



from the
New York Times
bestselling author
of *Thunder Dog*

**Michael Hingson
& Keri Wyatt Kent**

Live Like a Guide Dog

**true stories from a blind man and his dogs
about being brave, overcoming adversity,
and moving forward in faith**

LIVE LIKE A GUIDE DOG

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Live like a Guide Dog: True Stories from a Blind Man and His Dogs about Being Brave, Overcoming Adversity, and Moving Forward in Faith

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Preface

FOR MORE THAN TWO DECADES, my guide dogs and I have been traveling the world, speaking to audiences about trust and teamwork, ethics, diversity, and inclusion and, of course, telling my 9/11 survival story. Escaping Tower One on that fateful day taught me a lot about how to turn fear into courage. That is the premise of this book.

If you experience fear, you're not alone. Everyone feels afraid at various times in their life because it is a normal human response, like sweating when you're hot or bleeding when you're cut. But because of my experiences, and my rather unique upbringing, I've learned how to leverage my fear and use it to empower me to control that fear and be brave. Additionally, I've discovered the value of awareness and preparation, trust and teamwork, empathy and faith.

While my parents instilled these values in me, I also watched my dogs demonstrate these character qualities too—all of which are essential to being brave. Some guide dog experiences showed me that even these loving creatures could exhibit fear and simply not overcome it. All of my dogs were loving and loyal. But each of them exhibited certain strengths, and together we learned lessons about how to be brave.

Over the years, I've navigated a world designed for sighted people. Since childhood, I've been mainstreamed into that world, although

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that world did not always easily accept my participation. I've needed courage to make my way and to fight against discrimination and condescension that wanted to prevent me from thriving. I realize that most people know little about blindness even though they think they are experts. I hope that you will come to see that there really is more to the world than eyesight to support us.

My book, *Thunder Dog*, showed how teamwork, trust, and faith in God helped my guide dog and me survive the horrifying event in New York City on 9/11. Readers and audiences I spoke to were inspired by our story, but they weren't instructed in how to be brave themselves. I hadn't really given my audiences a strategy for managing fear and turning it into courage. This book seeks to remedy that.

During the pandemic, I realized that all around me people were being blinded by fear. They let their fear keep them stuck, cowering, and afraid. Now, more than ever, people need to know how to take fear and turn it around, to leverage and use it to live more freely.

In writing this book, with the help of Keri Wyatt Kent, I wanted to make it clear that I do know fear. It may not seem as if I showed much fear during my life. Not true. I had wonderful and thoughtful parents who gave me the framework for developing tools that helped me focus and not let fear blind me. By allowing me to try things, to explore and expand my world, by insisting that I had the opportunity to learn, play, and work alongside sighted people, they showed me how to be brave and thrive even in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds.

If I have learned anything during my seventy-plus years of life so far, it is that fear and being afraid should be a positive thing that helps us deal with any situation that befalls us. The issue is whether we let our fears overtake us or whether we learn to use our natural fear reactions to better focus and concentrate to make better decisions. In other words, to turn our fear into courage and a positive and powerful tool we can use anytime.

Dogs do this. Especially when guarding or assisting their humans, they will be quite brave, even in the face of scary circumstances. But

PREFACE

often their courage is developed by training. The good news is that you can train yourself to control your fears as well.

Yes, faith and belief in God fuels my courage. God always talks with and to us. The question is whether we learn to listen. Since July 1964 I have had the company and support of eight different guide dogs. Though my upbringing made me bold and confident, I have no doubt that my dogs have made me even more so.

I have learned a lot about communicating with and working with these wonderful creatures. Dogs, like humans, feel fear. But with training and preparation, my guide dogs learned how to use fear in a positive way. They've taught me many lessons by their courageous example. Each chapter in this book explores specific strategies for being brave and controlling fear that my various dogs seemed to specialize in.

I look forward to sharing my dog experiences with you. I hope you will gain a better perspective on the value of establishing a close relationship with your dog friends. What? You don't have dogs in your life? I urge you to change that, especially after reading this book.

I hope you will understand from the following chapters that you can learn to use your fear and fear reactions to your advantage. You will learn that you can create a mindset that will empower you to have more control in your life. You may not be able to control some things that happen to you, but you ALWAYS do have control over how you respond to and deal with situations. Of course, a dog in your life can help if you allow it. And having God in your life will help as well. So, let's get to it. I hope you will discover as much about yourself as I have learned about myself.

To read more, order *Live Like a Guide Dog* at <https://amzn.to/4dmxhyE>

Prologue

“IT’S JUST A COLD,” KAREN ASSURED ME.

My wife’s voice sounded horrible, hoarse, and raspy.

“I really think you need to go to urgent care,” I told her.

“They’ll just tell me it’s bronchitis,” she said, stifling a cough. “I’ll be fine. I just need to rest for a couple of days.”

I didn’t totally believe Karen. I was concerned, but I didn’t feel I could force her to go. Karen and I trusted each other deeply. I knew she had grown up knowing her body, especially since she had spent her entire existence being paralyzed and using a wheelchair. Her parents taught her to always be aware of her physical condition and to not take chances when something made her feel out of sorts. Still, I worried.

Fantasia, Karen’s attentive yellow Lab, lay on the floor next to Karen’s wheelchair. As we spoke, she stood and nosed Karen, then put her front paws up into her lap. “It’s okay, girl,” Karen said, stroking her. “Good dog.”

Maybe she’s right, I thought, as I continued to pack my suitcase. I hated to leave her, but I had agreed to attend the 2014 National Washington Seminar for the National Federation of the Blind in Washington, DC, weeks before Karen had come down with . . . whatever this was. In fact, we had both gotten sick the same weekend. I recovered quickly, but she seemed to be getting sicker.

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“Are you sure?” I asked again. “You sound like you’re getting worse. Maybe I shouldn’t go.”

“I’ll be fine,” she said in a tone that might have been more convincing had it not been followed by a wheezy cough. “Did you remember to pack underwear?” Karen teased.

“Yeah, I’ve got it,” I said, grinning.

“You’re sure?” she said. Her playful comment made me feel a little less worried.

“If you’re sure you’re good, I’m going to go get dinner started,” she said.

I closed the suitcase and zipped it shut as Karen turned her motorized wheelchair toward the door, with Fantasia beside her. Was it my imagination, or was Fantasia being especially solicitous with Karen this week, even hovering a bit?

She’ll be fine, I reassured myself. Despite being born a paraplegic, Karen had always been incredibly independent.

I set the suitcase on the floor.

Karen’s friends are not far away. I will ask them to look in on her, I decided.

And of course, she has Fantasia by her side.

