The Thesis Journey: Travelling with Charley¹

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I chose the title of my talk for two reasons. The first part connects with the book, *The Doctoral Thesis Journey*, which I co-edited with David Hunt in 1994. The journey metaphor still works for me as a way to talk about the thesis process. The sub-title, *Travelling with Charley*, is borrowed from an account of a particular kind of journey—John Steinbeck's road trip across the United States with his standard poodle, Charley, chronicled in his classic novel, *Travels with Charley*. The sub-title connects with a new book that I am working on now, with the working title, *Of Dogs and Dissertations: Notes on Thesis Writing and Life*.

You don't have to have a dog in your life or love a dog to connect with what I am going to say, but it might help. So I invite you to pause for a minute and invite a dog you have known or currently know to come forward in your mind. Let him or her be here with you for the next 40 minutes or so while we think together about what we can learn about thesis writing (among other things) from these wonderful creatures. If you are not inclined to want to invite a dog to lunch, then a horse will do, or a cat, or a rabbit.

No, I haven't lost my mind and I am not joking. There is much to be learned from dogs if we learn to adopt what Lous Heshusius (1994) would call, a "participatory mode of consciousness" and if we engage with them with patience, openness, and feeling. To quote Suzanne Clothier in her extraordinary book, *Bones Would Rain from the Sky*, "To travel in the company of animals is to walk with angels, guides, guardians, jesters, shadows and mirrors" (2002, p.11).

Suzanne Clothier describes her and her husband's wedding ceremony, which took place in a pasture on their farm and which, of course, included their seven dogs. As part of the ceremony they called forward each dog in turn as an embodiment of qualities and characteristics that they, the bride and groom,

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hoped to emulate in their marriage: gentleness, maturity, determination, gracefulness, faithfulness, beauty, courage, playfulness, and so on. “In calling our dogs to us and naming their gifts and lessons,” she says, “we acknowledged what they helped to create in our lives and honored their role in our lives as teachers” (p. 275). Earlier in the book she states, “Of all the gifts that animals can offer, perhaps the greatest is... [the] opportunity to delve deep inside ourselves. Without judgment or timetables, with patience and an amazing capacity for forgiveness, animals are the ideal guides through our inner landscapes” (p. 12).

I take inspiration from Suzanne Clothier when I think about the thesis process. We have much to learn from dogs about thesis writing and about life. Many of the qualities they embody are lessons to thesis writers: devotion, nose-to-the-ground discipline, presence, attunement, honesty, patience, humour, companionship, curiosity, dignity, dogged persistence, joy, creativity, forgiveness, acceptance, non-judgement, a basic wisdom about the need for physical, emotional, and intellectual balance, and of course love, to name but a few.

The following three dog vignettes are from my in-progress manuscript. Each story exemplifies one or more of the qualities to be honoured in the thesis process. After each story I more directly explore the qualities and their role in the thesis process. Then I offer a list of top twenty travel tips for the thesis journey. I hope what I have to share with you is both enjoyable and helpful. The journey on which you all have embarked is a demanding one on many levels. It is as Corrine Glesne and Allan Peshkin (1992, p. 179) say about qualitative research “an odyssey into our discipline, our practice, and perhaps our souls. We cannot be sure of what we will find, but we invariably get caught up in the search.” You are all at different points along the way and are likely grappling with different issues, problems, and concerns and you likely have myriad questions. I hope I will speak to at least some of what is on your mind. So without further ado, give that dog that has joined you a gentle stroking and I will begin.

Vignette 1

I sit at my computer staring at the screen, searching the far reaches of my mind for words to help me untangle the thoughts in my head. The harder I try to loosen up the ideas enough to work with them, the tighter the knot becomes, until I lose sight altogether of even the kind of words I am looking for let alone specific ones. I sigh in frustration and, conscious

