

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

‘Dog Wars’ in LA’s Elysian Park

Eric · Wednesday, March 18th, 2015

“Road Rage.” We all know what that is, right? That explosive and provocative malady driven by frustration and self righteousness, overtaking ordinarily peace-loving auto drivers, at unpredictable (or perhaps very predictable) moments of pique anxiety and stress “on the road”. Especially in LA. Perhaps you have a touch of it. I know I do. Sitting in traffic, late for work, I *sometimes* “tap” on my horn to just “wake up” all the absent-minded, dull and distracted drivers in front of me. To get them to just “step on the gas” a bit, or perhaps... to *run* that yellow light, just a fraction *after* it’s turned to red. You know what I mean? You’re tired after a long day at work; you want to be that *third* car making the left turn through the damn changing yellow light, so you just sit on your horn a bit – when the guy in front of you stops so law-abidingly and un-hurriedly at the light. Or maybe you raise a middle finger to Mr. or Mrs. Ma or Pa Kettle, who are driving on the 101 or the 110 or the 10 or the 5 Freeway, so *fucking slowly*... in the *left* lane. “Come on! Move over, you old sonofabitch!” You know what I mean?



Well, we have a dose of it in Elysian Park, right above the flatlands of quickly gentrifying Echo Park, on the east side of LA. Elysian Park. Do you know it? Los Angeles’ second largest park, after Griffith, adjacent to, and surrounding, Dodger Stadium in Chavez Ravine. Founded in 1886 and also home to the Los Angeles Police Academy and the Grace Simons Lodge, the park is surprisingly under-occupied during the week, and surprisingly well-occupied on weekends. During the week, it belongs to avid hikers and dog walkers, of whom I enthusiastically claim to be one. We all happily trod the park’s unpaved dirt roads, in our casual “park attire”, donning water bottles, iPhones, and dog leashes, if you’re in the second category. On weekends, we’re still there, but the park is full of bouncing castles, cotton candy sellers, and immigrant, Spanish-speaking Latino picnickers. In fact, it reminds me of Alley Pond Park in Queens, New York, in the late 1950s, when my own Jewish immigrant family met there once a month over the summer, right in the shadow of the local “loony bin”, Creedmoor State Hospital, and where we had strange, un-fun-filled picnics with our extended Russian-Jewish “Cousins’ Club”.



Well, in lovely and erratically-populated Elysian Park, the antipathy is not called “road rage.” It’s called “dog rage”... an oddly contemporary human phenomenon that exists probably only between over-educated and self-righteous adults, in only over-populated urban centers, gentrified and otherwise. It springs, I believe, directly from the psychic chasm between the leashless dog walkers, of which I’m also proudly one, and their sworn enemies, the leash-bearing dog walkers. What’s the

big deal, right? Well, that's where you go astray. Because, you see, there is a *big* difference. Between us leashless, freedom-loving dog walkers, and the uptight, "keep your dog on a leash" variety found in Elysian Park.

Now I've lived in the neighborhood for over 21 years. Around 16 years ago, I found one white, coyote-shepherd-like puppy under the shady eucalyptus trees in the park, abandoned by some sub-human being, as was the custom in the Mexican Mafia infested park back in the day. I slept with him, Clay, the Dog, on the hard linoleum kitchen floor the first few nights, to get him to trust me, after which we went on many walks, trips, and adventures together over the course of his healthy canine life. Clay always walked *off leash* in Elysian Park.



In fact, I'd say that about 70% of the walked dogs were off leash back in the day in our local park. Sure, there were signs that said "All Dos Must Be on a Leash", with that pathetic white, leashed dog on the rusty green metal sign, but what kind of self-respecting dog owner would do that to his "best friend"? Certainly, not most of us artist-immigrant-socialist types in Echo/Elysian Park, the "Badlands" of LA's East Side. So dogs "ran free," as Bob Dylan used to sing, back in the days of free-roaming Elysian Park. They romped with each other, in enthusiastic abandon, except for those few "problem dogs," whose owners knew that they were not dog-friendly or people-friendly dogs, and who naturally, therefore, kept them in muzzles, or – on leashes. I mean, c'mon. Why keep a dog on a leash if you don't have to? Laws? Signs? Dylan has that covered too: "To live outside the law, you must be honest." Bottom line and common sense: how much more exercise can a leashless dog get, running up and down the hills to the rhythms of his own instincts, compared to a poor dog-on-a-leash, who has to constrain him or herself to the tepid walk or trot of human speed? I mean, the whole point of a dog walk is.... exercise, right?

But now, after grieving a year of two, over [the loss of Clay, the Dog](#), I have a new pup, Cassius, a perfectly-muscled, brown shepherd-pit mix, who was found abandoned in a blue plastic garbage bin in South Central LA.



He's a beautiful handful, so friendly and enthusiastic that he approaches every dog in the park – to simply run and play with them. Of course, he's off leash, but... he's not fully trained yet. A problem, I admit. He doesn't "Come" when called all the time, and he's willful, mostly liking to play when *he* wants to and not come back when *I* want him to. This is a non-issue, of course, with the other off-leash dogs in the park. In fact, it's a happy, "dogs-run-free" free-for-all, where the owners are all too happy to have their dogs run with each other, so as to tire them out and give themselves, the owners, a little bit of dogless time at home, while Fido sleeps like a log from his energetic walk, or run, in the park.

