

I DON'T UNDERSTAND...

by

D. L. Hamilton

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PREFACE

The observations contained herein were written over a period of years, many while I lived in Fremont, California (population: 195,000 excluding the 59,387 people inching along in their cars on freeways within the city limits at any given time who, considering how long they have to sit there *should* be counted as residents), which is on the southeast shore of San Francisco Bay. Our relocation to the small non-suburban City of Jefferson, Missouri (population 40,000 including babies still in the womb, babies couples are planning to have, plus a few extra for husbands that had that look in their eyes the day they took the census) has indeed been somewhat of a culture shock. I've traded an hour-long commute and a Starbuck's on every corner for a snow shovel and running into people I know every time I go to Wal-Mart. Anyway, a few other things have changed: my yard, of course, since I'm now in a different state; shopping is not quite as intense given the smaller population—although the basics remain the same; and a certain four-legged family member has departed. However, the fundamental premise is unchanged: I *still* don't understand.

— D. L. Hamilton

1. I DON'T UNDERSTAND...

... *SHOPPING*

I realize that a certain amount of shopping is required to provide the basic necessities of life such as food, clothing, shelter, and Dr. Pepper. I will also admit that there are those times when it is appropriate to go beyond the basics, such as when there's a good deal on bigger hard drives or a half-price rebate on software. Then, of course, there are those obligations placed upon us by our American culture wherein we are compelled to shop: birthdays and Christmas. These events require us to forego all our natural instincts for self-preservation and foray into that region of outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. I am of course referring to: The Mall. (Or, more accurately, "The Maul.").

Now, it must be admitted that my view of Mall shopping may be a bit tainted by the circumstances under which I shop. Although the Lord was amazingly gracious in blessing me with an incredibly wonderful wife, she does have one flaw: her birthday falls between Thanksgiving and Christmas. Then, and I must take some of the blame for this one, my youngest son was born during the same timeframe (guess it was my own version of March madness). The foolishness of that arrangement is compounded by the fact that I had already made that mistake with my oldest son. He was born just after Christmas. Thus, each year I find myself shouldering the yoke of misery and oppression starting the day after Thanksgiving. As if having to dream-up one present for one person isn't difficult enough, I have two of each for three people within a month. But that isn't the worst of it. Even if I happen to come upon some miraculous stroke of inspiration and actually figure-out what to buy, my present-buying occurs during the Christmas Frenzy. (We learned early-on not to hold off buying my older son's birthday present till after

Christmas—big mistake. Stores assume the only reason they should even open their doors before mid-January is for exchanges. They don't bother with useless endeavors like stocking their shelves or waiting on customers.)

What's that? Did I hear someone ask why I don't shop ahead of time, earlier in the year? Be serious. That's like asking why I don't have Roto-Rooter come out and clear my drains when they're not even backed-up, just for preventive maintenance. Or have the dentist drill my teeth *before* I get any cavities. Get real.

So, I find myself doing most of my shopping during the closest equivalent humans have to crazed hyenas fighting over a carcass. Except the hyenas laugh.

There should not be the need to recount the details of the annual bloodletting known as Christmas shopping. The reader has undoubtedly experienced it all first hand. Unless you have the good fortune of living in some remote corner of the globe where impoverished people are forced to scratch and claw for their meager subsistence but are actually quite happy because they don't have to put up with surly salespeople, rude shoppers, and squalling kids whose bone-headed parents have dragged them to wait in an interminable line to see Santa Claus whom they insisted the kids see even though, left to their own devices, they would have had absolutely no interest in, and now they're tired and cranky and the parents are on the verge of the Santa line equivalent of road rage because that kid behind them keeps bumping into them as he dodges his mom's attempts to slap him cross-eyed for having told his little sister that Santa will stink as bad as uncle Hugo who also weighs 300 pounds and never showers so now she's upset and screaming she doesn't want to sit on his lap.

Speaking of road rage, Malls have their own brand. Instead of unstable motorists coming unglued because some jerk has the nerve to actually attempt to merge onto *his* private freeway, Mall rage is a malady that befalls parking-place stalkers. You know, those people who creep along behind you in their cars, pacing with your footsteps waiting, waiting, waiting for you to pull out your keys and enter your car. Like a lion singling out one specific gnu in a herd, you have become a marked individual. They are determined to take your parking spot, even if that means following you home and parking in your garage because you walked to the Mall. Which, of course, could never happen since walking, like spear hunting, has ceased to exist. At least in California. Anyway, stalkers are not to be trifled with. Once you unlock your car, an unofficial

timer starts. You now have exactly 6.38 seconds to vacate your hallowed parking space or the stalker will begin to honk. Never mind trivia such as putting away your purchases, buckling your seatbelt, putting your child into his car seat, or even putting your child in the car. Get that car started and those backup lights on, NOW. Actually, if you can find a way to turn on your backup lights before you're ready, it can buy you as much as 2.7 seconds in that it gives the stalker a brief renewal of hope before he (or she) goes berserk and starts smashing your windshield with a tire iron. Should you have the misfortune of merely going to your car to put the 29 packages you're carrying in the trunk, you are doomed. Stalkers will absolutely not allow you to get away with that. Not alive, that is. I have, however, found one technique that just might save your life. Lead the stalkers vertically down an aisle of cars two or three removed from where your vehicle is actually parked until you are even with it. Then, using all the speed you can muster, sprint horizontally between parked cars until you come to your own. This just might give you those few precious seconds needed to stash your purchases and get into hiding before the stalkers get around the end of the aisle and come gunning for you.

