**Dogs Will Fix Our Broken Democracy**

We need more reasons and prods to step outside of our narrowest selves.

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/31/opinion/dogs-democracy.html>

When I adopted my dog, Regan, six months ago, I made a few promises to myself. First, I would never skimp on her exercise. Second, I would never feed her from the table or allow groveling in its vicinity. Third, I would never get lazy and use her as column fodder.

Two out of three ain’t bad.

She’s 5½ years old, about 48 pounds and mostly black, but with blazes of white in all the right places: her paws, her chest, the tip of her tail. “Border collie?” ask people who know the breed, but a DNA test said different. She’s mostly Australian shepherd and Siberian husky.

And she’s not just smart. She’s telepathic. From the slightest twitch of my thoughts, she can tell that I’m mulling the mortal sin of leaving our Manhattan apartment without her, in which event she wedges herself against the front door to form a blockade of fur and flesh. I’m totally convinced that she could beat Donald Trump in a general election, but she’d never get through the Democratic primary. Her Upward Hound proposal for puppy pre-K is an incremental, modestly funded shadow of Bernie Sanders’s version.

But this column isn’t really about Regan, so go easy on me. She’s my pivot into a lament about the degradation of our country’s civic culture and a suggestion of how to push back at that process. You expected a simple, sentimental ode to the joys of a four-legged companion? Sorry. This is a mutt-and-switch.

You see, something happens when Regan does leave the apartment with me, something so rare these days that it’s practically revolutionary. I have honest-to-goodness conversations with actual strangers, who are from all kinds of backgrounds and occupy all sorts of categories: young and old, black and white, rich and not, fit and fat.

Some use highfalutin words befitting their highfalutin jobs. Some talk bluntly and plainly. Some curse the city’s mayor, Bill de Blasio. Some have a more generous assessment of him. None bicker, because we don’t have our guards up. That’s not the posture we’re in. A dog or dogs have established a bridge between us and started us off on a note of good faith. Because we love dogs, we can’t be all bad.

If the strangers are dog-less and are pausing to pet Regan, our exchange may be as brief as their asking and my explaining the origin of her name. (Her previous owner bestowed it on her, though I sometimes joke that it’s in homage to the little girl in “The Exorcist.”) If they have dogs of their own, it lengthens, in part because our charges’ olfactory inventories of each other can be extensive, not to mention invasive. I wish I were half as uninhibited as Regan. O.K., maybe just one-fifth.

In Central Park, there’s a whole vibrant society of those of us with dogs, especially during the off-leash hours before 9 a.m. and after 9 p.m., when I let Regan lead the way and the people I get to know are appendages of the dogs she decides to wrestle with. They’re not chosen by some social-media algorithm, sorted by income level, screened by political affiliation.

Which is to say that these communions are gloriously out of step with the times. Over the past decade, I’ve watched more and more Americans retreat with greater and greater efficiency into [increasingly homogeneous enclaves](https://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/03/opinion/bruni-traveling-without-seeing.html?module=inline). I’ve marveled over our fine-grained tiers of affluence and our [microclimates of privilege](https://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/12/opinion/bruni-the-extra-legroom-society.html?module=inline), which are reflected in and reinforced by the neighborhoods that we settle in, the vacation spots that we flock to, the exercise fads that we embrace, the schools that we send our children to.

And technology both speeds us to people who think precisely as we do and filters out anyone who might challenge us. We can click, scroll, sweep, share, like and favorite our way into a meticulously tailored and reliably validating tribe. There’s no real surprise, no true spontaneity, no actual serendipity.

But when I’m out and about with Regan, there’s all of that and more. There’s mutual courtesy and reciprocal generosity, for heaven’s sake. I’m not in the habit of asking random New Yorkers for freebies, or of responding cheerfully when some random New Yorker asks me for one, but I’m frequently cadging or gifting poop bags. When you’re about to bend down and scoop up your beloved’s odoriferous bequest, there’s no snobbery and no timidity, only solidarity.

My interactions in Central Park are partly about having a dog but just as much about what the dog encourages, even compels: spending time in public spaces that are open to everyone and well situated and appealing enough to guarantee that people from all walks of life cross paths.

Even before Regan came along, I found myself more drawn to such spaces than I’d once been and more conscious and appreciative of them as antidotes to the fragmenting of American life. I regularly visit Austin, Tex., which I love, and its open spirit is inextricable from the primacy of Lady Bird Lake, which is the name for a dammed stretch of the Colorado River that wends through the very center of the city and has [a 10-mile trail for walking, hiking and biking](https://www.austintexas.gov/department/ann-and-roy-butler-hike-and-bike-trail) that loops around it.

The trail has been continually refined and improved over the years, with [the addition of a boardwalk](https://thetrailfoundation.org/portfolio/the-boardwalk/) that juts out over the water and a beautifully manicured pedestrian bridge that reminds me of New York City’s High Line. There’s no private analogue to this public treasure, which tugs the city’s residents out of whatever customized cocoons they may inhabit and into the light. I’ve put in hundreds of hours there — and fussed over scores of dogs. A statuesque Doberman was attached to a recent immigrant from Mexico who was part of the local restaurant scene and who pointed me to his favorite Texas barbecue.

A whole lot has gone wrong in New York City over the past quarter-century, but the expansion and improvement of parkland along the perimeter of Manhattan and on the Brooklyn waterfront has [gone spectacularly right](https://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/15/opinion/sunday/bruni-in-urban-parks-our-newly-lush-life.html?module=inline). The visitors to these greenbelts compose a group more diverse than any in the city’s gleaming shopping emporiums; they’re sweating, snoozing, sunbathing andstrolling with their dogs on common ground, which is precisely what’s disappearing almost everywhere else.

The more parks, the better, though let’s be careful not to concentrate them in relatively affluent neighborhoods. And let’s throw public libraries into the mix. I’m elated to [read about renewed attention to them](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/10/travel/libraries-are-the-tourist-attractions.html?module=inline) and the [reimagining of them as community centers](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/08/opinion/sunday/civil-society-library.html?module=inline) that can draw heterogeneous crowds with a mix of needs. We need more vigorous pushes in this direction, as the sociologist Eric Klinenberg discussed in his recent book “Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life.” They’re one road out of a tribalism that’s tearing us apart.

And we need dogs, or at least we’re better off with them. They yank us outside of our narrowest selves. They force us to engage. In a perfect world, we’d do that on our own, but in this one, Regan plants herself squarely in front of a Central Park sprinkler, opens her jaws wide, treats the spray as an unusually emphatic water fountain and attracts an eclectic cluster of admirers who then fall easily into chitchat — about the cooling weather, the blooming skyline, new movies, old routines — that probably wouldn’t happen otherwise. We walk away feeling a little less isolated, a little less disconnected. I know I do.