

Time should be spent wisely

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Birthdays come and go. I now wave as they pass through.

My sixty-sixth falls on the 27th. I hear my clock. It's getting louder.

I don't think I've spent my time wisely. I can't change the past tocks, only the impending ticks—and probably not many of those.

In contrast, a friend, Miss Lucinda Beverage, who turns 93 on January 1st, spent 2011 teaching herself to paint.

I stopped by on Tuesday morning, and she presented me with a professionally printed, glossy calendar that featured 12 of her works. It was a private run of just 20. I was floored.

Her name is not on her calendar. So I asked her to sign my copy. She did, in a perfect cursive as self-effacingly small as this line of print. It's not that easy to break a good habit, particularly one that was used to instruct others while standing at a blackboard.

Until two years ago, she'd come to the workout room on the mornings when Joerg and I were there. Her hair was always done perfectly...unlike mine. She'd walk the treadmill, work the lat pull-down machine and then finish with squats!

I liked to flirt with her. I'd tell she was toning up for a new bikini. She didn't have that far to go.

She quilted until this year. Now she paints. Next year, she might take up magic tricks or hang gliding.

Earlier that morning, I spent time looking in our woods for a friend's birddog that had disappeared after chasing a deer the day before.

The Brittany's name is Molly, the same as our daughter who, I better point out, is a predecessor in title.

I started calling for her near the pond. "MOLLY. COME HERE."

Shouting "MOLLY" immediately flashed me back more than 20 years to a late-spring Friday afternoon on the spiffed-up, downtown Charlottesville Mall.

I had taken four-year-old Molly for an after-school ice cream cone. That was about the time when walking leashes for little kids were just starting to be marketed. I was not going to tether Molly like some pampered

Upper East Side Shih Tzu. I would, however, continue my work with her on “Sit. Stay,” a work in progress.

Molly was pedaling her low-slung, Fisher-Price three-wheeler with the pink handlebar tassels and the secret compartment under the seat. There she stashed her magpie treasures—bits of colored glass, spare ribbons, priceless pebbles and the wild-hair head of her Barbie doll. We referred to the highly valued remaining torso as, “Handicapped Barbie.”

The Mall was crowded for a TGIF event. I stopped to buy a newspaper from a vending machine next to the fountain where Molly and a classmate from Montessori school had barely escaped arrest two weeks earlier for dancing with one hand waving free in the shallow water.

When I turned, she was gone.

I quickly looked around, trying to see behind the clumps of people. I looked at the fountain, thinking that she might be a recidivist. I glanced behind the benches. “Molly?” **“MOLLY!”** **“MOLLY!”**

Fifteen seconds. 30. A minute. Two minutes. **“MOLLY!”**

I ran up one side street and down another. I ran to the ice cream shop. The bookstore.

Fear wrapped around me. Suffocating. I kept telling myself: Don’t panic. Keep your wits about you.

Dark thoughts appeared. Snatched. Kidnapped. It happens.

Every second meant that she could be farther away.

I started asking people on the mall, “Have you seen a blond girl on a trike?”

“MOLLY!”

Maybe three minutes had gone by. Adrenalin. My heart thumped.

“MOLLY!”

Idiot father loses child on Mall. How would I explain this to Melissa?

My back had not been turned for more than five seconds. Lame. Lame. No excuse. How would I live with this?

People were looking at me. **“MOL-LEEEEEE!”**

Then... I spotted her about 50 yards from the fountain behind a table. She was showing her treasures to a couple with whom she had struck up a conversation.

I ran to her. Sweating. Breathless. “Where did you go?” I asked.

“I was exploring,” she answered with great calm.

I considered buying a very short dog leash for Little Miss Magellan. But instead, I got her a double-dip chocolate cone with sprinkles.

These five minutes, at least, had been spent wisely.

I called: “MOLLY!” I heard distant barking.

After a night outside, on her own, on unfamiliar ground, she was now not that far from the place where she had started.

But she was high on Devil’s Backbone, on an old logging road cut into the side of a very steep slope that led to nothing but danger—rocks, bears and coyotes.

I was about 75 yards away when I saw her below me. You couldn’t miss her white coat against the brown and gray of the woods.

“Molly. Come here, girl.” Bark, bark. I started toward her. She didn’t know me. I guess I looked more scary than helpful. So she took three steps back for every two I took forward. When I stopped, she barked. I didn’t want to push her deeper into the holler where the road ended and the bad rocks began.

I retreated a couple of steps. She sat. Bark, bark.

I left her two biscuits and two bacon treats. I returned home and called my friend, Clif.

I figured Molly had had her fill of exploring and would hang around.

Clif found her, curled up on the jacket that he’d left in the field where he’d parked the day before. He said that she about wagged her tail off when she saw him.

Finding children who are not lost and dogs that are is time spent wisely.

So is teaching yourself to paint at 92.

Sixty-six. Sobering.

I’m no Rosa Parks.

Maybe I’ll work on my standing jump shot in case the NBA calls.

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