I had never been good at practicing mindfulness, or being mindful—period—until I got a dog. Observing your breath, extolled as the surefire way to become present, left me in such a deep state of hyperventilation I quickly wanted a break from taking a break. I was in constant, anxious movement, starting projects but never finishing them, leaving things halfway done, forgetting items, moving from one thing to the next, constantly apprehensive.

But then I got George Lucas: a miniature schnauzer that was the doppelgänger of the Star Wars director, down to the salt-and-pepper beard and pensive dark eyes. On our first walks I wanted to rush, but this was anathema to him. Every object needed to be smelled, taken in, mulled over, considered. Some needed to be thoroughly investigated for long stretches at a time, as if he were taking notes for a PhD thesis. I was forced to slow down for the sake of my dog; otherwise he wouldn’t enjoy his walks, and I didn’t want to spoil them for him.

So two whole new worlds opened up before me, worlds I didn’t know existed because my anxiety had prevented me from discovering them. During those walks, I had to completely focus my attention and energy on Lucas’s methodical walking mode and on what he found curious. I became aware of what the Japanese haiku poet Basho called the “cricket musician” and the coquis, the tiny tree frogs that are native to Puerto Rico and croak a high-pitched “coh-kee” sound to attract mates. I would quietly observe Lucas investigating fire hydrants and helechos (ferns) for the perfect place to leave a peemail. These investigations took time, and they would make me focus even more on our surroundings: I noticed the snail gliding peacefully toward a leaf, the lonely ant dutifully carrying a breadcrumb back to his people; the scary buzzing of an escarabajo (scarab) flying slowly and clumsily towards an uncertain destination, which often turned out to be my hair; the zorzal pardo (pearly-eyed thrasher) singing his questioning song; the quiquiriquí anthem of the neighbor’s rooster; the fire truck’s siren which Lucas would join in enthusiastic harmony.

As a result of these walks I became aware and fully present to the worlds of Nature and the City, very attuned to my surroundings, particularly sights and sounds. I would view the world from Lucas’s perspective, discovering flowers that he found interesting and sounds that made his ears twitch independently of each other as he zeroed in like a radar on their source.
My anxious state of being began to dissipate. Lucas’ systematic way of approaching life rubbed off on me, a good thing since I worked as a high school math teacher at that time. Instead of starting to grade a pile of exams and leaving it unfinished, I was now able to sit comfortably and grade them in one sitting. I would no longer leave things on at the stove to burn. I could start and finish a book for pleasure. During my lunch hour at school, I would leave the school grounds and take myself out for a walk not only as a break from the fast-paced life of a high school teacher but also to enjoy the sights and sounds I knew Lucas would enjoy. I would also find myself paying attention to the ground like a red-tailed hawk, looking for any scrap of food or other unknown substance he might accidentally ingest. It was as if I were taking him out for a walk in spirit, and they were a balm for my soul.

But I became completely untethered from the worlds of Nature and City after the death of Lucas, which occurred two days before Hurricane Irma and seventeen days before Hurricane Maria. Since the electrical power grid was essentially destroyed by the two hurricanes, the City was plunged into darkness and silence at night.

Suddenly I was very much alone, caught in an internal hurricane of grief I could not escape, not even to fully absorb the physical devastation around me. Having never been close to my family, Lucas had been my whole family. We were a pack of two. Losing him to leptospirosis, a disease I too had contracted at the same time, I felt like I had been uprooted—just like one of the thousands of trees around the island—and placed in a steel bubble where nothing but sorrow could touch me.

It was at night that I also became present to the silence of Nature. Since there was no power, so no light to read a book by, I would lie in bed straining to listen to the natural sounds I was so used to when I walked Lucas. But there were no coquis, no cricket musicians, no zorzal pardos, no roosters. Nature had become completely silent, and the silence was terrifying. I craved other sounds, any sounds, and the only sounds were those of the neighbors’ power generators that ran on diesel, and the only smell was the stink of diesel oil. Nature’s silence was a painful reminder that Lucas was gone. Every night, I would lie still in bed and strain to listen to something that wasn’t a generator, but those sounds never came. Every night, I had to brace myself against my own internal hurricane.

The timing of his death, together with the hurricanes, was just too much, too fast, too soon. Ironically, my mourning shielded me from crumpling like so many people did after Hurricane Maria, and I became aware of a new kind of presence: the presence of urgency. While others went into denial, I sprang into action, perhaps as a way of avoiding the violent emotional landscape within.

