

Watch Your Step

2/22/21

I met my wife when we were both in ninth grade. On my first trip to her house, she introduced me to Snowball. He was a gentle, midsized horse with a huge heart for his owner. Over the next few years, we would take several rides together, and I learned that Snowball had a bad habit. After a few hours on the trail, he liked to take a nap. If you were lucky, he would decide to take it while everyone had stopped for lunch, but many times he would take it as you walked the last few miles of the ride. You could tell that he was napping because he wouldn't be nearly as careful with his feet, and then he would trip, wakeup, and hopefully catch himself before both horse and rider hit the ground. He usually did, but there was always that moment between tripping and waking up that left the rider in limbo, hoping that he would right himself before he hit the ground.

As Melissa and I take weekend hikes, there will usually be a joke about Snowball. The joke usually happens at the end of the walk when one of us is tired and misses a step or neglects to step high enough to clear a rock or stump. If I can be honest, after hours on the trail, I can settle into a bit of a trance and, like Snowball, take a bit of a nap on the trail. I know it's not smart, and I need to be more aware, but time and fatigue take their toll, and it's easy to drift off and not be fully present in the moment.

Each Friday, I go through a process to prepare for the upcoming week. Usually, late in the afternoon, I take about an hour to look at schedules and priorities and make sure I am ready for all of the events ahead of us. I borrowed a one-page weekly planner that I found several years ago and modified it a bit to make it my own. One of the things that it asks me to do is select a word for the week. Last week that word was "Present." One of my goals was to stay fully present in the activities that I engaged in throughout the week. Being fully present takes energy and gets more challenging as fatigue sets in. Fatigue leads to mistakes. Fatigue slows down productivity.

As we think about intentionally staying present in what we do, we must remember the tension that fatigue creates for us and those who work with us. It is true for both educators and students. While we have students in school, we still need to be attentive and watch for the errors caused by the fatigue of a year-long battle.

Several years ago, I found myself at the end of a long hike in the southwest, walking on a small ledge. A missed step could easily be catastrophic and possibly fatal. I knew that I had a tendency to get sloppy with my foot placement late in the day, but on this day, I was fully aware of each step I took. There was no drifting off on this day; I was fully present in the moment. As we settle into the tensions associated with the prolonged battle, we must be fully aware of the emotional toll it has taken on each of us and make sure each step we make moving forward is carefully and deliberately made.