

Other Lives

Mushing is a very time intensive sport. We all know how it can consume our constant thoughts, not to mention free time. At times it may not seem like it, but most of us do have a "life" outside of the sport. In this column, we explore the "other lives" of mushers.

Tim Pychyl – “Dr. Procrastination”

For some people, mushing is a hobby. For many it is a way of life. Dr. Tim Pychyl, who we here at Mushing have named Dr. Procrastination, is one such person who has allowed the hobby of mushing to enter his professional world. Tim, a multi-award winning professor, teaches psychology at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada. He is a pioneer in utilizing technology in his teaching methods, and created video-streamed lectures, podcasts and cartoon strips in a successful attempt to reach out to students of all backgrounds and levels. Mushing Magazine's editor had a chance to talk to Dr. Pychyl recently and recorded the following interview.



Mushing Magazine: Mushing's publisher, Greg Sellentin, found out about you while he was procrastinating in his office one evening. The funny thing is that you host a podcast on procrastination. How did these podcasts come about?

Tim Pychyl: I have been doing research on procrastination for about 10 years now, and the reason I did it was because it is the bane of student life. A lot of my focus on academics is on teaching, that is where I put a lot of my emphasis. I was thinking that my research needed to reach more students, and students are not likely to read journal articles. There are two things I started in the last year: one of those is the podcast, and the other is a cartoon strip. I put out a monthly cartoon strip called Carpe Diem which tries to capture some of the things we have learned about procrastination in a cartoon. The podcasts themselves are meant to distill the current and main findings of research so they are available to students and other people. I have had over 28,000 downloads from all over the world on the first nine podcasts. It is quite incredible how useful they have been to people.

MM: Is podcasting difficult, how did you learn about it, and do you produce the shows yourself?

TP: In the early 90's when I learned about

the Internet, I started creating websites for my courses and teaching my students how to use the web and develop a new information literacy. Then the moment I learned that I could stream video, I started recording all of my lectures and having those streamed, so if students missed a class they could see it afterwards. When podcasting came about, I thought well that's perfect, I already had the streamed videos and all I had to do was convert them into a podcast format. That is what I am doing with the procrastination podcasts, because it is just audio, it is a little more accessible and I do them on my own on my desktop. The whole idea is that podcasting is revolutionizing broadcasting and so now each one of us can produce something we can share. It is a natural outgrowth of my research as well as my teaching with technology.

It's interesting, on campus I'm certainly known for my teaching and research, but I am also known as a musher. When most people see me they don't first ask about my scholarly life, they usually say, "How are your dogs?". That's why I was happy to be interviewed for the magazine. I've been reading it for years.

MM: You also run sled dogs, how did this come about? Did the psychology come first or the dogs? And how did you get into psychology?

TP: I just kind of followed my heart. I was not

one of those people who as an undergraduate said that I was going to be a professor. I thought professors were egg-heads. I was quite an outdoors person in my undergrad years; I taught tennis full time at one point in my life, and during the early 80's I was the manager of Trailhead, a major outfitter in the Ottawa region. If I wasn't selling canoes, I was paddling somewhere. I even taught whitewater canoeing for another camp while I was on my vacation from Trailhead. I also love to cross country ski and winter camp.

In 1987, I found an outfitter and went on a weekend dog sledding trip. I will never forget those first few moments. There are a few times in our lives that we fall in love and those are the most memorable times of our lives. One of those times for me was the first time I stood on the runners of a dog sled. It was thirty-five below, the dogs were excited, straining at their harnesses, and when I lifted that hook, I was hooked! I spent that weekend in Algonquin Park dog sledding and that was the beginning of a love affair. In 1988, I did the same thing and went out with a major outfitter, a place with around 150 dogs. I was blown away.

In 1991, I bought my first Siberian husky and it was not long before I had 7 of them, and then 20. It's a common story, I know. I didn't keep 20 for very long. I also joined the Ontario Sled Dog Federation, and I got to meet people like



DeeDee Jonrowe and Jeff King at our annual symposia. It was a steep learning curve. I bought a good lead dog, Barney, from a local competitive musher. Barney was a fabulous dog, he taught me so much. In the early 90's, I was basically teaching and running dogs (usually well into the night!). I started running dogs midway through my PhD and actually quit my PhD at one point. I was at the end of my first marriage, and the dogs really helped me get through that. I picked the PhD back up in 93, and the dogs were there with me while I was writing it (in fact, they took me in and out of a cabin up the Ottawa Valley every weekend so I could get some needed isolation for writing).

MM: You also use your dogs as a way to communicate to your students about psychology, how has that helped?

TP: As I've said, the dogs are a big part of my life, so they emerge in my teaching. For example, in my personality course, one of the most difficult concepts for students to get is that 50% of our basic personality traits are produced from our genes. The heritability coefficient on the major traits is around 50%. So personality is clearly the interplay between nature and nurture.