And so, on January 24, 2014, my guide dog, Africa (who was Fantasia’s daughter), and I were driven to San Francisco International Airport to catch a flight to Baltimore and be taken to the NFB National Center for initial preparations for the seminar. We left not knowing just how soon everything would unexpectedly change.

To read more, order *Live Like a Guide Dog* at <https://amzn.to/4dmxhyE>

1

SQUIRE

Awareness builds confidence

Our volunteer puppy raisers need to develop awareness of what's going on in the environment, not just for themselves, but for the puppy. From the puppy's perspective.

JAMES DERN,

*Senior Manager, Puppy Program,
Canine Companions for Independence*

WE MUST HAVE LOOKED ODD.

Jeff Locke and I walked through the campus of Guide Dogs for the Blind (GDB)—trainer and student. Jeff held the dog end of the guide dog harness and leash in one hand as if it were on a real guide dog, and I held the other ends of both in my left hand just as I would if I were working a real dog. Jeff stopped and started, occasionally moving the harness up, down, forward, back. He reminded me of what commands to give at different times.

For example, when I said “Sit,” Jeff lowered his end of the harness. Then Jeff told me to command my dog to go forward. “Forward,” I said. The harness raised, and Jeff began moving forward.

This peculiar sight was common at GDB headquarters in San Rafael. A dog trainer, walking beside a blind person, would simulate

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for them what it felt like to walk with a dog in a guide harness and leash. In my class, most of the blind students were middle-aged. Except for one: a fourteen-year-old boy with strawberry blond hair and a lot of energy. Me.

Suddenly, Jeff ceased moving forward, and I felt the harness stop. I kept my wits about me, remembering a lecture that emphasized when guide dogs do something you don't expect, there is a reason.

Jeff waited for a moment, giving me time to investigate and figure it out. I moved my foot around. Aha! The edge of a curb.

"Good boy," I said. My "dog" had done exactly what he was trained to do. Now I was being trained in how to reinforce and continue that training.

"Forward," I said confidently, and Jeff moved the handle forward.

"This is where the harness should be, to keep your harness handle grip at your left knee," Jeff explained. He slowly moved the handle forward a little too far, on purpose.

"Juno, steady," I said, pulling gently on the leash.

"Juno" training prepares blind handlers to work with an actual dog. Juno is the name of the imaginary dog, which is not a dog at all, but a simulation.

To the blind student, the training feels pretty much like working with a dog. Meanwhile, the trainer simulates the movements of the dog and watches what the trainee is doing, customizing the training exercises while evaluating the student in order to eventually match the student with the perfect guide dog. It also helps handlers feel less afraid and more confident. The training provides a place for the partners to practice as a team, and for the student to experience the world from a dog's perspective.

"Let's practice some down-sits," Jeff said. He stood in front of me, holding the leash. For now we'd set the harness aside to focus on obedience training, which is done only with the leash.

"Juno, heel," I said firmly.

Jeff walked toward me and did a U-turn around my back to simulate the dog going to my left side and sitting, as commanded.

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“Good boy,” I said, continuing to praise Juno’s proper behavior.

“Juno, down,” I said. Jeff moved the leash down as if Juno had laid down on the sidewalk. We waited a few minutes. “Okay,” Jeff said. “Ask for a sit, without moving forward.”

I grasped the leash firmly and said, “Juno, sit,” while at the same time giving a slight upward motion. The dog is supposed to simply rise from lying down to sitting, keeping its haunches on the ground, and Jeff moved the leash to simulate those movements.

Not every blind or low-vision person uses a guide dog. In fact, less than 10 percent do. Not everyone wants a guide dog. The level of commitment required for the responsibility of handling and caring for a guide dog is more than some people want to do. Finally, to use a guide dog effectively, one must not only have good mobility and orientation skills, but they must want to take on the added requirement of building a team, for which they must be the team leader. Guide dogs are simply not for everyone.

Guide dogs do not “lead,” they guide. Every handler must know where they want to go and how to get there, and using commands we communicate to the dog where we want to go. The dog’s job is to make sure we walk safely. As I like to say, I am the navigator, and the dog is the pilot.

Jeff simulated the dog walking too far ahead of me, lagging, veering off course, and even turning the wrong way, teaching me how to keep the dog moving forward as he should. But most importantly, Juno training allowed Jeff to observe me. How fast did I walk? How confidently did I take corners? Did I know to stop at intersections?

Each trainer team had a group or string of dogs. At the time when I got my first guide dog, Jeff had a string of about a dozen dogs that he and his apprentice trainer, Bruce Benzler, had spent months training. Once our class of students arrived at the school, Jeff and Bruce not only trained us in the basics of using a guide dog but also played matchmaker to select the exact right dog for each student. Each trainer team knew their pups’ personalities and temperaments. Jeff and Bruce constantly observed and evaluated me to decide which

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dog would do best with an energetic teenager getting his first dog. Both Jeff and Bruce taught the class of eight, often switching places so both of them fully got to observe all of us.

What we didn't know is that they constantly conferred with each other on what dog they felt would work best with which student. For example, a dog that is more tentative in its movements and personality wouldn't be a good match for someone who is extremely confident and who likes to get up and go. Or someone who struggles to sit still. They worked with each class member as well as participating together in class lectures for three days. Working with a simulation allows handlers to gain skills without causing their dog undue fear.

Even if you are not blind, you can become more courageous by taking small steps to learn and increase your awareness. We often fear the unknown. So the more you become aware, the less you will experience fear. This is true of both dogs and humans.

Guide dog training teaches dogs to be highly aware of their surroundings and deeply attuned to the commands of their handler. That awareness helps them to guide safely and fearlessly. While we as blind travelers often may go to places not familiar to us, it is our responsibility to learn how to get around. Most importantly, we must not show uncertainty or fear of the unknown to our guide dogs, or the dogs will become more stressed and fearful themselves.

In the training office in our dorm, I squirmed on a hard plastic chair. My body quivered with excitement. Like many teenage boys, sitting quietly was not my strong suit. Especially when I'd been waiting all morning, and in fact, for days, for this moment.

It was "dog day."

After listening to lectures, and doing Juno training for three days, the moment I'd been anticipating had arrived. I took deep breaths, fidgeted, and tapped my sneakers on the tile floor.

"Mike, sit quietly. I'm going to let Squire come in now," said

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Bruce. “He’s a dark red golden retriever that weighs about sixty-four pounds. I need you to be still, and don’t say anything. Don’t call him. Just wait, and let’s see what he does.”

Don’t call him? I want to tackle him and hug him! I shifted in the chair, making its metal feet scrape loudly on the linoleum floor. I took one more deep breath and held it.

I heard Bruce open the door, and immediately the room echoed with the staccato tapping of Squire’s nails on the floor. Squire snuffled loudly as he crossed the room, getting closer to me by the second. I gripped the sides of the chair to keep myself from reaching for him.

