

## Beagle Retreat

*A week home alone meditating with a beagle and a blizzard*

January 2011



It was the vacation break between semesters at the University where I teach. My husband was going to be out of the country for a week, so I decided to do a self-retreat at home. It would be just me and my 13 year old beagle, Thisbe. (Shakespearean dog names run in our family; our previous beagle's name was Bottom.) Thisbe is in pretty good shape for an old lady, but she takes various meds several times a day, needs to go out frequently, and wheezes loudly when she breathes. I was hoping to recreate a schedule similar to what I was used to at the Vipassana retreat centers where I usually go, with periods of sitting and walking, a bit of working and resting, and mindful meals in silence. I knew realistically, however, the Beagle would most likely determine the flow of the day. My husband left for the airport Saturday afternoon. I straightened up the house and put away as much distracting material as I could. I bought food for the week, put fresh flowers in different spots around the house, and turned on my email away message. I was ready for an amazing adventure in my own back yard.

The weather in NJ this last week of January was bitterly cold with bright sun and six inches of crusty snow on the ground. Sunday morning I put my sitting cushion in front of

the sliding glass door to the deck and basked in the rising sun as it poured in from my back yard. I caught myself tempted by familiar habits as I walked by the refrigerator, or the telephone, where my tucked away to do list usually beckoned. I watched my mind trying to figure out what came next: how long to sit, – if Thisbe is asleep, keep sitting! – where to walk, or what to cook for dinner. Humm, should I make a baked white potato and steamed broccoli, or a baked sweet potato and steamed zucchini? Should I save the tofu and peas for later in the week? Weighty questions as I relaxed into a slower, simpler tempo and rhythm.

Thisbe was a bit perplexed at first, especially during the slow walking periods, as she is used to me racing around the house doing six things at once. She was especially exasperated with me as I slowly and mindfully reached for my scarf, my hat, my coat, my boots, zipped up my coat, tied up my boots, reached for the leash, fastened it on her and *finally* opened the door so we could go out. Once outside, she often just emptied her bladder and headed right back in. Invariably if I tried to execute this simple maneuver without a coat she would want to go for a longer walk. It really was too cold to be outside in just a sweater. I tried to feel the cold and mindfully note "cold, cold, unpleasant, unpleasant." Eventually I just decided to do the whole coat, hat, scarf, boots thing every time. What else did I have to do after all? Pretty soon Thisbe got the hang of the slow pace of things inside and was willing to wait for me.

Outside it was a completely different story. Being a beagle, she is 200% smelling machine. It is heaven for her to spend an indefinite amount of time investigating one small spot on the ground, inhaling its varied history. Usually, I'm the one who gets impatient and exasperated with her, "come *on*, Thisbe, let's *go*!!!!" Now I decided to do slow walking at Beagle speed. She was delighted and took full advantage of my generosity. I observed and emulated her unquenchable interest in the smallest details. I practiced renunciation and tried to give up my own agenda, letting her lead me where she wanted to go. We followed fresh animal tracks in the snow and I marveled at her absorption as she plunged her muzzle, and whole head into the depths of a hole left by a deer hoof. Monday and Tuesday stayed cold and bright and I settled into a tranquil and concentrated state where everything delighted me: the blooms of tiny narcissus in a pot on the kitchen table as they slowly emerged from their shoots and turned to face the window, my soap in the shower which felt deliciously soft and slippery, and smelled wonderful, the sun glinting on icicles hanging from the roof. Even the fascinating patterns in the crusty frozen tire tracks by the edge of the road looked beautiful and amazing, and the velvet head and ears and soft brown eyes of my dear companion filled my heart with warmth and love.

Of course since everything is impermanent this blissful existence couldn't last. Wednesday morning it was cloudy and grey. As I sat after breakfast, I heard a soft warning growl that quickly turned into barking. Thisbe is usually a pretty vocal dog, and I have lots of experience with barking meditation. She'd been remarkably quiet the past three days. I tried to just hear the sound without wondering what was making her bark. Later in the morning when we went out, she knew by now that I would follow where she wanted to go, and she headed straight for the deck. I didn't want to let her go all the way

under the deck where I wouldn't easily be able to coax her out again, but I did let her get near to the opening behind some bushes. I held her leash firmly and let her smell as her body trembled with anticipation and excitement. Suddenly we heard a low growl and menacing hiss from the darkness beneath the deck. With surprising calm, I lunged forward and scooped her up into my arms and carried her, struggling, back into the house. She was inconsolable. There was some wild animal under there, a feral cat, maybe a raccoon, we've even seen a coyote in the neighborhood, and she had to get to it. What she would do then, of course, is another story, and I was not about to let that confrontation take place.