All of which leads to the overriding question, which is not “Why do people shop?” but “Why do people *enjoy* shopping?” As stated earlier, to exist in modern America a certain amount of shopping is required. But that there are those who do so voluntarily is beyond me. And, mind you, it isn't just that we Americans are so materialistic. That would only explain why people *buy*. My question is more fundamental. It refers to those people, primarily women, who claim to enjoy the shopping experience even if they don't purchase anything. There are undoubtedly those who will interpret that last sentence as sexual stereotyping. I will grant that there is a small percentage of men who like to shop, and a small percentage of women who loathe shopping but I am confident that “going shopping” as recreation is mostly a female phenomenon. How can I justify such a claim? Glad you asked. Apply this simple test, first to yourself. Imagine your boss told you that, due to the discovery of asbestos in your office, you unexpectedly have the whole day to do anything you want while it gets removed. (Of course, since your boss knew about the asbestos for years but is only doing something about it now because that former co-worker of yours ratted to OSHA after coughing up both of his lungs in large chunks and you're considering getting in on the class action suit, you might not even have to go back to work because you'll be set for life—although that might not be as long as you'd

hoped since you've started coughing up blood yourself recently. However, I digress). So, here you suddenly find a whole day to do whatever you'd like. Let's also assume that there is nothing you actually *need* to buy at a store. Make a list of some of the things you would do with your free day. Got it? Okay, here's the test. Where does "go shopping" appear on your list? If it's among the top five, look at your gender. Go ahead, I'll close my eyes. What do you mean you don't know where your gender is? It's got to be around here somewhere. I'm sure you had it a minute ago. Found it? Oh, good; you had me worried there for a second. Okay, now, odds are you're a female. By the way, if "go shopping" was number one on your list don't even bother checking. However, if "go shopping" was way down your list, like number 381 or something, your gender check will probably reveal that you're male. Again, if "go shopping" didn't even make the list at all, it's a slam-dunk. Poll your friends with this question and I'm confident you will find that shopping with no aim to purchase anything is primarily a female stronghold. Just a helpful hint, however, be sure and let your friends check their own genders or they may not remain your friends. Besides, it's remarkable how often your best guess will suffice.

One more indisputable piece of evidence that women have a whole different mindset toward shopping than men is the shopping vocabulary. No male—not even one who liked shopping—would ever use the word "cute" or "adorable" to describe an article of clothing (or any other inanimate object, for that matter). Let that statement soak in for a minute. Imagine a guy, any guy you know, or yourself if you are a guy, holding up a shirt and saying lightly, "Oh look, this is cute," or in a deeply sincere stage whisper, "Oh, *this* is *adorable*." Am I correct in saying this is a mental image that simply does not fit? It's like the proverbial square circle—a logical impossibility. However, "cute" and "adorable" constitute two of the three possible female reactions to clothes, shoes, ceramic figures, picture frames, shower curtains, and the like, the third being "I don't like it." Note that, "they want \$69.95 for *that*?" is not one of the three. The male vocabulary when shopping is focused on quantifiers: "Okay, then, how many gigs is the hard drive on *this* model?" or, "can't I get the four-wheel drive *plus* the surround-sound?" or, "will this remote work the CD player, the TV, the cable box, *and* the microwave?" Note that the words, "I already have one of those," is not in this vocabulary.

As I said earlier, while the buying habits of Americans may be odd, it's shopping that is the real mystery. I find it a true conundrum that otherwise rational, intelligent beings would

voluntarily subject themselves to the rigors of wandering aimlessly in and out of stores with no object in mind. I am firmly convinced that coal mining, ditch digging, and bucking hay put together cannot generate the kind of exhaustion dragging oneself through stores can. Women have long claimed that their ability to withstand labor and childbirth prove their hardiness if not their ultimate physical superiority. I, however, am already convinced of it. You see, I've gone clothes shopping with my wife.

Actually, I don't really mind watching her try on clothes. She's a very pretty woman and there are definitely worse things in life than having a sharp-looking gal do a one-on-one modeling show for you. There are, unfortunately, certain aspects of it that present a downside. One I've already mentioned is exhaustion. Some of the most frightening words in husbanddom are, "I just want to look one more place." And, of course, heaven forbid that women's clothing stores would provide a chair for you to sit in while she's trying on those eleven outfits. Having tried every technique possible, I have been forced to concede that there is no way to wait for your wife in a women's clothing department without looking like a doofus. If you just stand there and smile pleasantly at the female patrons, they're liable to think you're trying to put the make on them and call the cops. If you are stoic and aloof, they necessarily interpret that as being sinister. Then, of course, if you pretend to be shopping, you just know they think you're some kind of female-clothing-fetish-cross-dressing weirdo.

There is also a pitfall awaiting you. It is guaranteed that at some point your wife will ask your opinion of what she's trying on. I learned two important rules that apply here—the hard way. First, if she likes the outfit enough to ask your opinion, she has developed enough of a bond with it to take any criticism from you as a personal attack. Mind you, she may not want to actually buy it, but she can still consider you a thoughtless brute if you say anything negative about it. Second, you and she are both acutely aware that you have absolutely no idea about fashion and are a blithering fool for venturing an opinion anyway. You're lucky to be wearing matching socks. Why would anyone take fashion advice from a clown like you standing there in a faded, threadbare "Super Bowl XIX" tee shirt with a rip under one arm?

To the male mind this may seem paradoxical, since she did, after all, *ask* your opinion. The explanation for this phenomenon is far too complex to delve into here (i.e., I haven't the mildest idea), but just take the advice of a man with over 25 years experience in marriage: never

actually tell her what you think. She's not interested in your hare-brained opinion anyway, and all it will do is get you into trouble. Remember the first rule. If you in any way indicate that the outfit is not flattering to her she will hear it as you saying she's ugly as a scarecrow. Unfortunately this also precludes you from telling her how much you like something that *is* flattering. If you are enthusiastic over one item, she'll remember. Then when you try neutrality over another she'll know you hate it, and therefore assume you hate her. So how do you answer the inevitable "Do you like this one?" question? I highly recommend the following:

"Hmm. I dunno. Maybe. What do you think?"

This will work for several reasons. One, you haven't actually voiced any real opinion. Two, you admit that you're ignorant, putting truth on your side and giving your wife's suspicions positive reinforcement. Three, and most important, *you* end up asking *her* opinion. This not only gets you off the hook by putting the question back on her, it lets her tell you what she thinks about it—which she was dying to do anyway. It enables her to talk it out, assisting her decision-making, and gives the appearance that you are keenly interested in her fashion choices—something she will appreciate. I admit it's odd that this should matter given what we've already established about your being a fashion moron, but go figure.

One final note on clothes shopping. Sometimes your wife may give you what seems like an easy situation. She'll hold up two outfits and say, "Which do you like best, the green flowered one or the pink one?" This is relatively safe provided you accentuate the positive—always "I really like the pink" never "That green one looks like somebody puked on it" and never, ever "I don't like either one, they make your hips stick out too much." Just be careful you don't get too cocky and dig yourself into a hole with something idiotic like, "Which one's cheaper?" (Note that the words "idiotic" and "perfectly reasonable" are interchangeable here).