Suddenly, his soft doggy breath was on my face. He sniffed me all over—methodically and rapidly taking my scent in. When he sat down next to my chair, everything got quiet.

“Well, it looks like you’ve got a friend already,” Bruce said. “Go ahead and pet him.”

We had a dog at home, so I knew better than to launch myself at a dog, even one as meticulously trained as Squire. In my head I was singing his name, giving it three syllables, like “Su-per-man!”

Squi-aiy-yer!

I reached slowly toward the sound of panting, my fingers connecting with silky ears and a strong head. I rubbed Squire’s head and powerful shoulders, gently stroked his soft coat, then reached around him to give him a hug. He nuzzled me and licked my hand, and immediately I thought, *I’m Superman—able to do anything!* Still, I admit I was a little nervous too. My world was about to expand dramatically.

Not that it was particularly small before that day.

I have been totally blind since birth, but thanks to my parents I viewed it as an inconvenience but not a disability. When my blindness was discovered in infancy, the doctor recommended institution-alizing me because, as he said, “No blind child could ever grow up

to be able to contribute to society. All this child will be is a drain on your family.”

My parents listened politely but took me home and proceeded to raise me to be a kid like everyone else. I may have navigated the world using some different techniques, but I fully participated in that world. I didn't let blindness scare me or slow me down. As I was growing up, I never really thought about blindness, much less thought of it as a real problem.

God blessed me with two parents who knew that the only way I would learn to live in the world was to let me explore, just like all my sighted relatives and friends. I familiarized myself with my South Side neighborhood in Chicago just like my older brother, Ellery, and my cousins, Robby and Steve, did. The fact that they could see and I couldn't wasn't a big deal, mostly because my parents decided not to make it one.

Sometimes I learned awareness the hard way.

“Wow!” I said, running my hands over the smooth plastic of a toy pedal car, a gift for my third birthday. “Car!”

“Step in here and sit down,” Mom explained. “Put your feet on the pedals, and you can make it go.”

The pedal car was just my size, and I loved the feeling of scooting along the hallway of our apartment—a great outlet for my boundless energy. I was excited to “drive” myself around.

“Beep, beep!” I shouted, hitting the steering wheel with my hand. I took off down the hallway of our home, pedaling furiously. My first few test-drives included some minor sideswipes of the walls, but I soon became adept at using my hearing to drive my little car around our apartment. Well, mostly I used my hearing well.

A week or two later, I'd become the Mario Andretti of our living room. I raced down the hall and whipped around a turn. *Bam!* My face hit something solid, and I yowled in pain.

“Michael!” My mom came running.

I had driven straight into the coffee table that was just high enough for the hood of my little car to slide underneath. I bashed

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my face into the side of the table. I'm told there was a lot of blood. Mom gave me a towel to hold on my chin while we drove to the emergency room.

I needed six stitches to close the wound, but I was brave for the doctor and didn't cry. When we got home, my mother just shook her head and said, "Michael, you're just going to have to learn to watch where you're going." So I did.

What I didn't realize as a three-year-old was that my mom was teaching me to learn from my mistakes and to not be afraid when challenges came my way. She didn't take away my toy car or say it was too dangerous. Instead, she guided me toward greater awareness.

This sense of awareness is something psychologist and author Jordan Peterson discussed with podcaster Theo Von in 2022. A portion of their conversation has become the soundtrack for countless memes and TikTok videos. Here's what Peterson said:

If you are going to make your kids tough, which they better be if they are going to survive in the world, you can't interfere when they're doing dangerous things carefully.

This advice, offered decades after my parents raised me, sums up their parenting strategy perfectly. Perhaps you weren't raised this way—most kids aren't anymore. But you can implement what Peterson suggests: Do dangerous things carefully. You'll become tougher and braver. When you test your courage—fully aware of the risks—and come through it stronger than when you started, your confidence will naturally grow.

When I was five, we moved to Palmdale, California, where I got to start all over again familiarizing myself with an entirely new neighborhood. My parents were my strongest advocates and encouraged me to do things, make mistakes, and learn from them. I went to school with sighted kids and did just fine.

I became knowledgeable about my surroundings. I can still conjure up a map of my childhood neighborhood in my head—just like

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most sighted people can. I didn't realize it at the time, but building the skill of awareness also deconstructed or diminished my fears.

As a little kid, it never occurred to me to be fearful—mostly because no one told me I should be. Frankly, I didn't even think of myself as blind. I knew other kids and adults could do this thing called “seeing,” something I seemed not to be able to do. However, as I grew up, I discovered that I could do things other people couldn't do, like solving algebra equations in my head, and “hearing” the coffee table. I began to recognize that each of us have individual gifts, and not having others' gifts didn't make me better or worse than anyone else.

My dad, George Hingson, and I often discussed this. He had no problem telling me that I was blind, but he also reminded me that blindness was not a problem if I didn't let it be one.

“How will I be able to do what others do by seeing?” I asked him.

“How do you do things now?”

“I listen and figure things out.”

“Right,” my dad said. “If you continue to listen and use all the skills you have and will learn—skills given to you by God—you will be successful and able to do whatever you want in life.”

My dad loved me and spent a lot of time with me. I had no reason to doubt him. I realize now that his confidence in me gave me confidence in myself. To others, that confidence may look like courage. To me, it was my normal approach to life.

We had several pet dogs while I was growing up. None of them, as I recall, took special interest in me. They loved all of us, and our whole family loved each of them. When I was six, we adopted a mutt named Lady from a shelter, but she lived with us only two years before contracting distemper. I vividly remember January 4, 1958, when my parents told me that Lady had to be put to sleep. I was quite sad and really missed her.

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That September we welcomed Rudy, a five-year-old standard size dachshund, into our family. He loved being close to everyone, always finding ways to be underfoot, even with me. He seemed to think of me as just another playmate, not a blind kid who needed special treatment. Rudy lived with us five years before he passed naturally. Later that year we adopted a miniature dachshund named Pee Wee.

Before Squire entered my life, I navigated the world by feel and by listening. I didn't use a white cane because no one ever taught me that. I learned it later in life. My parents just expected me to figure things out, so I learned to pay attention. I didn't realize it at the time but being aware of your situation and surroundings is essential for managing fear and being brave.

A dog's acute sense of hearing and smell makes them tune in to the world around them. Sometimes awareness can cause you (or your dog) to be afraid—you sense danger. Sometimes that awareness protects you from danger—it tells you to be cautious, or to avoid certain places or situations. For example, when my dog and I are halfway through an intersection, and I hear a car coming toward us, I don't just stand there. I hustle to the sidewalk on the other side. Even though crossing the street can be dangerous, I don't avoid it altogether. I'm just careful. The goal is not to never be afraid, but to leverage your fear to bravely face whatever comes your way.