of the nagging pain in my right shoulder where I hold all my tension, I move it in a slow circular motion. As I twist my head to the right in an attempt to stretch my neck muscles and release more tension, my gaze falls to the floor a metre or so from my desk. I pause and whisper his name. Thump, thump, he replies. I say it again, louder and with an inflection that he recognizes as loving (I think). More and faster thumping accompanied by an expectant yet quizzical cock of the head. I slide from my chair to the floor and sidle over to his mat. His brown velvet eyes watch my approach. A few more thumps of the tail against the hardwood floor and then, ever so subtly, he shifts his weight. Before I complete my short journey across the floor he is on his back, all four paws in the air. I lay both hands on his soft, warm belly and begin a gentle caress. At my touch, his head flops to the side in a gesture of complete trust and assent. My hand movements are slow, gentle, rhythmic. I feel my body relax, tension ease. My search for words seems unimportant. He drops a front and back paw and shifts his weight again. He is on his side now and my strokes lengthen. Beginning at the top of his head and moving along his side and toward his tail, my hands glide across the surface of his fur. Just as I reach his hindquarter, he gently stretches, then slightly raises a back leg. It is an invitation. I follow his request and make a detour to gently rub the soft, downy crease between his leg and belly. He lets out a long and deep dog-sigh of utter contentment and in-the-moment gratification. His leg drops once again and I continue my light massage. I am aware of my breathing—slow and centred. Its rhythm has become synchronized with his. I am almost in a meditative state. A few minutes more and his gentle breathing has become a soft, purring snore. I pause to take in this moment of complete surrender before I slip away and return to my computer. Reseated, my fingers dance across the top of the keyboard—a slow skater’s waltz. I am present with my thoughts. Words come.

Writing a thesis is not just a work of the mind. It is an act of attunement that depends on the interrelated engagement of mind, body, emotion, and soul. As you work to conceptualize, clarify, and articulate ideas, as you strive to make meaning of mounds of data, as you yearn and struggle in earnest

for moments of revelation and insight, and as you desperately search for exactly the right words to say what seems so clear in your head and heart, you are engaged in an agonizingly elusive process of tough thinking and sense-making. Despite good intentions and strong will, sometimes you just have to surrender your reliance on your conscious, rational mind. Learning—deep insight and creative thinking, or what Stephen Nachmanovitch (1990), in his book, *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art*, calls “ripening”—requires mulling space. Ripening, says Nachmanovitch, takes place when our attention is directed elsewhere. In *The Writing Life*, Annie Dillard (1989) makes a comparison between splitting wood and writing. She tells a story about spending days and nights of agonizing cold in a cabin to which she had retreated to finish a writing project. She did not know how to split wood sufficiently well to keep a heat-radiating fire going. After mornings of what she described as “chipping flints” and “attacking the wood” and nights of trying to figure out how it was done properly, the answer came to her one night in a dream. “You aim at the chopping block, not at the wood,” the dream told her. “Treat the wood as a transparent means to an end, by aiming past it.” And so it is with writing she asserts. “Aim for the chopping block. If you aim for the wood, you will have nothing. Aim past the wood, aim through the wood; aim for the chopping block.” Incidentally, Nachmanovitch (1990, p. 157) has this to say about dreams:

Creative people, even when sleeping, are working and playing on their questions. Life is full of surprises when we’re asleep. There is something in us constantly wanting to come out, and it seems to emerge more easily when we let go of the strictures (hope and fear) of consciousness.

Often, sitting in front of a computer or at a desk with pen poised over (blank) paper does more to stifle creative thinking than inspire it. It is more likely the case that your “best” thoughts, conceptual links, insights, revelations, discoveries, “ahas” will come to you when you least expect them. Sometimes the best thing you can do to move forward is to move away—from your desk, from conscious attention to your work, and from your rational struggles with and for logic. Sometimes the best thing you can do to advance your thinking is to unfetter your intellect and engage other parts of yourself. Go for a walk, take a bath, cook a gourmet meal, take in a movie or concert, paint a room, spend time with your dog.

Vignette 2

It's raining, hard; the kind of rain you hope for in early spring, the kind you hope will wash away the debris from urban winter and give spring green a nudge forward. I am dressed for the weather—waterproofed from head to toe. Nevertheless, my plan is for a shorter-than-usual walk; it's late and it's cold along with the wet. We move quickly, wending our way along the familiar sidewalks of our neighbourhood, pausing only long enough for cursory investigations of interesting smells and littered remains of lunch bags, fast food containers, the odd bone or food scrap likely dropped by a scavenger on the run. We zigzag from one side of our neighbourhood to the other ducking down back laneways, taking shortcuts, moving steadily forward through the pouring rain. He seems quite happy with our faster-than-usual pace, and for a while I think my plan for a shortened walk is going to work. And then I lead us around a corner and onto the main commercial street of our neighbourhood. I realize my mistake too late; it's garbage night.

During the day and evening this street is a bustle of activity, drawing shoppers to any number of restaurants, pubs, bakeries, butcher shops, fruit and vegetable markets, and specialty food boutiques. Now, the street is more or less deserted except for a few lingering bar and restaurant patrons and the occasional dog walking duo. Now, on the abandoned sidewalk slick with rain and under the glow of the streetlights, sits the week's garbage. Curbside in front of every food establishment are mounds of polyethylene garbage bags filled to capacity and tied close, large blue and green plastic waste bins on wheels lined up in rows, and stacks of collapsed and bundled cardboard boxes. I heave a sigh of defeat as I look up the street; garbage as far as I can see.

