

The Tightrope Walker

Not long ago, as I walked my daughter's ball-obsessed collie in a local park, I caught sight of a young man, some seventy five yards away, teaching himself how to walk a tightrope.

As I repeatedly and energetically, flung a yellow tennis ball and the collie, red tongue hanging out, hurtled up and down the field to retrieve it, the young man concentrated, his body still, his mind clearly centred and focused on his challenge - the green wire, sparkling and flickering in the bright May sunshine, stretched tautly, some three feet above the ground, between two stout trees,

The young man seemed completely unaware of the dog and I as he stood for what seemed an age beside the wire, motionless, his concentration totally on his body and the task he had set himself.

Slowly and carefully he positioned one bare foot on the wire, this leg bent to his chest his back straight, his arms at his side while the other foot remained on the ground.

He stood in this way for another long while until, at some unseen prompting, he carefully and without haste, lifted the other foot off the ground and placed it carefully on the wire behind the first.

Now his weight was wholly on the narrow wire.

Taking his time he carefully found his balance, and then, straight backed, he rose elegantly to an upright position on the wire, arms outstretched for balance.

For a few seconds it seemed he was in control, then as I watched, his balance faltered and he fell off landing clumsily on the ground beneath. I watched as he picked himself up, dusted himself down, looked at the wire, and walked away.

He sat down by the tree, arms hugging his knees.

The dog and I walked on.

Returning from our walk an hour or so later I saw the young man again and slowed the progress of the dog and I for a while. Undaunted by his fall he had picked himself up and I watched as he went through his whole procedure, with the same grace and purpose again. This time as he rose to a standing position on the wire, his body steadied, his balance held, and began the walk between the two stout trees across the narrow wire.

I wanted to cheer him on, but, not wanting to disturb his concentration, I just smiled to myself and threw the ball for the dog as I walked on, reflecting on the fact that I had just witnessed something truly amazing.

Later that evening I watched the TV news round-up, which often seems like a daily, confirmation that we are still living through endlessly difficult times that test our ability not to falter;

cyber-attacks on the National Health Service that made the treatment of thousands difficult for a while; Brexit insecurities and a feeling that as a 'kingdom' we are far from 'united';

climate change, a melting ice-cap, floods, droughts and the plight of the polar bear;

warring nations far away displacing millions who risk life and limb to escape to less than welcoming destinations, and a tweeting president who boasts that he doesn't read! These are turbulent and often terrifying times.

Soren Kierkegaard said: 'Life can only be understood backward, but we must live it forward' and I suspect that some future hindsight may give this time understanding, but right now, as we go forward now it's often confusing, often disturbing, sometimes frightening.

It can leave us feeling like the young man learning to walk on the tightrope, off balance, bruised and thoughtful, though I hope not too despairing.

This human race to which we all belong might do well to take notice of the young man and his tightrope. Learn to slow down, learn to consider more deeply the multi-faceted tasks of living, and do it more carefully learn to take our time not rush in with knee-jerk reactions, but focus more intently on the task on living kindly.

When we don't at first succeed, let us learn to calmly and thoughtfully pick ourselves up, dust ourselves down and with a stronger focus, try again, and again, until we do succeed, to live more kindly, more carefully, more thoughtfully and with greater focus on progress towards a just world for all creation.