Growing up in a family that expected me to function well right alongside my sighted peers forced me to be hyperaware of my surroundings. I learned to “hear” the coffee table, posts, and doorways. Yes, I became a better driver after hitting the table. Learning to ride a bike was a little more challenging—but again, since my parents seemed confident I could do it, I believed them.

“Why are your eyes white like that?” Cindy asked me. Cindy and her family had just moved into a house across the street and a few doors down.

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"I'm blind," I explained matter-of-factly, as if I were saying, "I'm left-handed."

"What's that?" Cindy asked. We were both about seven years old.

"It means I don't see the way other people do."

"Oh. Okay. Want to go play on my swing set?" She clearly wasn't worried about my lack of light-dependence.

"Sure," I said, taking off down the street, with Cindy right behind me.

In addition to the cool backyard swing set, Cindy had a full-sized bicycle. She loved riding it up and down the streets of our little desert town.

"You wanna ride it?" Cindy asked one day. "I can teach you."

"Yes, please!"

"Okay," she said, helping me onto the bike. "Put your foot here," she said, guiding my right foot onto a pedal. "Pedal backward to stop; pedal forward to go," she offered helpfully. She ran beside me, holding the back of the seat and shouting instructions, but I still crashed. Still, I wasn't about to give up. After a few falls, I figured out how to keep my balance and the bike upright. But how was I going to avoid obstacles?

Of course! My pedal car training. I had learned how to listen for curbs, parked cars, and other obstacles. The same strategy could be implemented here.

Eventually I became quite adept at navigating the neighborhood on two wheels. I remember rolling through the streets of Palmdale on Cindy's bike and eventually on my own bike.

I remember it like it was yesterday. The wind in my face felt amazing. As I pedaled, I listened intently. The rubber tires sang to me, changing their pitch just slightly as I approached a parked car or drifted too close to the curb. The skills of echolocation I honed when I was younger by simply navigating the neighborhood on foot and my pedal car served me well.

Cindy and I were riding our bikes one day when she suddenly asked, "How do you get around?"

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“I listen.”

“But you can’t see!”

“Well,” I said, “do you really have to use your eyes to see?”

As Cindy and I rode up and down our street, I described to her things that I heard that clued me in as to how to ride safely. Cindy got it.

Rolling along, I made a gentle clicking sound with my mouth and listened. The slight echo of the noise changed when there was an object near me or in front of me. No one taught me to do this—it was an instinctive way of seeing my surroundings that I had figured out when walking around. My mom had told me to watch where I was going, so I had figured out how to do that. My brother compared me to a bat, but I didn’t care. Echolocation was my superpower, a tool I developed to increase my awareness of my surroundings, which helped me navigate the world with less fear.

I also paid attention to small details. The end of our driveway had slightly different cracks from others nearby. After a while, knowing my way around became second nature, just like it does for any kid who explores their neighborhood.

One day as I returned home from riding my bike around the neighborhood and walked in the door, I heard the telephone ring and my dad say “Hello.”

“Yes,” he said a moment later. As the conversation progressed it became clear that my dad and the caller were talking about me and my bike riding. And the caller was not happy.

“What about it?” my dad said.

“I understand. Uh-huh.”

Pause.

“Did he fall off the bike?”

Pause again.

“No? Did he crash into anything? No again? You’re sure?” Dad didn’t filter the sarcasm from his voice.

I could hear the caller’s high-pitched but muffled protest.

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“Uh-huh,” Dad said. The conversation suddenly stopped. After a moment of quiet, Dad hung up the phone.

“He hung up on me,” he said.

It must have really driven some neighbors crazy when I not only rode my bike around the block, but then biked to Yucca Elementary School every day. But it didn’t bother me, and after all, it was my parents’ idea for me to do so.

My upbringing trained me to be aware, but not allow fear to overwhelm me. It’s not that I didn’t sometimes feel scared. But I learned early how to control it—and use it. In a moment when we feel fear, which is a natural, physical reaction, we can either panic and be blinded by our fear, or we can leverage the hyperawareness that is a part of fear to help us walk forward. I also realized that the more aware you are, the less you will feel afraid. Because we primarily fear the unknown.

The guide dog looks to its handler for direction—not just where to go, but how to approach any situation. When I feel afraid, I begin not by denying it, but becoming aware of it. I make a conscious decision to keep from panicking (at least on the outside). I notice and pay attention to the involuntary physiological responses that fear can elicit, and I begin to control my breathing, my body movements, and all my external behaviors so that my dog can stay calm and so I can mitigate those physiological reactions. Rather than spiral into panic mode, I focus on self-awareness and self-control.

In turn, my dog reads my steadiness and responds by doing their job of guiding without fear. The dog’s calm response to my calmness helps me to manage my fear even more. My dog draws courage from me, and I draw courage from my dog. It’s a beautiful experience. Together we reassure one another that we can be brave.

As Bruce Benzler told us during one class, “If we fear or become stressed, then so will our guide dogs.” That lesson has always stuck with me, and one day it would save my life.

To read more, order *Live Like a Guide Dog* at <https://amzn.to/4dmxhyE>

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After dog day in San Rafael, we students spent several weeks learning how to navigate the world with our new guide dog beside us.

“Mike, the leash lets you communicate with your dog. The harness lets him communicate with you,” Bruce reminded me. We walked around the campus of Guide Dogs for the Blind with several other students, practicing the delicate dance that is guiding and being guided.

“Forward,” I said to Squire, and started to walk. But I ended up ahead of him.

“Mike, wait for Squire to take the first step. Keep your left foot by his right paw.” *Easy for him to say.* But if you pay attention, you can sense where the dog is, and how the harness shifts when he begins to move. Then follow his lead even as you simultaneously direct him.

“And say ‘Forward’ like you mean it,” Bruce added. “Remember, you need to learn to trust Squire and let him guide just as Squire needs to learn to trust you to know where you want to go.”

“Forward,” I said, enthusiastically this time. I waited, and the harness lifted up and forward as Squire began to move. I worked to match my step to his.

