

Because It Can

A garden hose satori

THERE ARE TIMES WHEN the certainty that I'm being picked on feels better to me than the facts. When I'm late, for instance, and stuck in traffic behind an Airstream trailer with a "We're Spending Our Kids' Inheritance" bumper sticker, I sometimes imagine God at her computer, and instead of goofing off with a game of electronic solitaire, she leans back and decides, "Nah, I think I'll mess with Jay."

Since my encounter with the garden hose, however, I've become free of the lingering effects of such personal stigmas and am now sharing the secret of my liberation.

It happened in my driveway, outside my home office, on a sunny spring morning during an hour-long break between therapy clients. I'd checked my voice mail and, after failing to reach anybody, smiled. I needed and deserved the free time.

With the portable phone in my pocket and a just-brewed mug of coffee in hand, I decided to treat myself to the gorgeous day and, at the same time, treat the poor parched daffodils and snapdragons around the house to a little water. We were both entitled to a break. Perhaps it was that sense of entitlement that pulled God away from her solitaire game. Or more likely it was my cursing.

Unwinding the garden hose, I spritzed my way one-handed across our front yard. My coffee smelled great and the sun was warm and bright—it was a "Big Sky" day, as if my tiny plot in New Jersey had been transported to the high plains of Montana. In the glow of the moment, I understood why plants grew toward the light.

Threading the hose around the minivan in our driveway, I made my way toward the wilted plants outside my office in back. If my clients were not open to the nurturing waters of psychotherapy, at least I could help a plant. Maybe, as my Eleven O'clock walked up to my office, she'd see hope in the blooms that grew in the shade.

I squeezed the nozzle again, but this time the water just dribbled out. In trying to reach the side garden, I'd gotten the hose pinched under the rear wheel of my minivan. I tried to pull it free one handed. No dice. Figuring all it needed was a bit more force, I pulled again. Now the hose was thoroughly wedged.

"Shit."

Still holding my coffee cup, I walked back to the minivan, set down the nozzle, and tried again to pull the hose free. No luck. I put down the coffee mug and grabbed the hose with two hands. It did not budge.

In a more reasoned moment, I would have gotten the keys, rolled the van back a little, and

freed the hose. Instead I got sucked into the F-word vortex. Thus occupied, I could not see the obvious: Mother Nature works all her laws all the time.

What happened next was more than a manifestation of my carelessness. It was an affront to my sense of entitlement. Yanking like a crazy man, I freed the hose and watched it uncoil and hit everything—me, the van, and even my coffee mug, which clanged into the street, just in case the neighbors had missed something. The worst part was that I was furious: this was costing me time that I did not have. What was the point of multitasking if not to save time to do something else? I was a hamster yelling at the wheel.

Coffeeless and miserable, I finished my watering and returned to the restorative chaos of my office. For the moment, nobody called. Thank God. As my anger ebbed, shame took its place: how pathetic to be so impatient. And to get so angry over something so stupid. Couldn't I have foreseen this little disaster? Who was I to help people?

The office was quiet. Then I began calculating the odds. If this had been a movie, how many takes would've been needed to create that scene? To uncurl just the right amount of hose, lodge it precisely under the wheel, pull with the exact amount of force, place the coffee mug where the flying arc of the hose would project it out of my reach and career it clanging into the street—it was really quite amazing. If I were a movie producer in need of a stunt hose person, I'd hire someone like me in a minute—a person who could do all of that in a single take. What savings! What art!

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It boiled down to this: the answer to "Why did the hose uncoil so perfectly and hit my coffee cup?" was "Because it can." It was one of the nearly infinite possibilities that existed in the universe of hoses being pulled through a yard and yanked around a minivan. That it happened to me in my impatience was simply a manifestation of those odds.

It was nothing personal—just my own impatience and the odds, while God was absorbed in solitaire. This is why people win lotteries, why accidents happen, why the undeserving get promoted, why bad, and good, things happen to people—because they can. We can improve or worsen our odds, but we cannot eliminate them: it's part of the imperfect human condition.

Now, when bizarre and amazing things happen, I routinely respond to "Why?" with, "Because it can!" It seems that in depersonalizing the cause, I've finally moved a step beyond neurosis.

This holds with good luck as well as bad. The other day, I stood at the top of our basement stairs and tossed a

smooshed piece of aluminum foil down to the recycling bin on the lower landing. It ricocheted off one wall, did a half-flip in mid-air, and landed, perfectly balanced, on the bin's narrow ledge. Because it could. I made my wife come and take a look. She smiled the smile of the wise toward the newly converted.

"That's nice, Hon," she said. ■

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