I actually have had shopping experiences that were somewhat enjoyable, like poking around in "gift shops" at such tourist traps as Maui, Catalina, and Carmel. Spending the day in such lovely settings with my lovely wife isn't so bad. One just needs to comprehend what the word "gift" means in this context. It is best defined as, "An item having absolutely no practical value, exorbitantly priced."

I don't have much problem in such places, because they appeal mainly to the impulse shopper, which I am definitely not. I can walk clear through one of those Sam's Club type

warehouse stores and never buy anything. I once had to spend a few weeks away on a business trip alone in a mid-sized southern city. One weekend I was so bored I actually stopped at the local mall thinking something might strike my interest. I started at one end and walked all down one side then back along the other, got back in my car and left. The only store I even entered was the one that connected to the parking lot. My wife laughed at me when I told her this story.

“Why didn’t you go into the stores?” she asked.

“I didn’t need anything the stores sold.” She shook her head at me as the poor pathetic creature I am. But then, like I said at the outset, when it comes to shopping, I guess I just don’t understand.

2. I DON'T UNDERSTAND...

... *SPORTS BROADCASTERS*

Lest I be viewed as being overly critical of the fairer (and, in my opinion, more godly) sex, I cannot leave unaddressed that particularly male bastion of brainlessness: sports talk. Before I start let me make it abundantly clear that I am most definitely a sports fan. Some might even classify me as “avid” although I will have no part in wearing hats shaped like food products, painting my body, or waiting on hold for two hours just to say something idiotic like, “Niners all the way, baby!” to a radio sports talk host. I am, however, hooked enough to listen to such mindless drivel (but not the raunchy or insulting schtick), much to my wife’s dismay. She cannot believe how air-headed sports talk and sports broadcasting are. To be truthful, even though I listen to it, neither can I.

There is no definitive answer as to why it has to be so inane, but I do have a theory. Sports journalism is taking something that is meant to be done—or at the very least watched—and talking about it *ad nauseum*. There is only a very limited amount one can say about a baseball or basketball game. Yet the media attempts to fill hours and hours talking about it. A single NFL game will be talked about for over a week counting both pre-game hype and post-game “analysis.” Can you imagine doing that with any other form of entertainment? If Leonard Maltin or Roger Ebert devoted seven programs back-to-back to talking about one film, how insipid would their comments and observations become before they were through?

Sports over-saturation has already reached that point. Sports analysts, interviewers and interviewees no longer have to make any sense. A while back I heard an interviewer question an ex-college coach as to whom he thought would win the NCAA basketball tournament. To the best of my recollection, these were his exact words:

“It’s hard to say, but I think whatever team plays the best defense and can score the most points, well, they just might have a chance.”

Wow. Thank you, professor for those pearls of wisdom. I shudder to think what it would mean if the team that played the best defense and scored the most points had *no* chance.

Actually that kind of prattle goes on all the time. Here is a composite of some others I’ve heard, and if you listen to sports broadcasts and interviews, so have you. I’ll use “Bob” as my Sports Personality and WWWBWS stands for “What We Wish Bob Would Say.”

BOB: “Welcome everybody to tonight’s basketball game between Southeast Central Peoria State Polytechnic A&M and the Van Buren Vermin. I’m Bob Broadcast and with me is Vermin coach A. C. Pepcid. Coach, you’d have to say that your opponents are heavily favored in this contest, wouldn’t you?”

COACH: “Yeah, well, that’s true but y’know, we’re gonna show up.”

(WWWBWS: “We’re certainly glad to hear that, I’m sure. Will you be in uniform?”)

BOB: “So tell me coach, what can your team do given Peoria’s significant advantage on the boards?”

COACH: “Don’t sell our guys short. They may not be big but they know how to play the game of basketball.”

(WWWBWS: “Oh, well, thank goodness. It would’ve been a rough night if all they knew was water polo.”)

BOB: “So what will the Vermin have to do to win tonight?”

COACH: “We’re just gonna have to put the ball in the basket. If we’re gonna have any chance to win this game we’ve simply got to score some points.”

(WWWBWS: “Ah. That would represent some of that ‘knowing the game of basketball’ you alluded to earlier, huh?”)

The saddest part of the above is that conversations like this take place all the time in sports broadcasting. And the broadcasters—and especially the so-called analysts—themselves aren’t much better. They, not unlike politicians, can carry on a highly profound discussion of an event and say absolutely nothing.

BOB: “Welcome everybody to this exciting football match up between the Colts and the Eagles. I’m Bob Broadcast and along with me is Al Analyst. Al, what do you see as the keys to the Colts being able to win today? Good defense?”

AL: “Well, that’s right Bob, no question about it, the Colts are going to have to step it up a notch on defense if they’re gonna win this game. They have to give their offense a chance and, after all, offense is definitely the deciding factor. Unless they can find a way into the end zone they’re going to have trouble scoring in this game, which means what they really need is excellent play from their special teams. As is so often the case, good special teams play will ultimately determine the winner of today’s contest. That’s why, as we’ve said so many times before, Bob, it all comes down to turnovers. Show me the team with the fewest turnovers and I’ll show you the winner.”

(WWWBWS: “Um, do you get paid for this Al?”)

Broadcasters also have developed their own set of contradictory clichés, which they can adapt to make them sound knowledgeable. For example, the mighty Casey stands at the plate. The pitcher pitches the ball on the inside corner of the plate. If he swings and misses, the broadcaster “explains” it with something like, “That’s exactly how you have to pitch to him, Al, get that pitch in on his hands and tie him up.” Conversely, if a home run results, the explanation is, “Big mistake, Al, he threw that one right into Casey’s wheelhouse. That’ll get a pitcher into early retirement if he throws in there.” Then again, if the pitcher gets Casey to miss a pitch on the outside corner it’s, “That’s it, Al, that’s what a pitcher’s gotta do; keep that ball away from Casey or he’ll murder you.” A homer on the same pitch and the story is, “Aw, just like we’ve been saying, Al, you get that ball out where Casey can get his arms extended like that and it’s outta here every time!”