Not the case with the *on-leash* dog owners, which now, in my own calculation, constitute more than 50% of the dog walkers in Elysian Park. They don't like Cassius approaching their dog. They don't like *any* leashless dog approaching their precious hounds. They huddle up with their dog(s), pulling them close, hoping that their well-behaved mutt, or over-amped pedigree, will not entangle themselves with the likes of Cassius, or any other free-roaming spirit.

You know how some people say that dogs get to look like their owners, or maybe vice versa?

Well, these *on-leash* owners look more like uptight terriers, pampered poodles, or perhaps snapping schnauzers than they do laughing labs, exuberant shepherds, or grateful mutts. I wonder what their dogs would look like if they had different owners, or if they were allowed to run off-leash and free. No matter though. Cassius and I will never know. All we ever get from these more and more gentrified and cautious, on-leash dog owners is a furtively unfriendly look, or a hostile, “look out for the coyotes” glare, or more and more frequently, a predictably angry “keep your damn dog on a leash” outright verbal snarl. It’s not pleasant. We leashless dog walkers don’t like it. It hurts our feelings. It makes us tense. It makes the leash holders tense. It makes for unhappy hounds. Unhappy neighbors. It makes for the Dog Wars of Elysian Park 2015.

So... it’s a Sunday morning. Bouncing castle day with plentiful picnics in Elysian Park. Lots of people. Lots of dog walkers. Both on leash and off. A good day for trouble. Cassius has been pretty good so far, “come” to many of my commands, but now we’ve reached the wide open hill, where many of the bounding dogs run off leash together. A little like a “regular” dog park. Cassius has between 5-10 dog friends. He can pick and choose, going from one canine to another. You might say he’s like a kid in a candy shop. Too many choices. The only thing I’m sure he’s *not* going to do is “come” to me when I call him. Too many distractions. Too much fun. But... call I do... until... I’m blue in the face. Inconveniently, I’ve forgotten my magical electronic device that makes him stop whatever he’s doing and come to me like a well behaved soldier. I won’t tell you what the device is exactly called, but I actually didn’t forget it; it’s just that the battery has decided to go dead today.



So... Cassius is a free dawg in love. Running and running and not coming and not coming. I’m loud — but he’s still free. I can’t catch him. No one can. He’s as fast as the wind. Until... about fifteen minutes later, when the young pup takes a breather, tongue hanging, just long enough for another dog owner to grab him by the collar. Bam! I run over and I have him in hand. I’m pissed. And frustrated. I shake the hell out of his collar and put him back on the leash. We walk off towards the back of the Japanese Garden, just the two of us.

Until... there he is again.... the self-proclaimed Dog Whisperer of Elysian Park. The sandy-brown bearded, slack-postured, self-righteous dude who wants to tell every dog owner how to train and how to treat his dog.

“Hey, old man, I saw you last week and I told you the same thing: ‘Your dog’s afraid of you. That’s why he’s not coming. You need to reward him with treats. Or get him a trainer. It’s obvious you can’t train him yourself!’”

Oh.... man. Here we go again.

“Thanks a lot, buddy. But I *can* train my own dog. Just give me 2 weeks, or catch me with a battery that works, and Cassius, who licks my face all day long with love, will show you how fucking trained he is.”

“I don’t believe you. Your dog’s afraid of you. Get a trainer. If I catch you one more time pulling on his collar., I’ll...”

“Fuck off, pal. Mind your own business. Maybe you want to tell me how to raise my

kids too!”

He doesn’t quit. The Dog Nazi is coming after me, following me behind the Japanese Garden. I’m amazed. And enraged. If I had a stun gun, I would pull it out and shoot this mother fucker.

“Get the hell away from us, dude.”

“No! I won’t.”

But the guy pauses.

Perhaps he thinks... I’ve gotten his point.

I have. My friendly, enthusiastic, nine month old dog won’t stop playing with other dogs, who are playing with other dogs – because “he’s afraid of me.” I should get a professional fucking dog trainer. I can’t do it myself. Hell, maybe the Dog Nazi is, himself, a dog trainer!

“I get it,” as they used to say in EST. But still... my rage won’t go away. It follows me up along the back of the dyed, blue water Japanese garden...

...up the “Magic Mushroom” hill...



....back up onto the paved road on Park Place, all the way home.... all day long.... right up until bed time... when I lose a good night’s sleep, and into the next day. I should “get a trainer.” Cassius is “afraid of me.”

I still want a stun gun. Or this guy’s name. So I can publish it in the Cultural Weekly. And maybe shame or embarrass him to mind his own fucking blindness, to shut the hell up, and to stop interrupting my elysian walks in the park with my dawg.

But... I doubt that’s possible. “Dog rage” and “Dog Wars” rule. They erupt frequently in Elysian Park. Sometimes it’s about who’s on the leash and who’s off. Sometimes it’s about “your dog’s afraid of you” and “get a trainer.”

Cassius? He doesn’t care. He’s gonna enjoy his walk in park and lick my face when he comes back home. That’s the way it is. That’s the way it should be – with dogs.

It’s us humans... that “have gone to the dogs.....”

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