

Don't Believe Everything You Think

You could be giving yourself unnecessary heartache

BY LAUREN GLICKMAN

Years ago, when I was working at the Progressive Animal Welfare Society (PAWS) in Lynnwood, Wash., I was often the first person to arrive in the morning. This meant that sometimes I found dogs tied up to the railing in front of the shelter.

Sound familiar?

Well, I believed that PAWS was one of the best places a dog could be, apart from a loving home, of course. Every time I found a dog like that, I greeted that dog with a big smile and a sense that this dog was lucky to have arrived at PAWS. It put me in a good mood, because I knew that someone made sure that this lucky pooch was brought to a place where it could get exactly what it needed. This happened fairly regularly, and it was always the same for me; I was happy because I saw evidence that someone cared enough to bring the dog to PAWS.

But one day I arrived at the same time as one of my colleagues. We saw the dog tied to the railing at the same time, and she turned and said to me in a voice full of anger and despair, "People dump dogs here all the time." She scowled. She sighed. She knew that whoever left the dog was cold and uncaring. And after hearing her say that people dump dogs here all the time, I felt deflated and sad. The next few times that I found a dog tied to the railing, I was sad because it had been "dumped."

You see, our stories are contagious.

One of the things that all human beings do regardless of culture, race, gender, profession, or age is interpret the world around them. We simply can't do anything else with the information we perceive. This is normal and natural, yet it can get us into trouble if we're not mindful about the meaning we're making. If we're not careful, we can get into the habit of assuming the worst about things and actually believ-



ing it's the truth. The key to avoiding this type of useless negativity is to consistently bring your awareness to the gap between What Actually Happened and What You Make Up About It. The better you are at distinguishing What Actually Happened from your story, the better you will be at avoiding the unnecessary pain you're caus-

ing yourself. Things are tough enough; we don't have to add false tragedy.

The *fact* in the situation I've described is that a dog is tied to the railing. The idea that the dog is therefore lucky or unlucky, that the people who left him there are good or bad? All of that is interpretation, judgment, and assumption—leading to con-

clusions about the situation that may be incorrect. There is a gap between the facts and our judgments about them.

It was right around the time that I heard that people “dump dogs” that I was first exposed to this concept. And I realized that my lucky dog story was just as invented as the dumped dog story.

This realization was incredibly freeing, because it meant that I could make up anything I wanted! The next time I found a dog tied to the railing, I crafted the most elaborate story I could imagine about a family that had just set out on a vacation. They cared so much about this stray dog that they brought it to PAWS and missed their ferry. They were so caring that they were willing to start their vacation one day late. The family had a daughter, and this event was so meaningful to her that she grew up to become a veterinarian.

Silly? Maybe. But the story about uncaring people dumping dogs is just as fictional as my elaborate story. Animals *are* left at shelters all the time, but the fact is that we often have *no idea* what circumstances brought that animal into our care.

Here is another example of how this meaning-making shows up. A friend of mine worked in a shelter where members of the public could bring their pets for euthanasia. One day a woman brought her elderly cat to be euthanized. The woman didn't want to stay for the procedure, and she didn't show a lot of emotion during the brief transaction at the front desk. After she left, the technician who assisted my friend with the euthanasia was furious. She couldn't believe that someone could care so little about a pet she'd had for 14 years. My friend, who understood the distinction between What Actually Happened and What We Make Up About It, suggested that perhaps the woman

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had spent all night crying with her cat and that this was something that was too hard for her. Perhaps this woman was uncomfortable showing her grief to strangers. Perhaps the woman cared so much, that it was unbearable to witness or participate in the process. Perhaps this woman didn't owe them an emotional display.

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Imagine a detective trying to solve a case. That detective has to constantly ask questions about what information is missing. Where are the blind spots? What is not visible? Ultimately, the most important question is whether there is enough information to determine What Actually Happened with certainty. Most often, we don't act like detectives. Instead, we act as though our sad story is the truth, and that doesn't help us, our colleagues, or the animals we love.

In Daniel Kahneman's book, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, he explains the effortlessness with which we become certain: “The normal state of your mind is that you have intuitive feelings and opinions about almost everything that comes your way. You like or dislike people long before you know much about them; you trust or distrust strangers without knowing why.” Have you ever known everything about someone within two seconds of them walking toward you? Was it based on their clothes? Was it based on the dog breed at the end of the leash? Was it based on their hair?

So how do you stop being so certain about things that you really can't know are true?

Practice. Start now. There are many ways that you can work to distinguish between your story and What Actually Happened. Seek contrary evidence every chance you get. If you are certain that your co-worker is lazy, catch her working really hard. If you're certain that volunteers make your job harder, look for ways that your job is easier because of work that volunteers have done. Have story contests. Invite some of your co-workers to read this article, and then make up alternative stories about the situations around you. Play with it—this can actually be fun!

Here's the deal. Intelligence isn't making up the “right” story; intelligence is understanding that you're making up a story in the first place. Since you're going to make something up about what you're seeing, you may as well be intentional, and make it as good as you possibly can.

In the next issue of *Animal Sheltering*, we'll explore some strategies for creating a sustainable self-care plan that you can put into place in 2014. ■