The same goes for football. A team runs the ball up the middle three times gaining five yards each time. Then they throw a pass. If it works, it’s, “Great job of mixing up the plays, Al. They really crossed-up the defense that time.” If it results in a quarterback sack or an interception, it’s, “When you’ve got something working for you, why on earth wouldn’t you stay with it? They’re gaining five yards a pop, why switch?” Conversely, if the fourth play is another run, and it succeeds: “That’s it, Al, they’re just gonna keep doin’ it till that defense figures out

how to stop it, huh?” But if that fourth run in a row gets stuffed: “Yeah, Al, looks like they went to the well once too often. They’re definitely gonna have to mix-in some passes to keep that defense off-balance a little.”

Of course, sports figures themselves are not without their quirks. Like spitting. Unlike some of the more delicate members of society, I have no fundamental objection to a person availing himself of the occasional human need to spit. When the plumbing gets clogged, sometimes that’s the only alternative. Sports being physically demanding as they are, keeping one’s air-intake passages clear is important. But certain specific sports have gone to absurdity, namely hockey and baseball. It is interesting that although basketball is probably the most demanding on the lungs of any sport, little spitting ever occurs. This is for the very practical reason that a slippery spittle on the court would be a severe hazard when it got between a hardwood floor and a rubber-soled shoe. Football players tend to restrict most of their spitting to the sidelines where they can lift their helmets and avoid having a mess on their facemasks (that is, when they’re not spitting in an opponents face, but we won’t go there). Hockey players have evidently discovered that spitting on the ice does not create the same danger as for basketball and use it to full advantage. Plus, when on the bench they are confined in a sort of rectangular box which, judging from the amount of spitting I see them doing, must become ankle-deep in expectoration by the middle of the third period (even counting their skates). But the worst of all are baseball players. Granted, chewing tobacco and sunflower seeds account for a lot of their spitting. Setting those aside, though, baseball players still hold the crown for spitting, hands down. A ten-second camera shot of any given player in a dugout will reveal no fewer than four expectorations. I know of one ex-player coach that had developed a technique with his tongue whereby he could accomplish one long continuous spit throughout the entire game. I’ve heard it said that players no longer get properly trained in the fundamentals of baseball in the minor leagues. Maybe instead they’ve substituted a lengthy course in “Saliva Management.”

However, we are focusing here primarily on broadcasters who, as far as I can tell, do not do a great deal of spitting while working. They can be quite annoying in other ways, though. I absolutely love going to worship on Sunday mornings and consider it one of the fringe benefits of being a Christian that I do not have to sit and endure the NFL pre-game shows. No matter the network, they’re always the same: four ex-jocks, at least two of whom are complete morons

(who make the *viewer* want to start spitting), droning-on incessantly with absolutely nothing of any value to say. To make matters worse, they try to be funny or controversial or both, with the result that they are instead idiotic. I am certain that any four people with so little to contribute to any subject other than sports would be off the air in less than one season.

Suppose, for example, news (which is bad enough as it is) were delivered by sports analysts:

CHRIS: There's been an accident on I-680 at "celebrated-jumping-frog-of" Calaveras Road near "do-you-know-the-way-ta" San Jose.

DICK: Lookit dat ambulance go, Bay-Beeee! Heez headed fudda scene like he t'inks heez Jeff Gordon at Daytona, Bay-Beeee!

JOHN: Y'know, y'know, y'know take a look at those big ol' lights on top of the ambulance. Put the camera on it. See it? There's a little mirror-deal that goes around the light t'make it flash and it's not turning. So, so, so, this ambulance (pause) has one light (pause) that doesn't flash. It just sits there.

TERRY: Ah guess it's not a very *flashy* ambulance. Haw, haw, haw, haw.

DICK: Looks pretty flashy to me! Lookidda people all lyin' on da road. Sensational! Dere gonna need a helicopter ta giddum to da hospital, Bay-beeee!

JOHN: See? See, right there. The light on the right side isn't flashing. So, this is an ambulance (pause) with only one flashing light.

TERRY: Ah don't thank they need a helicopter OR a one-flashing-light ambulance. Ah would brang the doctor right out here! If they don't do that ah don't thank they have a chance. And that's mah prediction.

CHRIS: Here comes a med-evac "when-are-ya-comin'-back" copter to take the injured to the emergency room at Kaiser "Wilhelm" Hospital. What do you think, John?

JOHN: Well, if they're gonna rescue these folks, they simply have to rush them, SHOOM! to the hospital. I mean, (pause) see, they can't get them the E. R. help they need, (pause) unless they get the injured to the hospital. So that's what they have to do. An' hopefully with all their flashing red lights really flashing.

CHRIS: The helicopter's lifting off now, it's moving back-back-back-back-back and now it's going full speed ahead! It just...could...go...all...the...way!

Talking incessantly without saying anything; stating the obvious as if it were profound. Kind of makes you wonder why there aren't more ex-sports broadcasters in politics, doesn't it? Despite our knowing they're full of baloney and just spewing mindless, cliché-ridden blather, goofballs like me don't have any better sense than to listen to such idiocy. Now there's something I'll never understand.

3. I DON'T UNDERSTAND...

... *THE ANIMAL KINGDOM*

People frequently extol the wonders of the various members of the animal kingdom. They attribute to them all the very noblest of virtues we admire in ourselves: courage, devotion, industriousness, intelligence and the like.

Me, I'm not so sure. Of course, my view may be jaded somewhat by my experience with our mentally challenged pet, Sparky. He is ostensibly a dog although he most resembles a long-legged dust mop with eyeballs. Except dust mops are considerably more intelligent and infinitely more useful. However, I am not altogether convinced that his influence alone creates my doubts about that which we broadly classify as animals.

Take ants, for example. Even God's Word extols them as industrious, hard-working insects from which we could all learn a lesson. I guess they must have changed some from the time the Old Testament was written. At least the ants around my house have. Did I say "around" my house? I should have said in, under, on, around and through my house. I keep looking for two huge pieces of glass on either side of our house to confirm my suspicions that it is really part of a gigantic ant-farm in some cosmic science project. My family keeps after me to call in the exterminators but I'm certain that if all the ant nests under our house were suddenly abandoned our entire property would sink three feet. What gets me, though, is that our ants are not the noble creatures of scripture. They're wimps. And they're stupid.