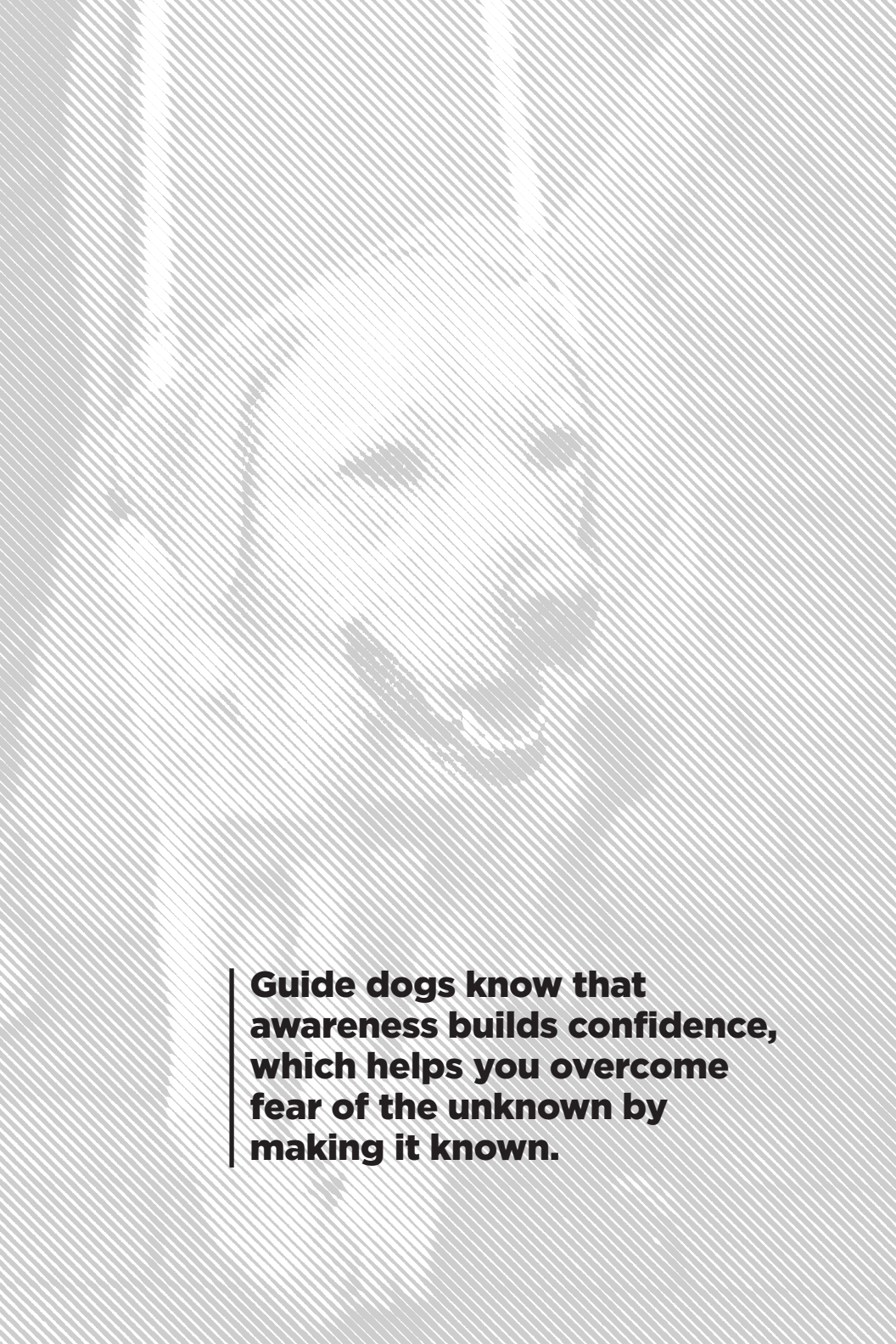
“Okay, in about ten steps, signal him to turn right.” I felt the sidewalk beneath my feet, then moved my right hand to the right with a slight flick of the wrist.

“Right,” I told Squire.

Via the harness, I felt Squire respond to my command and turn, and I walked around the corner perfectly with him.

“Great job!” Bruce said, matching my enthusiasm. “Use the harness to know where he is and keep yourself out of his way, but next to him.”

Our training class was four weeks long. So Squire and I got roughly three-and-a-half weeks of working together under Bruce and Jeff’s supervision. On our last day, a Saturday, we gathered for a graduation ceremony. Because I was the youngest, I was chosen to be the class valedictorian. I wrote a brief speech in Braille. I don’t even remember now what I said, but I am sure I thanked Jeff, Bruce, and



Guide dogs know that awareness builds confidence, which helps you overcome fear of the unknown by making it known.

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the entire Guide Dogs for the Blind staff. I know I talked about what a difference Squire would make in my life.

Before graduation, we got to meet the people who raised our guide dogs. Nancy, Squire's puppy raiser, was a 4-H member. The high point of the day, as you can imagine, was when our dogs were officially presented to us.

Right after graduation, Squire and I flew home—my first time on an airplane. I was more curious than afraid. My father worked at Edwards Air Force Base and airplanes were a common topic of discussion around our house. Dad was involved with experimental aircraft such as the X-15 rocket plane, so I already had a pretty good notion of what flying was. Of course, there is nothing like actually being in a plane and flying.

My biggest concern was how Squire would handle this new flying experience. I shouldn't have worried. We boarded the Convair A4 and the flight attendant directed us to the "lounge" at the back of the plane. Here, two bench seats faced each other. I sat down and fastened my seat belt, and Squire lay down in front of me. The aircraft taxied to the runway, gained speed, and we were off. Squire took it all in stride. He didn't even get up during the flight to look out the window!

I spent the hour-long flight talking to the others in the lounge and also talking to and petting Squire. My seatmates wanted to know all about Squire and about guide dog training. The time passed all too quickly, and we landed at Burbank Airport. My parents were there to greet me and the hero dog. Of course, Squire immediately made friends with them.

Finally, we returned home and settled into a "normal" life. I'd been around dogs most of my life, but I'd never had one so attentive and well-trained. I was smitten—and eager to see how my life would change with a dark red golden retriever walking beside me everywhere I went.

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LIVE LIKE A GUIDE DOG

I rolled over in bed, relishing the lazy last days of summer vacation—or trying to. Pee Wee, our family’s dachshund, had other plans. He jumped on the bed, landing square on my chest, and licked my face. “Oof, Pee Wee!” I gave him a morning ear rub.

A moment later, Squire’s nose pushed Pee Wee out of the way so he could nuzzle me as well. “Hey, man, we need our breakfast,” they seemed to say.

“Okay, okay, I’m getting up.” Pee Wee raced down the hallway, and Squire took off after him. This was their favorite game. When they reached the living room, Pee Wee would launch like the Slinky Dog he resembled and soar onto the couch. Then Squire would grab Pee Wee like a toy, flip him off the couch and onto the floor on his back, wrestling and growling playfully. In less than a month, they’d become great friends.

But as soon as I got to the kitchen, they abandoned the game and pranced around me, eager for their food.

“Hey, Mom,” I said, both dogs circling me.

