

I was out with the dog this morning. Not too early, as I'm still in holiday mode, but early enough that it hadn't got fully light. The tide was out, so we walked on the beach and then back along the grass above. As usual, the dog was behaving as if she had never been for a walk before, stopping to smell every scent, bouncing for sheer joy and bringing a smile to my face as she does every morning.

There was a man sitting on a bench when I went along the way, looking out across the water and we met on the way back. He had got up to talk to another dog walker and we all chatted about the weather and the beauty of this time of the year.

After passing a few minutes I moved on, anticipating the coffee that would be brewing back home and I thought that life just did not get any better than this. We had a load of things to do, including bracing the supermarket for four days worth of food and drink for a ton of visitors, but I knew we would find time for coffee, to listen to the radio and chat about unimportant things.

It got me thinking about the things in life that matter. I don't specifically remember as a child dreaming of fame or of riches, but there is some sort of tacit understanding that either or both will make you happy. I'm afraid to say that I have not yet achieved either of those two idols, but there are moments like this morning when I think I've tasted true happiness.

Recently I read a book by John Bird (the man who started the Big Issue) about how to succeed in life. I'm a bit of a sucker for these improvement books, especially given my track record with New Year resolutions. His philosophy is about not being too ambitious. He has worked with people who have a good deal about their lives that they want to change, but what he found was that those who aimed too high, almost inevitably fell flat on their faces. He suggested that we

should aim to make small changes but lots of them, and so eventually achieving those big changes that we wanted all along.

He talked of someone arriving in the Big Issue office, wanting to get off the streets, to give up drink, to get a job, to stop smoking and to get back with their spouse all at once. John encouraged them to cut back on the drink first and then to leave the rest for now, knowing that if they stuck with it, they would eventually get their life back on track.

I think somehow, that something similar applies to finding happiness. You can win the lottery; marry a Johnny Depp (or Keira Knightley) look-alike and feng shui your home all you want, but I bet you still get a kick out of the smell of coffee when you come in on a frosty winter morning (or whatever your thing is).

One of my presents this year was a campsite guide. It came with a promise that we would visit every one of the sites over the next year or so, and I have spent many hours since then picking which one would be the first. The book didn't cost a fortune and it's not a rare edition that it took many hours of searching to find. But it was bought by someone who knows how much I love camping, and who knows how much pleasure I will get from us spending time together in a remote corner of the Highlands.

And that's what matters, the thought that went into it and the seemingly small gesture of the promise to come in March. I hope there will be a moment in the weekend that we go camping, that I will feel truly glad to be alive. Maybe there will be more than one of these moments. And as I sit here surrounded by the family that have come to share the season with us, I think there must be some grain of truth in what my Nana meant when she told me to count my blessings.