A few years ago our section of the country suffered a prolonged drought. Our home was plagued by myriads of ants. Why? According to the "experts" (the guy who usually does the sports but subbed for the regular news guy one night when he had tonsillitis) they were coming inside in search of water. Water? Has anybody ever seen an ant drinking water? Ants *drown* in water. Unless, I guess, it's in tiny enough puddles for them to simply walk up to it and drink like

Sparky does out of his dish (that is, when his clumsiness doesn't cause him to step in it). How dumb is that? We don't *have* tiny ant-size puddles of water in the house. If we did, they'd evaporate before the ants could drink from them. Even I know that, and I don't possess that magnificent animal instinct the nature shows go on and on about.

Then it got really hot. Okay, maybe compared to summer in Omaha or El Paso it wasn't that hot, but for us it was hot. For days on end. Once again our house was besieged with ants. Why? "The heat" said the guy at the hardware store where customers were rapidly buying him out of Black Flag and Raid. Heat? Why would ants care about heat? They live underground for crying out loud. How hot could it be? If those guys from the highway department can go out and spend all day in the broiling sun leaning on a shovel and drinking from an Igloo cooler, surely a hardy species like ants doesn't need to come into my house. I don't even have air conditioning, for heaven's sake.

Next came the rains of El Niño. Once again we were invaded by bazillions of ants. As you might guess, the reason given by the UPS driver—who ought to know—was that it was the rain forcing them inside. I don't get it. I thought they needed water. Besides, what did they ever do back before this area was settled; before there were any houses here? Use little ant umbrellas to stay dry? Now, earlier this winter, we had a cold spell. Keep in mind, cold in these parts is not really cold. Not Minneapolis or Buffalo cold. Cold around here means wearing a sweatshirt under your jacket and being able to see your breath during the daytime. Nevertheless it was too much for these supposedly hearty, industrious creatures known as ants. The entire population of them decided to winter in our house to be in where it's warm. At least so the experts (both the bagger *and* the checker at the supermarket) agreed.

It's extremely irritating to be plagued by these pests getting into every cupboard and countertop in the house. It's even worse knowing what delicate little snobs they are. I'm not sure having an exterminator destroy them is proper justice. I'm going to look into some method of torture like infiltrating their nests and stealing their TV remotes and recliners.

And did I mention they're stupid? Explain this, if you can. Night One: An entire box of Golden Crisp is left on the counter (remember when it was *Sugar* Crisp? And when Frosted Flakes were *Sugar* Frosted Flakes? And Corn Pops were *Sugar* Pops? Sure glad they got rid of all that sugar, aren't you? Anyway where was I? Oh yeah, cereal on the counter.) Next morning

no ants in sight. Night Two: The cereal has been put away. Still no ants. Night Three: One breadcrumb exactly three molecules in diameter is left on the counter. Next morning $1,200,396,454,197 \times 10^{23}$ ants are swarming over the lone breadcrumb. Laud the animal kingdom all you want, but I don't consider that intelligence.

Speaking of the lack of intelligence, as long as my dog Sparky is alive, the average dog IQ will remain depressed. Nonetheless, many of the more normal dogs do seem to have the capacity to display a certain amount of smarts. We watch in admiration as a seeing-eye dog dutifully and accurately waits at a crosswalk until the proper signal, whereupon he leads his master safely across the street. Our reaction? "My, what a *smart* dog that is." I bring this up to provide a backdrop of contrast to a distinctly different species: cats.

Now, I have heard repeatedly how cats are every bit as bright as dogs but are simply too independent to learn anything useful like aiding the disabled, sniffing out drug traffickers, or running out to its master's pickup and fetching his reading glasses off the front seat (I knew of a guy whose dog could do stuff like that on command). Too *independent*? I don't know. If it looks like stupidity, and it sounds like stupidity, and it acts like stupidity...

Let's try an experiment. Let's think of an indisputably ignorant animal. How about an ox? We even have a saying, "Dumb as an ox." And that doesn't refer to its inability to speak, either. Okay, so we agree that oxen are just about as stupid as a creature can get. Let's do a comparison between an ox and an intelligent creature, say a well-trained dog. Then let's see which end of the continuum cats are closest to.

Command	Smart Animal (dog)	Incredibly Dumb Animal (ox)	Cat
"Fetch the newspaper"	Goes and gets paper and brings it to master	Stares blankly. Chews cud	Stares blankly Doesn't chew
"Keep this burglar at bay till help arrives"	Keeps burglar cornered with threatening growls	Stares blankly. Chews cud	Stares blankly Doesn't chew

“Go find Doc Peters	Races the eight miles	Stares blankly. Chews cud	Stares blankly
and tell him we’re	into town, finds Doc		Doesn’t chew.
trapped in a cave-in	Peters in OR # 2 on the		Eventually
at the old Jackson	4th floor of County		crawls down
Mine and Timmy’s	General and, through a		and curls up
asthma is acting up	series of barks, tells		on Timmy’s
and he needs his	him to bring help and		face.
Albuterol”	the medicine.		

Having deeply offended all you cat lovers out there, let me make this one concession. There is absolutely nothing cuter than a little kitten. Not even a puppy. Mercifully I am allergic to cats and was therefore able to sidestep my kids’ pleas for a kitty during their younger years. I must admit, though, that a kitten tumbling with a ball of string will melt the heart of the most avid cat-opponent. Which is why I find it astonishing that advertisers haven’t caught on to this. For all the cat food and litter box ads that plague our TV screens wouldn’t kittens seem like a natural? Instead they use fake talking mouths on cats, a cat doing absolutely nothing while a background voice pretends we’re hearing its thoughts, and film running back and forth rapidly to make the cat look like it’s dancing (remember the chow-chow-chow? Ooh, easy stomach). I thought the idea of advertising was for people to watch. Just put a kitty with a ball of yarn in front of the camera, throw your logo on the top of the screen and a voice-over telling us what you’re selling and we’d all rush out and buy it. Even if we didn’t own any cats. How come you and I can see this but advertisers can’t? I don’t understand. In fact, generally speaking, I’d have to say I don’t understand advertisements...