“Good morning.” Mom was sitting at the kitchen table with her cup of coffee. I walked to the cabinet, pulled out a plastic bin, measured out a cup of kibble, and put it in Squire’s bowl. I scooped a smaller portion for Pee Wee, pouring it into his bowl in the opposite corner of the kitchen. As the dogs scarfed down their breakfast, I went to the fridge and pulled out the butter and strawberry jam, then pulled a loaf of bread from the bread box. I put a slice of bread into the toaster and pushed the lever down.

“Is there any bacon left?”

“It’s on a plate next to the stove. I convinced your dad to leave you two slices.”

“Thanks!”

“Mike, school starts in a couple of weeks. I think we should go over there a few times so you and Squire can learn your way around.”

“Sure, Mom.” We’d been talking about high school all summer. Up until that year, I had navigated school without assistance, but Yucca Elementary’s layout was much simpler. Palmdale High

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School's campus consisted of many small buildings and courtyards, typical for California. It was one of the many reasons my parents had applied for me to get a guide dog.

I sat down at the table, munching my toast and bacon as she talked. High school! I did feel a bit apprehensive, as any freshman would. And I wasn't sure how Squire and I would be received. But I hoped we would be very popular, especially since I had a handsome furry guy as my wingman—uh, wingdog.

As we drove to the school midmorning, Mom began describing the campus. "At the front, there are four long rectangular buildings, parallel to each other, perpendicular to the parking lot," she explained. "These buildings make up the series 100 section. You'll get off the bus right in front of the building that has rooms 141, 142, 143, and so on."

Though she had only a high school education, Mom knew that awareness is power, and exploring builds awareness. She knew sheltering me (or my brother, for that matter) wouldn't serve us in the long run.

"Okay," Mom said as Squire and I got out of the car and walked beside her from the parking lot. "This is where the buses stop. Go straight ahead, and your locker is third from the left. Yours is easy to find—it's the only one with a keylock instead of a combination." Knowing I couldn't see the numbers on a combination lock, the school had agreed to my parents' request for an alternate lock.

"From here, go left and then around the corner to the right," Mom continued. "The first room on the right is Mr. Dills's classroom, where you'll have general science, first period."

I wanted to run through the campus, asking a million questions. I took a deep breath, put my hand on Squire's head to steady myself, then gripped his harness and leash. My goal was awareness—the first step to being brave.

Squire walked obediently next to me, watching for obstacles, but listening for my commands. His watchful presence boosted my confidence and courage.

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Thanks to Mom's coaching, I already had an idea of what to expect. But Squire did not. He needed me to tell him where to go, and I needed him to help me avoid obstacles and other people. I memorized which way to go from Mr. Dills's classroom to the next class on my schedule, a music elective with Mr. Darrington.

Mom walked beside me, taking me through the next part of my schedule. "Here are the math classrooms. Do you remember which room you're in and how to find it?"

"Room 241—the first door on the left."

"Excellent. And when do you need to be there?"

"Right after lunch." I felt the sidewalk go slightly downhill, and I stored this information away, adding it to the map I was building in my head of the school grounds. Squire's step quickened as he read my growing confidence. I smiled. After only a few weeks, I could tell that this dog felt what I felt. He saw the world for me and was eager to explore it with me.

"This is a snack bar, where you can buy food," Mom explained—immediately piquing my interest. "This courtyard is where you'll eat lunch. There are benches all around the perimeter where you can sit. And there's a restroom just off the other end of the courtyard."

Squire was buzzing with excited energy at my side. Despite the many interesting smells and sights in this strange new environment, he focused on his job of guiding me, listening to my commands to go forward, turn right or left, or stop and sit. After a couple of days of walking me through my schedule, Mom stepped up the challenge.

"Okay, now I'm going to watch you find your way from this classroom, where you have English third period. Which class is next, and how do you get there?"

"I need to go to the locker room, by the gym." The school required me to enroll in a special PE class for kids who couldn't participate in regular PE. We didn't do much physical activity. But I still had to suit up for gym (or rather, suit up for sitting around). I had hoped they would let us jump rope. I was actually pretty good at it.

We walked down the sidewalk, Mom silently trailing us. I walked

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along, listening for the spaces between buildings, noticing subtle changes in the grade of the sidewalk.

I moved my hand to the right. “Right,” I told Squire, who immediately made a sharp right turn. I walked a bit farther and signaled Squire to turn left when I could hear the opening. I walked forward again and listened carefully, hearing the subtle changes that indicated a door on my right. Not the first one, but the second one. I commanded Squire, “Right,” and he turned right just like he should. “Good boy!” I said as we entered the gym.

“Great job, Mike,” Mom said from behind me. “This may be a bit more challenging when the sidewalk is full of other students, but I know you will do just fine.”

Over the next two weeks, Squire and I, with Mom lurking behind, explored and practiced. I learned how to find each of my classrooms, and how to get from one room to the next simply by memorization.

Squire did not have to memorize the campus. Eventually, he would become very familiar with our routine. But I couldn’t just let him pull me around from class to class. That is not how a guide dog works. In fact, if possible, you should mix the route up from time to time, just to keep your dog alert. He needs to look to you for direction. He also needs to avoid getting in a rut, so that when you need to change the routine he won’t try to “stick to the routine” as dogs (and people) sometimes like to do. Together, dog and handler work as a team to get from one place to another safe and sound.

As I explained earlier, a guide dog doesn’t “lead” a blind person. The dog “guides.” The dog’s job is to keep himself and his person walking safely. The handler must know where they are going and how to get there. Eyesight is not required to master this skill. The dog lets the handler know of unexpected obstacles, such as a construction barrier or a car. Both of us are always aware of our surroundings, and that feels empowering.

Sighted people rely on visual clues to find their way around. But they also remember landmarks when they’re driving or memorize the layout of familiar places such as a school. Students aren’t stopping to

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read the signs to the science lab or room 241. They just know where to go. And eventually, I had that same knowledge. In nearly any place I go, I pay attention so I can find my way, with or without my dog. I rely on sound, smell, and physical characteristics like a slight incline in the sidewalk to “see” my surroundings.

Those heightened senses aren’t something blind people are just born with—we have to develop them by training ourselves to pay attention and to prepare for anything.

The truth is that even sighted people rely on their other senses. When you ride a bike or cross a street, you often hear cars approaching from behind you. A bicyclist relies on their sense of hearing and acts accordingly. Rather than turning their head to look at the car, and inadvertently steering right into the vehicle’s path, they move over. Everyone uses, or should use, all their senses to perceive what’s going on. Eyesight can be helpful, but it’s not the only game in town.

By the time my high school freshman year began two weeks later, I could go to any room on the campus. Using the simple tools of awareness and preparation eliminated a lot of fear. I knew I could make it from class to class in the six minutes between periods. In my four years of high school, I never arrived late for a class.

