

Do we need dogs to teach us friendliness?

LYNN Creek was calmer at the weekend

BY ELIZABETH JAMES, NORTH SHORE NEWS MARCH 27, 2013

"How many times have we walked by someone on the street or in a hallway and, instead of saying 'Hello', we pretend we don't see them? The truth is that all of us, deep down inside, have a need to be seen, acknowledged and appreciated." -- **Ron Atchison**

Gone was the turbulent roiling of pineapple-express rain-swell that, two weeks ago, had threatened flood levels as it swept small boulders closer to the estuary.

Instead, sunshine teased errant waves and began again to warm creek banks and light up the vivid greens on moss-covered logs.

Now was the time to shed the rain-gear and remember that "Sunshine on (our) shoulders" really does make us happy.

We fared well this winter. Snow was in its rightful place - on the mountains.

That kept the skiers occupied, while the rest of us did what we do best: complain about the never-ending rain that "stays mainly in the plains" - until we welcome it to carry us and our lawns through the all-too-short dry spells of summer.

But my walks up Bridgman Trail brought more thoughts tumbling down than our mild weather.

What is the plant that, alongside the trail, has tiny red berries sharing fan-shaped branches with the opening buds of equally-small leaves? Is it a variety of cotoneaster, or a wild plant?

Is skunk cabbage the true albeit unromantic harbinger of a Lower Mainland spring?

Why aren't human beings as multicultural as the rampant varieties of dogs happily sharing the trail with everyone they meet - canine and human alike?

Why do dog owners always say "Hello," unlike others of their species?

Why do black-clad crows commute in virtual silence from their Burnaby murder to their jobs at North Shore work-stations, while others of their kind like Canada geese and the remarkable lesser snow geese never stop talking as they fly?

Is it that the crows' short urban route is so well-known they never need to ask the way or to voice the plaint, "Are we there yet, Mum?"

But then less welcome thoughts came to mind.

"I took the last available parking spot when I arrived," began the intrusion.

"What will happen to this much-used dog-friendly place once the Lower Lynn Town Centre projects are completed? Will it become just one more ant-trail of people and their canine friends aching for some quiet space to enjoy?"

"Will dogs be banned outright in the name of Metro government?"

That worries me because those smiling de-stressed dog "owners" are of a special breed themselves.

To explain, I need to tell you a short story and a small theory I had been testing.

In the first week of February, I saw a brief news item on Global TV's Morning News about Shelley Koorbatoff, a young woman who, born and raised in Grand Forks, B.C., moved to a new job in Vancouver.

Now living in a downtown Vancouver highrise, she came to realize that after two years in her new home she still had not met her neighbours.

What she had encountered was what I refer to as the "Ron Atchison syndrome".

Although I don't know who Atchison is, Koorbatoff and I sure know the syndrome when we see it. The difference between us is that Koorbatoff decided to go public with her experiment.

Where were you on the morning of Friday, Feb. 8? Did you happen to travel to your Vancouver job and see a young woman handing out name tags and greeting everyone on the street with a smile and a friendly, "Hello"?

If you did, that was Koorbatoff working to turn her world upside-down - in a good way.

She had noticed that when people are handed name tags at a conference, the awkwardness of meeting complete strangers melts away.

Asking "Why can't that work everywhere?" she decided to make it happen.

Compared to Koorbatoff's Grade A-plus open and active efforts, my own inhibited experiment garners only a C-mark.

When the rains began last fall, I wondered whether the Atchison syndrome that affects some Vancouverites is a result of the mild to severe depression that often accompanies Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD).

So after all the "Happy new years" ended, I decided to keep going and say a cheery "Good morning!" to everyone I met on Lonsdale, just to see what happened.

Yeah, you're right; I'm bonkers as some Brits would say.

In order to achieve a friendly response, of course, I needed to penetrate beyond the averted eyes of those who "pretended not to see" me.

My percentages weren't impressive.

First, even the best greeters don't stand a chance with the 25 per centers whose eyes are locked on to their RIM or Apple gadgets.

Of the other 75 per cent, about half readily returned the greeting; some even included a tentative smile to go along with it.

Of the rest, a few were startled out of their socks enough to mutter something in return, while the remainder truly did think I might be asking for whatever it was they didn't want to relinquish.

Nothing daunted, and as Koorbatoff might do, maybe I should stand on a corner this Sunday, handing out brightly-coloured eggs as I say, "Happy Easter, everybody!"?

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