4. I DON'T UNDERSTAND...

... ADVERTISEMENTS

Cat food advertisements are only one example of a larger conundrum. They're not even the worst. I realize that anyone able to form condensation on a mirror placed under his nose loathes most advertisements. Yes, a few of them are less than annoying and an even tinier number are actually clever. The vast majority, however, are inane, irritating, insulting-to-one's-intelligence, and often, downright deceptive. Even though I despise them, I have to admit, I do recognize why most of them exist and what they are trying to accomplish. What I don't understand are those that seem to have no relationship to the product being marketed and which create absolutely no desire in a person to buy it.

For example, I am not inspired to buy a particular brand of toilet paper based on the recommendation of a family of cartoon bears. In fact, I find it amazing that Charmin has based its entire ad campaign on an old off-color smart-aleck retort: "Does a bear **** in the woods?" Come on, you must have wondered what connection bears and toilet paper would have.

I've heard reports that advertising gurus claim it's not what is said about a product that matters so much, it's just keeping the name in people's minds. I don't know, I think they've outsmarted themselves. Like, the software product that claimed it was used by "over 23 Fortune 100 firms." Um, let's see. How far over 23 would that be? Could it be 24? Or how about cars advertised as "under \$36,000." You don't suppose they would cost \$35,999.99 do you? I really resent snooty car ads anyway. I may very well purchase various used cars in the future, but I'm going to fight tooth and nail to avoid ever buying a "Pre-owned" car. Besides, "pre-owned" is nonsensical. A "pre-adolescent" is a child who has not yet reached adolescence, true? Therefore why isn't a pre-owned car one that hasn't been owned yet? In other words, a *new* car is pre-owned, not a used car.

Another type of annoying TV commercials are ones that you might not have even realized why they irritate you. I am referring to the *cinéma vérité* mode of filming commercials. *Cinéma vérité* is French for “nausea-inducing camerawork.” This is where the entire production is made to look as if someone did it with a hand-held home video camera—someone drunk, that is. I call them “bad photography” commercials. The idea is that you’re supposed to think it’s not a commercial with an actor, but Joe Average just talking about stuff. So the camera is zoomed in too close and then pointed wrong so that all you see is the guy’s nose and chin for a while. Then it swings around so that you catch a glimpse of one of his eyes, his collar, and then just the wall behind him. To make matters worse, many bad-photography ads also have this succession of random flashes; supposedly people walking-by in front of the camera. *Dozens* of people walking in front of the camera. Cut me some slack. How dumb do they think we are? Some company is going to spend \$1,000,000,000,000.89 on a 60-second primetime commercial and have it filmed by a six-year-old who borrowed her uncle’s camcorder and then let people keep walking between the camera and the subject? And we’re supposed to believe it’s because this is a real life interview? I recall one commercial where the camera starts by zooming-in on a pedestrian from across the street. The guy stops and looks right into the zoomed-in camera (which is swinging around like the cameraman desperately needs a potty break). “Headache relief?” he asks as if in response to a question. Since this is supposed to be real-life, who asked this guy about headaches? The cameraman obviously has bigger worries on his mind. Besides, he’d have had to shout it from across the street. Meanwhile three flash-people walk in front of the guy across the street, none of whom think it’s the least bit strange that he suddenly stopped, looked across the street and said to no one, “headache relief?” Two more people and a delivery van cross in front of the camera as he says, “There’s only one thing that will get rid of my headaches.” Still not one of the people stops to see what he’s doing or to whom he’s talking. Most of the time it’s not really even people getting in the way. They’re just flashes put into the advertisement for effect. Of course, the effect they have on me is to get up and go do something else besides watch such silliness. Hmm. Maybe stupid commercials are pretty helpful after all.

Hands down, the worst of all are drug commercials. You know, those incessant ones for new “wonder” drugs, with fancy medical-sounding names that allow you to eat deep-fat-fried lard sandwiches with a hot-fudge sundae chaser and not gain weight. Or that grow hair on heads

like mine that look like a mosquito dance-floor. The big problem with these ads are the side-effect disclaimers.

The ads usually go something like this. First a scene appears on your screen reminiscent of the opening shot from *The Sound of Music*, with a joyous couple frolicking in a wildflower-dotted meadow. As the uplifting music softens a bit, a soothing voice says something like: “Feel the rapture of a hangnail-free life with Xylum-C. One Xylum-C capsule per day can bring you the joy of living you’ve always wanted, apart from the curse of hangnails. Tell your doctor, ‘I want Xylum-C to set me free!’”

At this point the voice becomes quieter and more businesslike—plus much faster:

“In less than 40% of people taking Xylum-C certain side-effects occurred including gut-wrenching, week-long bouts of continuous vomiting and diarrhea, severe unstoppable bleeding from all major bodily orifices, hemorrhaging of the gall bladder, permanent speech loss, and hundreds of excruciating, throbbing, pus-filled boils in the armpits and nasal passages, leaving the patient homicidal and begging to be placed on Dr. Kervorkian’s waiting list.”

Then, as if we hadn’t been paying attention, the voice brightens and continues right on:

“So, let Xylum-C set you free. Ask your doctor about Xylum-C today!”

But even worse are the ads for mystery drugs. They have the same basic opening, i.e. men and women whirling and dancing blissfully to inspiring music in some Eden-like setting. Then a breathy voice, laden with sincerity comes on.

“Let Plutonicaine change your life.”

Long pause while the music crescendos and the scene changes to four beautiful, flawless children racing gleefully across a lawn fronting a mansion as their delighted young parents look on, hand-in-hand.

“Plutonicaine can make all the difference.”

Another pause and scene-change, this time to a middle-aged couple smiling dreamily into each other’s eyes across the table at a quaint Parisian outdoor café.

“At last, the breakthrough has arrived. Ask your doctor if Plutonicaine is right for you.”

The picture does a fade to black, the music ebbs, and that’s it. No explanation. No information. Not even the merest hint of what on earth this drug is supposed to cure or do or

what it is. Now, I realize advertising is a powerful medium, but do they really think anyone is stupid enough to make a doctor's appointment to ask if they can use some mystery chemical?

DOCTOR: Now, Mr. Gullidupe, what seems to be the problem that brings you in today?

PATIENT: Well, doctor, I'd like to get a prescription for Plutonicaine.