One of the ways to explain that personality is inherited is to look at the breeding of dogs. Over a few hundred years we have created all these different breeds, and they all have distinct

personalities. And then I go further, and go within a breed and see that each dog has a distinct personality. When I lecture in my class, I show photographs of my dogs, which are all quite different, as every musher will know, and I have some extreme cases. One dog, Jupiter, an Alaskan who is just so nervous, I can talk about her behavior and her breeding and the fact that she had been through 5 homes before I got her. So those things are very memorable for the students to think about, as often times people will dismiss that dogs have distinct personalities.

It opens up a conversation then for the larger issue of people and personality. It is easier for many people to understand that there is a lot of genetic shaping of the animal world, and we are just another animal so let's extend that to think of ourselves. No one forgets the dogs; it is such a great hook for that lecture.

This past year I had some students do some research on personality of dogs, not with sled dogs, but just the personality of dogs and what social benefit dogs provide. This is an emerging area in personality psychology, and we've submitted this research for publication.

MM: What was it that made you go into psychology originally?

TP: Back in 1974, when I began university, I was

double majoring in biology and psychology. My first degree was a bachelor of science and my focus was on animal behavior. I thought I would be a full time biologist, but I got more interested in behavior instead of the physiology and other aspects of biology. So, I studied behavior for that undergraduate degree, and I think I have always had that interest into the why of what we do.

I think in my research on procrastination the thing that fascinates me is, why do we become our own worst enemy? Why does our own behavior break down when we have an intention and we really do want to succeed? We are really the only person standing in our own way.

After many years struggling to find the place where I was connected, trying life as a tennis pro, even life in a seminary and various other "possible selves", I got into the outdoor industry. As I said, I managed Trailhead in the early 80s as an outfitter. One day I was driving back from a whitewater canoe class I had been teaching, and I asked one of the other canoe instructors, "what are you doing tomorrow?", and she said she was heading off to Nigeria. I said, "No kidding, how did you get to do that?" And she described how she had completed a certificate to teach English as a second language at a local university, so she got to travel. I dropped her off, and I drove right to that same university, that is where I work now, and I enrolled in the program for

the fall. I quit my job, I did the certificate for teaching English as a second language, thinking I was going to go travel the world. Instead what happened was I got hooked on academics. As I got older and a little more focused, and after having a linguistics background (ESL), I did a MA in psychology, then a PhD and along the way a Bachelor of Education. And then I settled back down. You can see I kept following my heart. In the end, I completed 5 degrees. That was incredible to me - as an undergraduate I wasn't sure I would finish the first three years!

MM: What are your responsibilities in your job as professor?

TP: I have done a lot of things at the university. I have been an associate dean of students, and I just finished being the graduate supervisor in our department. So, I have done administrative work in addition to my teaching and research. Mostly, I focus on my teaching. I teach very large classes. In fact, I teach on television, that is how I was able to do that streaming video, because TV cameras recorded me anyhow.

I have signed a contract to write a first-year text book, so I will start this when I return. I say when I return, because right now I am on unpaid leave of absence to be "Mr. Mum." I am at home full time, because that is what this "Dinosaur Dad" wants to do. I didn't have my first child, Laurel, until 50, so I thought, I have the means, so I stay at home and we play. My wife, Beth, is back at work at Environment Canada, envious of daddy's time at home!

MM: How has that been working out?

TP: It is a big change. A lot of people at the university asked how I was going to do it because I am deeply involved in what I do at Carleton, but a child is a miraculous change in my life. I used to teach developmental psychology, but it is not until you have a baby that you have any clue. It is an amazing trip. The great thing is that she loves being outside with the dogs and horses. I am still doing consulting work, but I don't have the day-to-day grind of the commute, committees, etc.

MM: When you are working, how do you hold such a big job and keep dogs?

TP: That's a good question. Some days we all ask that. There is the video called The Lone Trail about the Yukon Quest, and I think it is William Kleedehn they ask at one point, "What do you like about mushing?", he answers "sometimes I wonder". It is a lifestyle, like anything in your life, it ebbs and flows. To do my job, there are days that I have to get up really early, around 4.30 am, to get the tractor going to clear the driveway, feed the dogs and horses. It is a lot of work, but it is a way of being. Of course, on



other cold, sunny days when I don't have classes, you'll find my dog truck at the end of the trail. That flexibility makes my job as a professor perfect for my other life driving dogs!

MM: One more question regarding your job: Do you procrastinate?

TP: Ha ha ha! I use to, like every student. I thought it was the bane of my existence as an undergraduate, because there would be assignments I didn't want to do, but after studying it for so long, I have it beat. I can recognize when I start to lie to myself, like when we tell ourselves "I will feel more like doing it tomorrow", or "I work better under pressure", but these are just big "flags" that we are trying to rationalize our current behavior, which is not doing anything. I am pretty good at seeing that for what it is and

flagging it and saying "Tim lets just get it done". Once you get started, most jobs just get done. I am really not much of a procrastinator anymore. It is an odd thing though, it is like saying do you ever get depressed? Everybody gets sad and everybody puts things off once in awhile, but I am never bothered by procrastination.

MM: I will try and tell Greg to look for his flags more closely.

TP: It is just those moments when you are making excuses, and you need to say "Lets just get to it."

MM: There you are Greg, words from the wise man himself! Want to learn more? Check out www.procrastination.ca (but don't rush or anything).