Four hours added nothing anyone could measure. Somewhere around the two-hour mark, a dog decides you have been gone forever, and forever is the top of the scale.

The cameras caught something else, and it's the part I keep turning over. While the owners were away, the dogs mostly lay around. They didn't pace, and their behavior in the fourth hour looked like their behavior in the first. The researchers couldn't even say whether the dogs had been tracking the time or only found out how long it had been when their people walked in. Either way, the explosion at the door wasn't four hours of misery finally released. It hadn't been building. It was summoned. A calm animal heard a key in the lock and let the whole thing through.

✦ ✦ ✦

Which matters, because I want to make a comparison that isn't the one it sounds like. I love those dogs. I love my wife on a scale that doesn't share units with them. Erin is beautiful and smart and a world-class marathoner, which means she can cover twenty-six miles in less time than it takes me to find my keys. She also has an inability to cook so complete that it starts before the cooking does. It isn't that she has trouble boiling water. She has trouble filling the kettle. She gets this from her mother, and I'd like that on the record.

More to the point, she has been through things with me that she had no obligation to go through, more than once, and she stayed every time. That alone would be enough for one life. Everything else is a bonus.

So here is what happens when I come home from a work trip, which is often. The dogs greet me like I've returned from the moon. Erin greets me like I've returned from Chicago. A kiss, a glad you're back, a question about the flight. It's lovely. It is also, by any measure the Swedes would accept, the smaller reception, and it comes from the larger love.

That's the puzzle. The deepest love in the house produces the quietest greeting. The love isn't smaller. The pipe is.

The inside diameter of a pipe is called its bore. It sets how much can move through at once, and it has no opinion about what's waiting on the other end. A valve that opens to the pipe's full width is called full bore, which is exactly how a dog greets you: no restriction, all of the feeling at once. Most adults run theirs through something closer to a coffee stirrer.

We didn't start that way. Some people arrive with wider pipes than others, the way some arrive with better knees, but everyone arrives open. Watch a four-year-old spot a grandparent across an airport and you are watching full bore in a human body. The narrowing comes later, in ten thousand small adjustments, most of them reasonable. Someone tells you to settle down, and you do. You learn that the excited kid gets teased and the excited adult is usually selling something. You learn to greet people with a second, quieter self standing just behind you, checking how it's landing. Toots has never once wondered how the greeting landed. That's half her secret.

The other half is what she lets in.

✦ ✦ ✦

I've come to believe a person becomes what they take in. Not only food and books but the whole atmosphere: the music, the silence, the tone of the room, the condescending email, the manipulation dressed up as a promotion, the man on the cable panel paid to be furious at eight o'clock sharp. You breathe it because it's air. Some of it you choose. A lot of it

you don't. And a pipe that carries runoff all day learns to close down, which is exactly what you'd want a pipe to do.

Here's the cruel part. A valve doesn't read labels. Narrow yourself against the sludge and you have narrowed yourself against your wife walking in the door. The same throttle that holds the outrage to a trickle holds the joy there too. We never lost the capacity. We installed a regulator to survive the inputs and forgot it was on.

The dogs' inputs are smells, naps, a squirrel of uncertain intent, and us. Nobody is paying anyone to make Coco Bear angry. Her air is clean, so her pipe stays wide.

This is about where a podcast would cut to an ad for a gratitude journal, so let me take the best objection before anyone tries to sell you anything. Not all narrowing is damage. Three researchers once combed through twelve million personal blogs and found that as people age, the word happiness drifts away from excitement and toward calm. Peace starts to count. There is wisdom in that, and there is love in the quiet greeting. Erin and I don't need to vibrate at each other in the kitchen. We've been through enough that the quiet says most of it. A love that has survived something doesn't need to pee on the floor to prove itself.

But go back to those Swedish living rooms. The dogs spent their afternoons in exactly the calm the bloggers were describing: flat on the rug, the picture of contentment. Then the door opened, and they spent thirty seconds at full bore, and then, being dogs, they went back to the rug. The dog never traded excitement for peace. It kept both. That's what we gave up. Not joy. Range. We graduated into calm and sold off the other register to pay the tuition.

✦ ✦ ✦

Nobody needs it all the time. A life lived at a frequency only dogs can hear would exhaust everyone in the building. Thirty seconds will do. A minute. Two, on a big day. That's the whole dose the dog uses. And the

dose does more than feel good, because a pipe running full has no room left for runoff. Joy doesn't just wait out the sludge. It displaces it. A person who takes in that much at the door is harder to fill with anything else for the rest of the night. Multiply that by a few hundred million doors and you get a different world, which is a large claim to build on a small puddle, and I'm standing by it.

So the code has two parts. Be choosier about the air, wherever you get a choice. And at the door, open the valve on purpose. You don't have to wait for the feeling to show up first. The dogs never check whether the occasion warrants it. The key turns, and they let it through.

The next time Erin comes in from a long run, salt on her face and twenty miles in her legs, I plan to be at the door before the dogs get there. Not the Chicago greeting. The other one: the whole thing, undiluted, with nothing about next week's flight mixed in. Thirty seconds at full bore.

I'll leave the floor to Toots. ◆