DOCTOR: Excuse me? Plutonicaine?

PATIENT: Yes, and don't try to finagle me out of it. I saw their ad on TV and my mind's made up. I want you to prescribe Plutonicaine for me.

DOCTOR: Um, okay, Mr. Gullidupe, if you insist. But may I ask you a question first?

PATIENT: Sure, I guess so.

DOCTOR: All right, Mr. Gullidupe. Just how many months pregnant are you?

P. T. Barnum once said that there's a sucker born every minute. But are we really as bad as Madison Avenue thinks we are? If we are, I don't understand how civilization has lasted as long as it has.

5. I DON'T UNDERSTAND...

... *HUMAN BEHAVIOR*

I realize that the phrase “human behavior” is rather broad but I must confess that the more I see of it the less I understand. And I’m not talking about the bizarre or macabre behaviors of lunatics or sociopaths. It’s the little things that get me.

Take seating for example. Especially in rows, like pews. I happened upon a perfect setting for observing this odd phenomenon recently. The building had three sections of pews and I focused on the center section. It was about 10-15 minutes prior to the start of an event in this particular auditorium and previous sessions had indicated that the center section would eventually fill up. It should be noted that most of the attendees were not well acquainted with each other.

I watched the early arrivers and was amazed and bewildered. Fully two-thirds of those who arrived and sat down early did the same boneheaded thing. They found a pew that was either empty or that had one person at the far end, and then sat at the very end. This virtually guaranteed that several people were destined to have to crawl over them to get seated. For them to not think of this is shortsighted to say the very least, but that wasn’t the worst of it. As people arrived and inevitably needed to fill-in the vast unused space between the bookends of people at each end of every pew, the reaction by the end-sitters became even more baffling. They wouldn’t scoot. I watched in amazement as a couple looking to be seated approached a woman end-sitter. They did the usual pointing and half-spoken question routine asking if the empty space on the pew beside the woman was unclaimed. She very politely assured them that it was available for their use. Then, rather than scoot over and let the couple sit, she scrunched herself in (affording an additional .03 angstrom units of space) so they could clamber all over her in an attempt to sit on the inside. Amid a cacophony of apologies and pleas for pardon, knees hit knees, clothing

swooshed, toes were trodden upon, and the lady of the couple's purse clipped the end-sitter under the chin almost warranting a standing-eight-count. All concerned were notably worse for wear and the net effect was simply that the end-sitter still sat at the end of the pew. So I feel I must ask the obvious question. Why would anybody do that?

I've heard all the usual rationales for such irrational behavior, which are shaky at best, and in this instance none of them applied. Some claim that only the ends of a pew have armrests, which is why they're such hot property. However, these pews had not even a semblance of an armrest on either end. Others say it's so they can get out if they have to leave early. I might buy that if the event is of uncertain length, or there are apt to be other events demanding that some audience members exit early, or even if the event for which they're sitting is anticipated to be a long haul (especially if some may have bladder issues to contend with). In this instance none of the above was true. The event was planned, programmed, and publicized at one hour flat. There were no requirements for anyone to be anywhere else; this was a retreat and there was nowhere else for the attendees to be but in the auditorium. And as for those for whom an hour is a bladder challenge, the people I'm talking about are the ones who sat down 15 minutes early. They should've used the extra time to go to the restroom, then they wouldn't have had to worry about it. Besides NOT ONE person—including all those end-sitters—actually got up and left before the event was over.

The only other rationale I've heard is that the end-sitters want to be the first ones out. Again I wonder why, since in this instance the next event wouldn't occur until everyone was out of the auditorium anyway. Not only that, I've watched the same behavior in church where end-sitters will stand right where they are and chat for twenty minutes after the service is over. Not exactly what I'd call bolting for the exits.

No, my friends, this was not a case of sitting at the end for some eventuality, this was a case of human behavioral weirdness. People have some kind of inherent loose screw that tells them that they must sit at the end of the row. I've seen it in theaters also, where the people who've used the rest rooms, bought their snacks, and theoretically have no reason to want to get up during the show, sit at the end and get walked over fifteen times (five people crawling over them to get seats then taking turns going out and then coming back). We're just loony, that's all.

It's like if I ask you to pick just one of the numbers listed below and hold up that many fingers, which will you pick?

1 2 3 4

Got a number? Good. Now turn to the first sentence in the last paragraph of this chapter and you'll see what number the vast majority of people pick. Doesn't it make you feel a little creepy that we're this way? By the way, if you're ever in a public restroom with four stalls, now you know which one is the most used (and therefore the one to avoid). If you change those numbers to letters you now also know the most frequent correct answer on any given multiple-choice test. However, it probably won't occur so often that just picking that one all the way through the test will get you a passing grade—but then again on occasion it just might.

But back to my seating issue. There's another type of "seat" that has caused no end of conflict between the sexes and I still don't understand why. I refer, of course, to toilet seats. Supposedly the most telling evidence that males are plodding, insensitive ignoramuses is our barbaric refusal to put the toilet seat down after we...um...are through having it up. Certainly there can be no question that we men *are* plodding, insensitive ignoramuses, but not because of anything to do with toilet seats.

Let us attempt to shine the light of reason on this unnecessary conflict. There are three possible positions for the toilet seat and lid: both down, lid-up-seat-down, and both up. No matter what one intends to do with the toilet, the odds are two out of three that the seat/lid combination will *not* be right—whether one is a male or a female. Let me illustrate from my own experience. Anytime I walk in and want both seat and lid up, two out of three times it will not be. Either the seat, or both seat and lid will be down. If I want to use it with the seat down, two out of three times both seat and lid will be either down or up. If I want the lid closed (to avoid dropping my toothpaste tube in the toilet), two out of three times it will be open. And yet—now don't miss this—*it is no big deal*. Adjusting the seat/lid positioning takes roughly six-tenths of a second, or about the amount of time it takes one to belch. Well, okay, maybe not the amount of time my boys use for belching. They're still seeking the ultimate 45-second

continuous belch. But anyway, it's really quick. And it requires .000000296 calories of energy—approximately one eighty-three billionth of the energy required to gripe about it.