There was no gasoline? No problem. I would wait in a six-hour line under the scorching sun with my car’s engine turned off until the gas station opened again. My whole left arm would get sunburned from sitting in the driver’s seat with the window down, but I didn’t care.

There was no food? No problem. I would stand in a two-hour line at one of the two only restaurants that opened after the hurricane.

Wait, they only accepted cash because there was no Internet connection for the credit...
card system? No problem. I would stand in the two-hour line at the only functioning ATM in my vicinity and pray I would be lucky that there was any cash left when my turn came.

There was no propane gas for my mother’s generator? No problem. I would stand guard with her in front of her house, waiting for a San Juan Gas truck to ride by. At one point I ran behind one, but the driver ignored me.

These tasks kept me alive because they kept me busy and, most importantly, not present to the uprooted ceiba trees, the defrocked amapola trees, the car windshields strewn over sidewalks, an apartment’s entire parquet flooring hanging from my mother’s patio wall, and the lampposts that had flown like projectiles and were now lying everywhere.

I couldn’t help but think of Mary Oliver’s poem “Hurricane.” She writes:

“...I watched

the trees bow and their leaves fall

and crawl back into the earth.

As though, that was that.

This was one hurricane

I lived through, the other one

was of a different sort, and

lasted longer. Then

I felt my own leaves giving up and

falling....”

My own leaves had given up and fallen, leaving me naked with grief. I thought of Lucas and his final moment, when I had to say goodbye. The first thing that popped into my mind to tell him was that in the grand history of the universe, a human life is very short. I remembered reading in David Christian’s “Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History” that the Universe is about 14 billion years old, the Earth 4.5 billion years old, the scale of human evolution about 7 million years old, the measure of human history 200,000 years old, the history of agrarian societies and urban civilizations 5,000 years old, and the chronicle of modernity a meager 1,000 years old. I also remembered reading The Dragons of Eden, in which Carl Sagan condensed the history of the Universe and the Earth into a 12-month calendar, popularizing the concept of the Cosmic Calendar,. We come into existence only near midnight on December 31st, when developments such as Stone Age tools and the Pyramids begin to appear. It is in the last second before the clock strikes midnight that the world becomes what it is and what we know of today.

Keeping all of this in mind, our lives are minuscule compared to everything that came before us. And the life of a dog even more infinitesimal, but infinitely more precious.

I told Lucas that my life would be short too, just like his, and that we would meet again. Because of the shortness of my own life, our approaching “separation” would be brief too
and therefore he needn’t worry about not seeing me ever again. Because in the grand scale of astronomical time, we would meet again very, very soon. And in the same breath, I was trying to come to terms with the fact that I would never see him again, but that when I did, it wouldn’t be for long. I thanked him for giving me the honor of being his human for almost 12 years, a number I still wrestle with as being so unfairly short. I hope, and I think he understood what I was saying.

It’s been two years since Lucas has gone, but my world has completely changed. I have not healed completely, and the cliché that “time heals all wounds” is not true. Some wounds never heal. One must rebuild one’s soul around them.

image by Mathias Krumbholz, Wikimedia Commons

When I walk now, I look up at the trees and notice the birds singing. Every time I hear a fire truck, I smile. Smells, both good and bad, are quickly detected by my nose. The tinkle of a dog’s tags immediately makes my ears prick up, just like Lucas’ did, and I happily look around to see where the dog is. Things that used to scare me, like the sound of a scarab’s wings near my face, no longer do.

I have been broken but made more present to other people’s suffering, especially the one that you cannot see, the one that is unspoken. When I talk to people now, I listen attentively instead of interrupting. I watch and consider their body language. I no longer think of what I’m going to say next in the conversation, while impatiently waiting for the other person to stop talking. I think before I comment, instead of impulsively saying whatever’s on my mind. This has made my conversations full of thoughtful pauses and silences, with which I am now, for the first time in my life, comfortable. I can read the mood in a room when I first walk in because I walk thoughtfully now.

In the evenings, I take myself out for a walk and have taken up the hobby of taking photographs in the blue hour. I listen to the song of evening birds. I notice ant marches and moth dances. I use an app to see what constellations and planets lie above me, like spilled blue glitter in an art classroom. And when I return home, it feels like I have just returned home with Lucas. His presence in my life has made me become more present to my own, and for that and a million other things, I will be forever grateful. ♦