

# Lessons from Louie

**n**ot too many years ago, I was a grim exerciser. Living in New York City, I'd set off to the gym two or three times a week in dark resignation, determined to keep my weight down as I approached 40. In my own angry little world,

I'd pedal madly on the stationary bike or trudge dull-eyed and dead-brained on the stairclimber, literally and figuratively going nowhere. Exercise was a bore and a chore.

That was before I came to love exercise. Some people get their inspiration from fitness gurus like Jane Fonda or Kathy Smith. I got mine from my own very personal four-legged trainer. Here's how it happened.

One fall afternoon, my husband, Daniel, and I adopted a tough little dog, a terrier mix, that we named Louie. I worried about how to housebreak him, but almost immediately he trained us to walk him several times a day. I found myself

along with other dogs, where his favorite fire hydrants and trees were, how to chase and bring back a ball. The funny thing was, thanks to Louie, I was learning new stuff, too, some pretty important lessons about the pleasures of moving and exploring.

While Louie joyfully ran around with the other dogs, the cold wind snapped my eyes open enough to see the beauty of dawn on the river. Surprisingly, I was as invigorated by doing something I thought I'd hate as I was by the walk in the cold air. I was shocked to be up (and out!) so early—and proud of myself, too.

Soon I had an extra incentive for these early outings. One day, a young woman named Janie and I struck up a conversation as we walked our dogs together. I was fascinated to learn she was dating *two* men who also walked their dogs in the park. Our brisk walks each morning lengthened as we analyzed her romantic liaisons. The gym became less interesting by the day, and eventually disappeared from my life.

Two years later, Daniel and I moved to Los Angeles for work. Louie, of course, came along. At first I was so homesick in this strange, new city, I didn't even want to go exploring. Yet, ostensibly because Louie needed exercise, we took him hiking in the canyons and on the beach cliffs near our home. His enthusiasm for nature proved infectious.

To Louie, a hike is a big adventure, and eventually I, too, realized there were far more opportunities for fun and excitement on a hike than, say, lying on my sofa with the newspaper. On one outing we passed a man walking a pig—a little black thing stepping along daintily on tiny feet, unperturbed by dogs or people. At dusk in one canyon, a big, brown owl swooped by and perched on a pine branch. Climbing around the California terrain with Louie helped me get to know and love its special beauty.

Louie is four years old now. He hasn't changed much, but I have. I run in the park, and hike and swim regularly. I did turn 40, and then some, but I'm more fit—and happier—than I've ever been.

On a recent warm afternoon, Louie stopped during a walk to sit down, not out of fatigue but apparently just to survey the scene. He looked about nobly, nose to the air, watching leaves flutter in the breeze. I took his cue and sat down next to him. In this Zen moment it came to me that exercise doesn't have to be goal-oriented. Sometimes it's nice to suspend the bigger mission,

take a deep breath and appreciate the passing moment. Some people learn this from gurus like the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. Me, I learned it from Louie. ■

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A reluctant exerciser discovers fitness at the other end of a leash. **By Nicole Gregory**

being yanked down the street daily at 6:00 a.m., heading to the park along the Hudson River, barely awake, hair askew, no makeup, sneakers untied. Louie, it seemed, learned something new on every walk: how to get