I could turn around and lead us back home the way we came but, because I have a rule about never retracing steps, I give a signal that moves us forward. The rain has not let up and I am aware that a chilly dampness has settled in my bones. I feel a slight tug at the end of the leash and look down to see his brown nose, wet and glistening, held high in

the air twitching, honing in on what must seem like a veritable olfactory feast. I give in knowing that it is futile, not to mention unfair, to engage in a battle of wills that I could only win with brute force. I follow him to the first stop, the butcher shop. Bundle after bundle of flattened cardboard boxes are tied and neatly stacked curbside opposite the store entrance; twenty-six in all, I am about to discover. The printing still visible on the rain-soaked cardboard reads like a delivery list: Chicken Coop Poultry Products, Grade A Meats, Brown's Beef. "There couldn't possibly be any scent left," I think half-aloud with a gentle tug, bidding us forward. We are at bundle number four.

With the kind of methodical precision of a forensic detective, he passes his nose over every square centimetre of cardboard within reach. Heedless of my suggestions that it is time to continue on our way; oblivious to the rain pouring down and soaking both of us, and even despite bribes of yummy treats from my coat pocket, he persists with his task—methodically, meticulously, relentlessly. There is nothing as important right now. This job has priority over everything. No shortcuts, no distractions; just nose-to-the-ground (or box) persistence, regardless. From beginning to end, top to bottom, he perseveres. Sixteen and counting. "What? He has skipped three bundles." We're into the twenties now; the end is in sight. I walk a few steps ahead past the end of the line in hopeful anticipation of moving on. Finally, number twenty-six. He pauses at the end of the last bundle as if to review his work and we walk on. Not ten steps away I feel the leash strain in my hand and groan upon realization that he has turned back and is headed toward the cardboard again as if following up on a second thought. Again, I follow, rain dripping from my hood, down my face, and trickling into my mouth. Back we go straight to the three bundles passed over first time around. With the same kind of finical precision as before he gives each one a thorough going-over, then stands back and does a final survey of the entire pile before working up a long, full, satisfying shake throwing water in every direction. Finally, ready to move on, we pick up the pace and make our way farther along the sidewalk. As we approach the pile of garbage bags stacked opposite the bar and grill I shiver in anticipation. It will be a late night. There is much to be done.

A thesis is completed through dogged persistence and determination. Be prepared for hard work and dedication to the task. Writing a thesis is hard work that is unlike any other academic task. It is not just another course paper. It is a book, believe it or not, and it requires a different kind and level of commitment: focused and sustained. Doing course work is the easy part of a degree program - which is why there is such a high percentage of ABDs (All But Dissertation) or ABTs (All But Thesis). A study reported on in Berkowitz (2003) indicates PhD completion rates of 55.1% and Master's completion rates of 70.6% in the Social Sciences.

A thesis is written one word at a time. Words string together to make sentences which compose paragraphs which fill pages which add up to chapters. Working with dedication and discipline toward deadlines (working in 3-D) will carry you a long way. Establish and stick to a schedule. Write every day for a set period of time. Set goals and stick to them, regardless. For example, 3 pages a day x 6 days a week = 18 pages a week x 10 weeks = 180 pages—not all of which will be usable but nevertheless. Persist towards achieving those three pages and reward yourself when it comes easy. And on those days when you just can't seem to put a coherent sentence together, there is always editing the previous day's work, proofreading last week's writing, gleaning field notes and transcripts, updating your reference list, polishing and fiddling. The longer a project is stretched out, the greater the chances of losing interest. As Stephen King (2000) would say, the mythical muse is not going to get the work done; she can only supply the inspiration.

And then just when you think you've finished look again, go deeper, look for overarching points to theorize. Try to answer the questions: What is your thesis about? What can a reader learn from it? To answer, stand back and look at it from a distance. If the answer to those questions is not apparent then it needs another revision. In *Writing Down the Bones*, Natalie Goldberg (1986, p. 103) says this of writing in general: "Sometimes when you think you are done, it's just the edge of the beginning."