The rest of the day she paced the house in agitation, panting and whining. Occasionally, while I was sitting, she drifted into a troubled sleep, her wheezing faster and louder than usual. But more of the time I heard the "click, click, click" of her nails on the floor as she patrolled the borders. During walking periods she would butt her head against my legs or try to slip between them like a cat. She even used her familiar ploy of sitting on my foot, asking to go out. This was really comical as I slowly lifted one foot in mid step, only to feel a soft warm beagle behind settle on the foot that was still on the floor. I laughed out loud until I started to get really bugged. "I've taken you out six times already!!!!" "No, I'm not going to let you go under the deck!" This was intended to be a silent retreat, but not this afternoon. Thisbe was having a full blown multiple hindrance attack: fear, restlessness, desire to find out who was threatening her territory, and delusion about what she would do if she confronted the intruder. I was fighting with my own set of hindrances: how am I supposed to sit with all this panting and pacing going on? How many times do I have to take her out in an hour? What can I do about the animal under the deck? I wish things were not the way they are! Ah, there's the real problem: my own aversion to the way things are. When I finally saw this, it was a little easier to be present with the situation, but it was still a long afternoon and evening.

By now it had started to snow. We were in for a storm, but I had no idea how much accumulation was expected. As the evening progressed we had lightning and thunder which I thought was incredibly cool, but only added to Thisbe's unrest. I shoveled numerous times to keep the front and back steps clear, and maintain some passable paths to Thisbe's toilette. Every time we went out the back door she still tried to pull me over to the deck. It really was a comedy of errors trying to manage a shovel and a tugging dog and the blowing wind and swirling snow. When I finally went to bed, I didn't sleep much. Awake at 4:30 am, I heard a popping sound and saw flashing lights outside my window by the street. At first I thought it was more thunder and lightening, but the light was a dazzling variety of colors, red, blue, green. Is it a police car or snow plow? Oddly, I wasn't frightened, but fascinated by the amazing sight. Then the house was suddenly very quiet and the clock on the cable box went dark. Oh. That was the transformer exploding. The power is out. Again, I didn't panic, but started thinking of my contingency plans: I have plenty of food for me and Thisbe; I have several spare containers of drinking water for us both. I can make a fire in the fire place if it gets cold in the house. I could probably light the burners of the gas stove with a match to cook, and melt snow in a pot to wash the dishes; I have plenty of candles in the house, but it will be daylight soon. I wasn't planning on going anywhere anyway. I don't need electricity to sit and walk. I can be like

a hermit in a mountain cave, no problem! Still, I stayed in bed where it was warm, as long as I could.



When I finally got up, the first thing I had to do was clear the front step and shovel a small place for Thisbe to do her business. Over a foot of snow had fallen since I went to bed, too deep for an old lady beagle to jump through. I let her pee, put out her breakfast and went back outside to survey the property. The storm had past and my back yard was a magical winter wonderland. The sky was clear except for a few wispy clouds kissed with pink by the rising sun. Tree limbs bowed low with heavy snow. The deep quiet and unspoiled expanse of white filled me with wonder. It was incredibly beautiful. The snow was over knee high and very dense and wet. I measured 17 newly fallen inches for a total of almost 2 feet. I tried to find the Thisbe paths I had cleared last night, but only managed to make a modified version of her toilette area. I loved being outside on this gorgeous morning, but shoveling was tough going, and after an hour I was ready for a rest. The front walk and driveway could certainly wait. Time to deal with the situation inside.

When I came back in, I was startled and then overjoyed to hear the refrigerator and furnace hum back to life. So I wouldn't have to make a fire in the fireplace after all! As usual, all my planning in the middle of the night was unnecessary. I savored brushing my teeth, enjoyed a hot breakfast, and finally settled down to sit. We had a pretty good practice period of sitting and walking Thursday morning, but Thisbe hadn't forgotten the excitement of yesterday, and she wanted to go out to explore the new world of snow. The minute we got out the back door she tried to head over to the deck. Never mind that the snow was way over her head. She wanted to go there in the worst way. I marveled at her persistence. Kindly and patiently, with her safety and well being foremost in my heart, I firmly led her to the path I had made for her. This is what I was doing with my mind after all, wasn't it? The old, unskillful habit patterns are so strong, we can't help but be pulled in their direction. With mindfulness, we turn again and again away from the unskillful and towards the more wholesome path. I know it is not in my best interest to get involved with the various wild animals under the deck of my mind and heart, yet I keep getting tangled up with them. My practice is to see myself starting or wanting to go in that direction, and then turn instead, with great kindness, towards the better path to peace and freedom.

I learned a lot from Thisbe in the next three days, and I practiced kindness, patience and compassion for her and for me. I wrestled with the snow blower and eventually managed to clear the driveway and front walk. I did a lot of slow, mindful shoveling, and then sat with my tired, aching body. When I felt Thisbe sitting on my foot, I looked to see, as Tara Brach teaches, what needed attention. Whether it was fresh water, supper, a long or short walk outside, putting her needs ahead of mine made our time together much easier, and infinitely sweeter. Sitting together in the last few days of the retreat, the sound of her wheezy breathing mingled with the sounds of the furnace and refrigerator going on and off, and my own breath flowing in and out to create a multi-dimensional tapestry of breath and sound. The boundary separating her breath and mine began to fade, and I rested in a spacious awareness of the way things were.

When my husband returned home and my house was filled once again with the energy of regular life, my retreat oasis seemed like a dream. Yet I was filled with gratitude for heat,

electricity and running water, and a deep feeling of connection to my beloved beagle who shared that special adventure with me.