



THE DUCK IN THE TUB (By Jeff Camozzi, Sept.'22)

My friend, Lynn, a seventy something 4'10" blonde hair, blue-eyed, Jewish woman, an accomplished ballerina of Ukrainian decent lives alone with the company of her elderly foster dogs, one at a time until they pass on. She recently survived a stroke and among all the challenges that comes along with it, the difficult task of remaining adamant about her strict DNR and palliative-only care order. Lynn's decades-long career as a social worker for child protective services in Oakland and as a volunteer educator to incest sex offenders in San Quinten maximum security prison should paint a picture of her resolute character. Now include in your image a woman who you cannot imagine angry, and who looks you in the eyes with laser focus. She sees someone in there right through your mask and knows you can love and be loved. Lynn is the definition of a couple phrases I've come to appreciate; 'you can be tough without being mean' and 'do no harm but take no shit'. The story you're about to hear is a product of our regular coffee parties, where Lynn, my wife Emily and I sit together and tell tales from the road and inevitably bear our souls.

Now Lynn is also a volunteer at the Humane Society, one of our country's kindest institutions. She is one of a few qualified trainers in their youth education program. They host groups of kids, many from inner-city, marginalized, and underprivileged communities to spend a day learning how to safely be around pets, dogs mostly, and practice a few simple commands they learn. It's a mutually beneficial setting. The homeless dogs get some people-time, and these kids get some unconditional love. There's no language barrier there between them and the dogs (sign language), no racial or sexual construct, nor inter-relational hierarchy, no conditioned judgement from the dogs and the kids may even build some camaraderie as a team working together.

Now, as you might imagine, it's not for everyone. And try as they might, the staff won't get the buy-in from some. And that's totally ok. Those kids are asked if they'd like to try some other jobs or watch over other parts of the facility, whatever. And some will just remain quietly against the wall on their own.

Take Billy for example. Billy is about six, he's very quiet. Compliant, although uninterested, melancholy, politely declining all offers to join in. He's been there all day and perhaps missed his opportunity at lunch so by the afternoon, he really had to go... potty.

He tugged on one of the few *male* staff member's coats and inquired. The *little boy's* room was now quite aways off. You see, the facility is sort of made up of these adjoining trailer units that had developed as needed over the years and sprawled out a bit in a somewhat unorthodox pattern. So, after the staff member (we'll call him *Jim*) checked in with a colleague to inform of their journey together, they headed off. Along the way, Jim explained to Billy that the restroom was also host to a duck.



“Billy, do like ducks?” “uh-huh”, “well, when you go in there, you’re going to be in there with a duck, ok? He’s in the bathtub”. “...Oh.” “Also, I’d like to you to do a favor for me if that’s alright.” “ummmm...” “If you could just swirl the water in the tub for him for a minute before you leave, please. He *really* likes that.” “Uh...ok”.

Jim held the door and Billy looked behind himself as he headed in. He’d been in there a while before Jim cracked the door to check in. And sure enough, Billy was gently moving the water for his new duck friend. They caught eyes and Billy asked if he could keep doing it. Jim gave him a little while longer but said they’d have to get back to the group. Upon their return, Jim asked if they could go back for the rest of the day and just be with the duck in the tub. After a little deliberation that’s just what happened.

When they all got on the bus, Billy asked if he could come back and help with the duck again sometime. After they left, the staff got to talking. Jim told his story about Billy and how he liked helping with the duck in the tub. Billy wasn’t aware that he was participating in the physical therapy rehabilitation tank that was set up for the duck, who had a broken flipper. The safe environment of the tub, and a little movement in the water gets him to flapping, with one good leg mostly, until the other is healed. Billy also wasn’t aware of the breakthrough trauma therapy he, himself was experiencing.

A senior staff member knew Billy’s story. And upon hearing this said to Jim; “oh you didn’t see Billy’s legs”. “Billy has 4th degree burns to the entirety of his lower region and legs. His mother held him and his brother in a tub of scalding hot water to punish them when they were just two or three. His brother didn’t survive”.

Seeing that duck, alone in the tub, with his one good flipper, waiting to heal while trying to be a duck, had such a profoundly deep impact on me just hearing it, but as a kid living through such horror, I’ll never know. I think he must not even be able to put the two together like I am. Maybe to him it’s no big deal, he doesn’t see the metaphor, it’s just funny to see a duck in a tub.

But as an adult, with a host of my own traumatic events logged in and a fair amount of time learning about modalities of “trauma informed care”, a most profound, unexpected and divinely accidental thing occurred here. Of all the thoughts and emotions whisking around in my mind having heard this tale, were all the ways we mean well and miss the mark in compassionate care and open understanding because of our own fears of making matters worse with the “wrong interaction”.

As Lynn told this story, and tears welled up, she could see right through me. She could see all the scenes of how becoming a man in recovery meant going in that room and swirling the water for the broken duck in the tub. And how I, how we, have all been the *Duck*. How some come to be *Billy* and how we never really know who *Jim* is going to be.