Inevitably, life will get in the way. While it is important to acknowledge and attend to life events and challenges, it is just as important to know when they have become excuses to stop work. You will reach a point in the thesis process where you realize that, in order to do the kind of deep thinking, mulling, and writing required you must make your thesis your priority over all else (except your dog of course). You will need to eliminate distractions and find Virginia Woolf's equivalent of "a room of your own," a place where, in Gail Griffin's (1992, p. 230) words, "the significance of one's work is assumed and takes priority over all else." Annie Dillard (1989, p. 26) describes how she goes about creating "unappealing workplaces." No matter

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where she is—in the mountains, by the ocean, in a busy urban setting, or in her home environment—she works to block any access to the outside world and minimize distractions within her workspace. She says she doesn't care where she works because she doesn't notice things around her. "One wants a room with no view," she argues, "so that imagination can meet memory in the dark."

Vignette 3

I want him to have a good, long run. I have a full day of writing ahead of me and I always feel better when I know he is sleeping because he is tired, not because he is bored. We arrive at the lake and I unclip his leash. He immediately heads for the water, wades in belly-high plowing the water with his snout, sits for a few seconds, and then jumps up, shakes, and walks back to shore. As always I wish he would swim; as always he keeps mostly to the shore, meandering into the water only for the occasional drink, to cool off with a quick duck, or when he wants to avoid another dog (his version of Nya, nya, nya, nya nya, can't catch me). Instead of the fast-paced, physically challenging workout I have in mind, we inch our way along the shoreline, he with his nose to the ground and I with my eye trained on his movements and ready to offer a sharp, "Drop it". The shoreline is littered; I must be vigilant. I try to interest him in a stick for a game of fetch or chase. He ignores my shenanigans and continues his methodical explorations sniffing, pawing the sand to unearth buried treasure, occasionally picking up something in his mouth and not always dropping it on command. I come across an empty plastic water bottle and give it a kick so that it skims along the sand, an enticement for sure I think. The noise and movement catch his attention. He looks up, satisfies his curiosity, and resumes his exploring. "Come on, play, run, exert yourself," I silently urge.

We continue along the beach at a snail's pace. I have resorted to entertaining myself by kicking the plastic bottle in front of me as I go. We pass a woman throwing sticks into the water and a dog blissfully swimming to retrieve every one. "See that," I say as we amble by, "that's how it's done." And I toss a stick just in case. No response, except for an imagined "Yeah, so." Thirty minutes later we are still

sauntering along, he relishing the journey, I intent on the destination. My image of a tuckered-out dog sleeping peacefully at my feet while I work fades with each dawdling step. We eventually reach the crumbling remains of a concrete wall that separates two stretches of beach and I decide to turn back rather than climb over to the next accessible part of the shoreline. We reverse direction and continue ever so slowly to make our way back along the beach, I trying to resign myself to the fact that my plan is not to be and he busily picking his way through the flotsam and jetsam along the shore. (The rule about never retracing steps doesn't apply here; there is sufficient new ground to cover to keep the walk interesting and stimulating.)

Ultimately we once again come upon the plastic bottle that I had abandoned an hour earlier. I give it a careless kick and watch it sail several metres through the air. Almost before I can take another step, he bolts forward in hot pursuit, pouncing on the bottle just as it hits the sand. A backward glance in my direction allows him to judge the range between us and assess how much of a threat I am. With the bottle firmly grasped in his mouth, he charges down the beach at full tilt until he is a safe distance away, screeches to a halt, and plops down in the sand facing me, daring me to advance. As I approach, he releases the bottle only long enough to taunt me. His body and mind on high alert, he is ready to flee at the first sign of my impending seizure. As I cross some apparently predetermined line in the sand he grabs the bottle in his mouth and takes off. The chase is on. Round and round he runs in ever widening circles, sand flying, feet pounding, his body extending with the speed and grace of a racehorse. A thing of beauty. One more loop and into the lake he dashes, dropping the bottle at the water's edge. I rush to pick it up and hurl it into the lake; he swims towards it, snatches it from the water, and heads for shore. The game continues. He is ready now; he has found his stride. This is his way.

The work of a thesis is a process, not an event; it is about the journey, not only the destination. And this journey is as much a journey of self-learning and personal transformation as it is an academic exploration. It is about developing one's identity as a researcher and writer, gaining confidence and

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trust in oneself, finding voice. It is a process that takes time. I am reminded here of Stephen Nachmanovitch's lovely analogy of an oyster:

When a grain of grit accidentally slips into an oyster's shell, the oyster encysts it, secreting more and more of a thick, smooth mucus that hardens in microscopic layer after layer over the foreign irritation until it becomes a perfectly smooth, round, hard, shiny thing of beauty. The oyster thereby transforms both the grit and itself into something new...completing the gestalt according to its own oyster nature. (1990, p. 88)

It takes time to make a pearl and, like the oyster, we need to engage in the creation process according to our own nature. We all have different ways of being and doing, different styles of learning and creating. There is no one right way of researching and writing. Striving to follow someone else's system, routine, practice, route will help you eventually reach your destination but it is likely that the journey itself will be void of deep meaning and you will inevitably miss a lot along the way. You need to find your own style and honour it. You need to find your own rhythm and move to it.