Those simple steps of preparation not only made it possible for me to thrive in a public high school alongside my sighted peers, but it taught me a valuable lesson. You can combat fear by increasing your awareness and by preparing. Once I memorized the school’s layout, I had an advantage and felt much more confident.

Squire was highly trained, but he had a wicked sense of humor sometimes. About halfway through my freshman year, I was walking down a hallway when I heard a group of girls talking in front of me. I figured Squire would guide me around them. Not Squire. Before I could stop him, he barged right through the middle of the group. Suddenly I heard one of the girls scream, and the whole crowd parted like the Red Sea. I thought, *What just happened?*

This was 1964 when shorter dresses were the latest fashion. In

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fact, our school required girls to wear dresses measuring between two inches above the knee to two inches below the knee. Later that week, the same thing happened where Squire barreled us through a crowd of girls. Again, there was screaming. Afterward, a friend came up to me.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Your dog,” my friend said, laughing. “Squire was moving his head from side to side as you walked through the group, checking out the girls. His cold, wet nose touched one girl’s bare leg. She screamed and almost slapped you. When the girls saw Squire, they scattered.”

Actually, Squire did seem to enjoy his game until the girls at school figured out Squire’s antics. I would let them pet him after I took off his harness so they wouldn’t interfere with his training.

Between my junior and senior high school years I arranged to visit Dr. Ken Ford, chairman of the physics department at the University of California, Irvine, where I contemplated attending college. My parents and I drove to the campus and went to his office.

After we were seated Dr. Ford said, “Tell me about yourself, Mike. Why do you want to major in physics and why do you think UCI is a good fit?” I answered his questions, and we talked about how I would study physics without being able to see. After an hour he said, “I believe you will be a good addition to the school, and I hope you will apply here.” I did apply and was accepted for the beginning of UCI’s 1968–69 college term.

The summer before college I attended a six-week college preparatory class for blind incoming college freshmen. The course took place at the University of California at Santa Cruz, located about 350 miles north of Palmdale. My parents drove me up there. Squire was not invited, as part of the program was learning how to use and work with white canes. Before attending, I purchased a cane and practiced a bit. I discovered that while it was different from using a guide dog, I did quite well. This was, of course, because I was always quite aware of my surroundings.

When the course began at UCSC I met the mobility instructors who assured me that I could learn to use a cane and that I could get

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around with it. I smiled internally since I already knew this. It took about ten minutes for the instructors to decide that I was capable of traveling with a cane. As I tell people, “I can teach you to use a cane in five minutes. However, teaching you to have the confidence and faith to use the cane takes months.”

In September 1968, my parents drove me a hundred miles south from Palmdale to the University of California, Irvine campus. The school had recently opened, and its student population was smaller than most universities, which pleased me. My dorm, Loma, seemed to house all the UCI jocks.

As Mom and I had done in preparation for me attending high school, I spent time walking around the UCI campus, but now with the help of some students and new friends. All went well for the first few weeks. Then one night I was in my room studying, while Squire lay curled at my feet under my desk. After a while I stood up and stretched for a quick break. Squire sighed in his sleep.

“Mike!” one of my classmates, Richard, called to me from his room across the hall. “Could I ask you about the third problem in our homework assignment for Dr. Bork’s class?”

“Sure,” I said. I pulled my door shut and walked across the hall.

Soon we were deep in a physics geek discussion.

Very quietly—after all, you know I have excellent hearing—three scoundrels slinked into my dorm room.

“Hey, doggy,” one said. Squire, friendly and trusting, greeted them with a wag.

“Come on, pup, here we go,” one said, grabbing Squire’s leash off the hook on the wall and clipping it to his collar.

Stifling laughter, the three boys led Squire down the hall.

“He’s going to freak out when he can’t find his dog,” one said, laughing.

Richard and I figured out the equation we’d been wrestling with. I

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walked back to my room and sat down at my desk, but my feet didn't feel any canine bulk underneath.

"Squire?" I called. Had he just moved to his bed in the corner of our room? Nope. "Squire!" I called again. My throat got tight and dry. I struggled to remain calm.

"Rich, have you seen Squire?" I said, quickly stepping back into the hallway.

"Your dog?" Richard was brilliant at physics but a little absent-minded.

"He was under my desk, but now he's not in my room!" I said.

Suddenly, we heard a loud bang, like a gunshot. I jumped. Richard ran to his window. "Your dog is running across the parking lot!" Squire was being chased by his three captors, who thought it would be hilarious to set off a firecracker while kidnapping a dog.

"Squire!" I screamed. My heart was racing, my ears ringing. *What if he's injured? Why would these people want to hurt me and my dog?*

Richard and I ran outside. The pranksters had caught Squire and one of them sheepishly handed me his leash. My hand was trembling as I took it from him.

"What were you idiots thinking?" Richard and I demanded.

"It was just a prank, man," said one. "Don't be such a downer."

"A downer?" I said, fuming. "How would you like it if someone suddenly shined a 1,400-watt light in your eyes and at least temporarily blinded you? This is no normal dog. I hope you didn't permanently traumatize him."

I knelt down and petted Squire, who was shaking. He nuzzled me, looking for reassurance. "It's okay, boy, I'm here." Squire pushed his head against my chest, whimpering.

As I stroked his shoulders, he settled a bit and licked my face. But the damage had been done. From that time on, Squire, who'd been mostly fearless, was afraid of loud noises. Thunderstorms made him cower and run to me for comfort.

Squire never totally got over this fear, but with work, his behavior in loud settings did improve. His fear was a normal response to this

unfortunate incident. However, he still guided capably. He stayed open and curious—and when he needed to be, he was exceptionally brave.

UCI had only around 2,700 students when I was there, with buildings spread over a large campus. So Squire and I typically enjoyed a nice long, quiet walk from one building to another as we went from class to class.

Until the day our walk was not quiet. Or nice.

“Forward, Squire,” I commanded as we walked to calculus class. You may wonder how a blind guy could do calculus. Well, why not? I had to solve the proofs in my head as well as writing Braille notes. Actually, I used the same processes as everyone else. The only difference was that I used Braille while my sighted classmates used pencils or pens and paper. My professors gave me oral exams, and I explained the steps of each proof out loud. Higher math wasn’t much of a stretch for me—my dad had taught me to solve algebra equations in my head when I was six.

As we walked, I heard barking.

“Squire, hop up,” I reminded him. “Hop up” was a command to remind a guide dog to pay attention. I knew that “the pack” was nearby—a group of dogs that belonged to some students. Unfortunately, the owners just let these dogs roam free while they were in class. The pack made me a little nervous—and also a little peeved at the irresponsible behavior of their owners. I tried to ignore them.

