

Letter to the editor: In times of crisis ordinary people turn to the trivial

Please allow me to quote a short passage from the world-famous book “Catch 22” by Joseph Heller ~

“On the other side of the intersection, a man was beating a dog with a stick like the man who was beating the horse with a whip in Raskolnikov’s dream. Yossarian strained helplessly not to see or hear. The dog whimpered and squealed in brute, dumbfounded hysteria at the end of an old Manila rope and groveled and crawled on its belly without resisting, but the man beat it and beat it anyway with his heavy, flat stick. A small crowd watched. A squat woman stepped out and asked him please to stop. ‘Mind your own business,’ the man barked gruffly, lifting his stick as though he might beat her too, and the woman retreated sheepishly with an abject and humiliated air.”

In a book filled with scenes and incidents that accurately portray the horror of war, I have often found this scene the most disturbing, even sickening. The book is of course set during World War II and this scene in liberated Rome towards the end of the war. Why would anyone treat a helpless animal so brutally? I am no psychologist, but I have often agonised about this question. My own simplified answer is this: in times of crisis and significant despair, people are most traumatised by their own sense of helplessness – their inability to “make things right”. To counter this trauma, they will focus on small and trivial things or issues as the source of all the trouble. Anything small and trivial enough that it is under their control will suffice for this. Through manipulation of this thing and the resultant feeling of power and authority their sense of helplessness is at least starting to be diluted. Of course, as an outside observer it is clear that this is absolutely futile without any impact, but there would be no ways to convince the perpetrator(s) of this. Thus, the scene of the man mercilessly beating the dog.

I think it is fair to say that in South Africa, our own sense of despair and helplessness have grown and grown over the past decade and for many of us it is reaching fever pitch. In the community of Hermanus, this sense may even be elevated due to repeated protest action over the past few years, the land occupation(s), environmental and economic destruction as a result of these and of course the general lawlessness as reflected by massive ongoing poaching. Like the man with the dog, ordinary folk in Hermanus have been searching and struggling to find anything or any issue through which they can express their anger and “put things right” and “save our dear town”.

It seems to me that this thing or issue has now been identified: dogs running around unleashed. And it is being attacked with a fervour that is typical of a traumatised mob on a crusade. All of a sudden it is scientific (sic) fact that ~

- Unleashed dogs are the biggest danger facing anyone venturing into public. Pathways and nature walks are off-limits due to the danger posed by dogs running around wildly. Criminal activity on these walks are nothing compared to the danger posed by free-running dogs. In fact, it is now a criminal activity, to allow your dog(s) to run free.
- Dog poo on the cliff paths and the beaches is the single biggest contribution to pollution and environmental destruction that our beloved town is facing. It may even be the cause of climate change?

- The same dogs running around with abandon is threatening our precious (and endangered) wildlife like breeding black oyster catchers, other birds, dassies etc etc.
- The Blue Flag status of our beaches are threatened by unleashed dogs and dog poo – thus they pose a significant economic threat to all and sundry as well.

So, this is the issue that many ordinary folks in Hermanus have identified as the root cause of all our troubles and problems in Hermanus. And this is the one issue that must be set right then everything will be OK; things will revert back to “normal” and our town and our way of life will have been saved. Not everybody agrees with this – indeed many think this sets us on a path to a cynical, bureaucratic and pet unfriendly Hermanus that is very different to the town and lifestyle we love - and the debate has been raging on this platform since around October last year. As anyone can see, the debate is becoming more and more fell by the day.

Once one understands why people are so psyched by this (according to my own simplified analysis above), one realises the futility of the debate. One also realises that in their own minds (most) people caught up in the fervour of this are doing so for the “greater good” – so could one really convince them of the contrary? The answer is obviously: No!

I believe it is more constructive for us to focus on the real drivers behind this issue. And throughout the debate, on this platform, the key question has often been asked: *who is pushing this agenda so hard and why?* The answer is clear. This issue has been relentlessly driven and the debate stoked by OLM – or at least the political apparatchiks behind OLM. The stoking of this debate is witnessed in ~

- Posting of notices about the bylaw prohibiting free running dogs anywhere on public property on this platform virtually daily. Every time such a notice is posted, strong reaction (from both sides) is evoked and the debate just starts over again.
- Posters that proclaim the environmental damage caused by free running dogs posted equally often. As I stated previously this is the new science.
- The reintroduction of dog licenses (a relic from the 70’s) – carefully timed at the height of the debate - as a means to manage and control this scourge in our society.
- OLM acknowledging its inability to enforce the legislated fines but indicating that errant dogs will be removed from their owners and “liquidated”. If one really wanted to provoke and add raw emotion to the debate nothing could be better than this.

Why is OLM pushing this so hard? It is an easy and convenient way for the apparatchiks to divert attention away from their own massive failings over the past few years. Failings which ironically have directly contributed (and still contribute today) to the very sense of helplessness and trauma parts of our society is experiencing. The strategy seems to be to at least give part of the community something to celebrate and crow about – that will take the heat off us. In this machination, a section of the population that is most easily impressed, is being shamelessly exploited. The fact that it is turning into a major divisive issue in the community is seemingly of no concern to the apparatchiks – to create a perception of balance and fairness they are holding out a vague promise of (possibly) identifying spaces where dogs may run free in future.

To my fellow dog lovers and owners who are clearly baffled, frustrated and indeed angered by this machination my advice is this: let us ignore it and above all not participate (anymore) in the debate. Never mind how much it is stoked and provoked (and it will be!), let us do what our fellow citizens in Zwerfhoek, Mount Pleasant or Hawston are doing: ignore it and treat it as the joke and idiocy it really is. But, let us also hit back at the apparatchiks and refocus our minds

and the debate on the real issues and threats facing our town and community and how we are going to solve those – without the apparatchiks of course!