



Dog's Grace

Eighteen-year-old Kirby stands at the kitchen door, yawning. The smells of eggs, toast and bacon have pulled him out of bed. The last item has his eyes wide with anticipation. I hand him a piece and he carefully takes it. He creaks back into the living room to savor his pre-breakfast snack.

Kirby, in case you wondered, is a dog—the older of our two aging Rat Terriers. His sister Meg is a mere 16 and thinks she's still a puppy, but Kirby is encountering many of the same physical challenges we all deal with later in life—hearing loss, cataracts, arthritis, respiratory ailments—you name it.

His long life has been punctuated by several illnesses, including near-fatal valley fever, pancreatitis, a rare auto-immune disease and pneumonia. But Kirby doesn't seem to give any of this a second thought. We still go for short rambles through the woods nearly every day as well as a late night walk down the street (his eyes are sensitive to bright light).

It's not like I drag him off on these expeditions against his will. Once he gets his joints warmed up, he creaks along with joy and confidence, sampling smells along the way. Sometimes he even scampers, careening down the trail and hopping and tripping over fallen branches.

By contrast, if I had Kirby's afflictions, I would likely be in a blue funk over my loss of hearing, eyesight and mobility, added to loss of hair and memory. Did I mention loss of memory? I would grow more and more depressed as I wondered about my physical state ten years from now. I would slide

into melancholia as I over-pondered my inevitable demise.

Dogs (at least Kirby) just don't do this. Author Dean Koontz put it this way: "When you have dogs, you witness their uncomplaining acceptance of suffering, their bright desire to make the most of life in spite of the limitations of age and disease, their calm awareness of the approaching end when their final hours come. They accept death with a grace that I hope I will one day be brave enough to muster" (from *A Big Little Life: A Memoir of a Joyful Dog*).

Why can't we muster this animal-like grace? Or more accurately, why do so many humans have so much trouble accepting the same gift that a kind God has given our supposedly less intelligent animal friends? Instead of enjoying grace and faith, we wallow in anxiety.

"Now hold on there," you might say, "Dogs don't have a sense of past and future in the same way we do. They lack self-awareness. They know nothing of North Korea, terrorism, rising sea levels or shrinking retirement funds."

True that. Animals pretty much live in the here and now. And yet that's exactly what Jesus advises us to do, in a passage that almost sounds irresponsible, but absolutely is not.

Look at the birds. They don't plant or harvest or store food in barns, for your heavenly Father feeds

them. And aren't you far more valuable to him than they are? Can all your worries add a single moment to your life?...Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need. So don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring its own worries. Today's trouble is enough for today (Matthew 6:26-27, 33-34, NLT).

Even though this gem of advice points the way to anxiety-free living, it's one of the most ignored by Jesus' nominal followers. Christendom is notorious for promoting devastating guilt and hand-wringing worry.

Meanwhile, many non-Christian ideologies have made an art form out of clearing the mind of anxiety through various practices and techniques. Yet Jesus offers us this freedom from worry as a gift. We just need to accept it, lay aside our anxieties, have confidence in him and take one day at a time.

It's a gift so simple even my dogs can accept it. Why should it be so hard for us? □

—Monte Wolverton



Monte's sweet rat terriers, Kirby (L) and Meg (R)