A moment later I heard the dogs approaching behind us. Suddenly Squire jumped away from me, spinning to face the pack, growling ferociously. His maneuver caught me off guard, and his quick turn pulled the harness handle out of my hand.

The pack stopped in its tracks, surprised by Squire’s defensive move. I managed to keep hold of Squire’s leash even as he moved toward the pack. I could feel him crouching down and hear his loud

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and commanding growl. I had never experienced this behavior from him, but I was awed at my dog's courage. He knew he was supposed to keep us both safe, and he had decided that in order to do that, he needed to confront the pack.

The disorderly dogs stopped in their tracks, obviously surprised. Their barking ceased, and several had their tails between their legs (so a witness to the incident told me later). Slowly, the dogs slunk away.

"Squire, heel," I said. As he stopped beside me, I grabbed the harness again, which wriggled as he wagged his tail furiously, as if to say, "Did I do good or what?"

I knelt down, rubbing his head and shoulders. "Good boy, Squire," I said. "Such a brave boy."

Squire showed no fear. Instead, he showed strength and loyalty. Despite my efforts to stay calm, I'd felt pretty nervous when I heard the dogs approaching.

Squire determined that he had to address the issue of this pack of dogs who threatened us. Essentially Squire told them, "Get out of here and leave us alone!"

Squire may have felt some fear but overcame it to face a specific situation directly. He felt scared but did it anyway. Squire reacted courageously and helped our team stay safe. We never encountered that pack of dogs again.

Squire taught me, by his courageous example, something important that day. When you face the thing that scares you, it need not be so scary after all. Awareness is simply knowing what scares you and facing it head on. One way to be brave is to get as much information as you possibly can.

I am sure both love and a desire to keep both of us safe motivated Squire. He was not trained specifically to guard and protect, but his instincts clearly ran deep. He might have felt afraid, but he overcame his fear at that moment. I never saw that kind of behavior again from him.

What are you afraid of? The more aware you are of your surroundings (with or without people) and what to expect in any situation, the

better you'll deal with unexpected or frightening things. Awareness allows you to leverage your fear and deal with what is going on.

An essential part of awareness is understanding fear itself. From a scientific perspective, fear is a biological response to an external stimulus. Our bodies respond to what happens around us, often in ways we don't even think about. If you feel cold (external stimulus), you might get goose bumps, or eventually start shivering (biological response). If you're too hot, you may start sweating or get red in the face. In the same way, your fear is simply a biological response to an external or internal stimulus. Just as you can't stop yourself from sweating or shivering, you can't stop yourself from feeling fear in certain situations. But it doesn't have to run your life.

Many of our fears are internally created. Very rarely will you find yourself in an actual life-or-death situation. Most of the time, you are afraid because of what you *think* will happen rather than what is *actually* happening.

Put another way, many fears simply aren't connected to reality. What you feel is real, but the circumstances you're imagining are not. At times, your fear is a response to a genuine threat. At that moment, your fear keeps you safe. But most fear is a response to an *imagined* reality. This puts you into a "fight or flight" mode when you don't need to be—which can lead to injuring your body and stealing joy from your life.

When you understand the true nature of fear, it becomes easier to overcome. You are able to closely examine your anxiety and determine if there is any substance to it. Some of your worries may have merit, but many don't. Or they might be pointing you toward a past trauma, an unresolved issue, or a hidden wound.

For example, a dog that has been mistreated might cower even when you try to pet it gently. Or it might bark at people who resemble its abuser.

You can view anxiety in a positive light, seeing it as an opportunity to work through and resolve past hurts and fears, so that you can focus on what is happening in the present moment. In other words, anxiety issues an invitation to increase our self-awareness.

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One of the most important opportunities afforded to us by our parents is to learn how to live life and, as much as possible, to experience new things they never encountered. Some families do this better than others. My parents worked as hard as they could to help me be well prepared for whatever I encountered. They knew I would not stay sheltered at home as I grew. Whether or not they realized it, they did teach me about being prepared for life's encounters and challenges. Of course, we may well not be prepared for everything that comes our way.

I know many people who, as they age, are losing their eyesight. Nothing has prepared them for this. This is unfortunate as, in reality, while they may not have expected to possibly become blind, they could have learned not to fear life changes, whatever they may be. The specific threat of blindness frightens people—mostly because we tell ourselves that blindness is more debilitating than other things. More importantly, people losing their vision need not experience this alone. While the ophthalmological profession feels that anyone losing eyesight is a failure to their doctors, such people are not failures and should be encouraged.

There are many organizations, such as the National Federation of the Blind, the nation's largest consumer organization of blind persons, who show constantly that blind people can live just as productive lives as others, no matter what their age.

So while not necessarily being directly prepared for blindness, people can learn to be more prepared to deal with unexpected life changes. I faced that with every guide dog I received. I faced changes when I unexpectedly had to change jobs or face other issues. We can fear or we can learn to control our fears and move forward.

One night in the late spring of 1972 I called home.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Oh, Mike, how are you?”

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“Well, I’m doing fine. But I’m a little worried about Squire.”

“What do you mean? Is he sick?”

“Not exactly,” I said. “He just seems to be slowing down, and he’s not as sharp as he used to be. Last night when we were walking to the dorm, he seemed sort of hesitant. I think his eyesight is getting worse at night. I’ve noticed it a couple of times.”

“Well, Mike, he’s ten years old. We knew he’d have to retire eventually.”

“I know. But is it still okay if he comes to live with you and Dad when I retire him?”

“Of course.”

“Okay. I’ll call Guide Dogs and apply for my next dog.” My voice caught in my throat saying those last two words. “He’s such a good dog, Mom.” *Would I ever find a partner as amazing as Squire?*

“He’s been a terrific partner,” Mom said. “Honey, don’t worry. Your dad and I will take good care of him. He deserves a comfortable retirement.”

The work of guiding takes a heavy toll on a dog, both physically and mentally. The dogs love their work and their people, but the intense concentration and commitment required often mean they retire at about age nine or ten.

Squire guided me through the campus of UC Irvine for the rest of that school year, until I graduated with a bachelor’s degree in physics. The school gave Squire an honorary degree in “lethargic guidance.” He received a diploma, which I still have more than fifty years later.

In the summer of 1973, after my first year of graduate school at UCI, I went back to San Rafael to meet my second guide dog, Holland.

I had learned so much from Squire. Together, we’d bravely faced all sorts of new situations, expanding our world and making us both grow in awareness and courage. But there was even more that Holland would teach me.

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Guidance from the Word

*For the LORD gives wisdom;
from his mouth come knowledge and
understanding. . . .*

*Discretion will protect you,
and understanding will guard you.*

PROVERBS 2:6, 11

Prayer for Courage

God, when I feel afraid, help me to become more aware. Help me to be aware of your presence in each moment and to pay attention to you.

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