Travel Tips

And now we leap to a fast-paced ending with some travel tips. I leave you to find the dog stories in these points.

1. Research/write what you most want to know. Following your passions will sustain you through a long and arduous journey.
2. Striving for the 'unique' study or 'original' idea is a misdirected goal. Research is a communal act.
3. Take ownership of your work. This is **your** thesis.
4. Find someone besides yourself who believes in you. The thesis journey is a lonely one.
5. Work in 3D: discipline, determination, and deadlines. Read, read, read. Write, write, write.
6. See and believe in yourself as a researcher and writer. Take your work and role seriously. Dignify them.
7. Make your thesis a priority.

8. Take time to know who you are and what you and your work stand for. Don't be bullied by those with opposing views.
9. Hours spent talking about writing is time spent not doing it. A thesis is written one word at a time.
10. "The scariest moment is always just before you start" (King, 2000). Start writing NOW...and KEEP GOING
11. Maintain your focus; stay the course.
12. Be prepared for hard work and dedication to the task. Persistence and determination will take you 90% of the way.
13. Establish and stick to a disciplined schedule. The longer a project is stretched out the greater the chances of losing interest.
14. In the beginning...suspend your critic. Write as fast as you can to get it all out, in order to, as Stephen King (2000) would say "outrun your self-doubt".
15. Be prepared to let go—of preconceptions and expectations, of plans, of that line that took you all day to perfect.
16. Trust and revel in the process.
17. Strive to nourish your body and spirit as well as your mind.
18. Your thesis is only a small piece of your life and career not all of it.
19. Be prepared to end up with more questions than answers.
20. Your relationship with your supervisor or advisor is up there with other significant relationships. At this point in your life and career this relationship matters a lot.

Proverb

On that note I will conclude with a story, a proverb, that my former supervisor, mentor, and dear colleague, Dave Hunt, recently shared with me. It is particularly apt for today because of its consistency with our animal motif.

The Rabbit's Thesis (Author Unknown)

One sunny day a rabbit came out of her hole in the ground to enjoy the fine weather. The day was so nice that she became careless and a fox sneaked up behind her and caught her.

"I am going to eat you for lunch!", said the fox.

"Wait!" replied the rabbit, "You should at least wait a few days."

"Oh yeah? Why should I wait?"

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“Well, I am just finishing my thesis on the superiority of rabbits over foxes and wolves.”

“Are you crazy? I should eat you right now! Everybody knows that a fox will always win over a rabbit.”

“Not really, not according to my research. If you like, you can come into my hole and read it for yourself. If you are not convinced, you can go ahead and have me for lunch.”

“You really are crazy!”

But since the fox was curious and had nothing to lose, it went with the rabbit. The fox never came out.

A few days later the rabbit was again taking a break from writing and sure enough, a wolf came out of the bushes and was ready to set upon her.

“Wait!” yelled the rabbit, “you can’t eat me right now.”

“And why might that be, my furry appetizer?”

“I am almost finished writing my thesis on the superiority of rabbits over foxes and wolves.”

The wolf laughed so hard that it almost lost its grip on the rabbit.

“Maybe I shouldn’t eat you; you really are sick—in the head. You might have something contagious.”

“Come and read it for yourself; you can eat me afterward if you disagree with my conclusions.”

So the wolf went down into the rabbit’s hole and never came out.

The rabbit finished her thesis and was out celebrating in the local lettuce patch. Another rabbit came along and asked,

“What’s up? You seem very happy.”

“Yup, I just finished my thesis.”

“Congratulations. What’s it about?”

“The superiority of rabbits over foxes and wolves.”

“Are you sure? That doesn’t sound right.”

“Oh yes. Come and read it for yourself.”

So together they went down into the rabbit’s hole. As they entered, the friend saw the typical graduate abode, albeit a rather messy one after writing a thesis. The computer with the controversial work was in one corner. And to the right there was a pile of fox bones, on the left a pile of wolf bones. And in the middle was a large, well-fed lion.

The Moral

The moral of the story: The title of your thesis doesn't matter. The subject doesn't matter. The research doesn't matter. All that matters is who your advisor is.

Thank You

Thank-you for listening to me and to your dogs and bon voyage.

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