Now, I've heard the heart-rending tales of weebegone wives and sisters who are victimized in the dark of night by upraised seats. Apparently they walk into a dark bathroom, back up to the john and sit *assuming* the lid is up and the seat down. As we've already discussed, they only have a one-in-three chance of that being true—not good odds given the possible unpleasant results. I spend much of my life evidencing the IQ of a bran muffin and even *I* don't just assume the lid and seat will be positioned properly. If, in the same situation, I *assumed* them to both be up, and both are down, the result could be—well, I'll leave that to your imagination. Not only that but if this whole in-the-dark issue is such a problem—here's a real brain-buster—*why not turn on the light and look?* You'd think that something this simple would not even merit a debate. But then, like I said, I guess I just don't understand.

Superstition is something that makes me wonder about people also. Ballplayers are known to be an inordinately superstitious lot. Frequently they will latch onto a lucky pair of socks or a lucky batting helmet and refuse to change for fear their performance will falter. You frequently see professional players with mangled, pine tar encrusted batting helmets. What kills me is they wear the mystic helmet—wouldn't dream of getting a nice new one—and cost the team an important game by striking out with the bases loaded. Yet, next time up the helmet is still there just as ratty as ever. One major league manager always sat in the dugout with his fingers, arms and legs crossed for luck. He also was obsessively careful never to step on the chalk lines on the field. For quite some time it looked like he might have something there. He had several years of magnificent teams that won pennants and World Series. Then time passed and eventually he found himself with a team having what was among the worst seasons in baseball history. Yet, there he was, deftly stepping over the chalk line or sitting cross-legged, cross-armed, cross-fingered in the dugout. Wouldn't you think it might have occurred to him that things couldn't get any worse if he *did* step on the line? Or sat normally?

Personally, I have good luck at times and bad luck at times and superstitions have nothing to do with either. I have never had anything bad happen to me on a Friday the 13th. In fact, my first kiss (I was in fourth grade) happened on a Friday the 13th (and she was cute, too). Conversely I've never had anything good come of throwing money in a wishing well. In fact, it

blows me away that any public place with any body of water, no matter how small, gets inundated with coins in no time. Even if one believed in wishing wells, what would cause one to conclude that throwing a quarter in one of the puddles near the Big Thunder Mountain Railway ride at Disneyland is going to bestow some kind of blessing? I've always figured if you can come out of that place and *still have* a quarter you're pretty lucky.

I also wish people would stop being too polite. Don't misunderstand, I appreciate polite people and try to behave that way toward others myself. But there comes a point at which ultra-politeness becomes ridiculous and an inconvenience. Take holding doors, for example. A person comes to the glass door at the entrance to a business and opens it. He looks back and sees me walking at a normal pace toward the door—*30 yards away*. What is the last thing I want him to do at that point? Hold the door open for me. Why? Because it leaves me with only two options, both bad. If I walk at my normal pace, it is going to take several long seconds for me to cover the distance to the door. To just continue ambling along while this "helpful" soul has to stand there waiting impatiently is blatantly discourteous. You can see it on his face that he considers me a jerk for not having the common decency to appreciate his consideration. So, Option 1 is to maintain my pace and establish myself as a self-centered cretin. Option 2 is to instead break into a sprint when I see the door being held to show my "gratitude." But that's stupid; why is it to my advantage to have to do a 30-yard dash for the door? I was perfectly content walking at my leisurely pace and now I'm forced to double-time it to the door because this ultra-polite clown has decided to "be nice" to me. Spare me, okay? The amount of effort necessary to open the door myself is about one-millionth what I have to expend to avoid making the *faux pas* of appearing to be an ingrate. Now, if I were carrying a crate containing a 97" HDTV with Surround-Sound, okay, hold the door and I'll appreciate it. But if it's just me and I'm more than 3 seconds (walking) from the door, just go on in. I promise I won't think you impolite!!! In a similar vein, where I work the parking lot is across a side street from the building. There are signs asking motorists (mostly people entering or leaving the parking lot) to watch for pedestrians. And I certainly don't want to get my toes run over. HOWEVER, once again I have been a full 20 yards from the crossing and an approaching car stops and waits for me. This creates the same dilemma as the door holder. In this case though, for whatever reason, I feel less obligated to hurry. The simple truth is that the car could proceed and be two blocks

away by the time I would reach the point where it is waiting. I somehow cannot generate any sympathy for the driver. If he or she is determined to wait me out, then wait they shall. I don't speed up one step. But the whole time I can't stop thinking about how ridiculous it is. The simple rule of thumb should be: If, by continuing on, the car would be fully clear of the crosswalk before I enter it, THEN GO ON. It won't bother me one bit. Is that such a hard concept? But, then again, I guess I just don't understand.

Oh, and by the way, in case you didn't look ahead earlier, the number most people pick is three. Don't you hate being so predictable?

6. I DON'T UNDERSTAND...

... *HOSPITALS*

It's not that I knock hospitals. Thank God we have them. But I truly don't understand them. I had occasion to be hospitalized when I was a teenager and even at that young age there were things that mystified me. I'd had surgery on a cleft palate, a birth defect that I am pleased to say they did a marvelous job repairing. The procedure consisted of basically paring a long narrow slice of the back of my throat, leaving one end attached and connecting the other end of the slice to my hard palate. This would enable me to function as if I had a uvula (the little hangy-down punching bag the rest of you have in your mouth). Anyway, needless to say, this surgery resulted in a humdinger of a sore throat. After the anesthesia wore off, the hospital staff seemed obsessed with two things. One was that I eat something. The other was that I faithfully receive two shots in the posterior (always two). There were problems with these lofty goals, however. The first was that my throat was as sore as you would expect it to be, thus rendering me unable to eat. The second was that they kept giving me those shots in the same spot—reusing the holes as it were. The third was that shortly after the shots I'd be out like a light, only to later awaken to more tongue-lashings about not eating.

One evening, as one of the more sadistic of the needle-wielding nurses approached for yet another round of shots, I asked her if I could “turn the other cheek” so to speak. She shrugged and mumbled about how that would just make me sore on both sides. Since we were engaged in such glib dialogue I asked her, out of idle curiosity, why always *two* shots? Her answer was that one was a painkiller and the other was to put me to sleep. Something struck me as very wrong about that, but I was hesitant to bring it up. After all, these were medical professionals and I a mere punk kid. However, she pushed me over the edge by launching into another tirade about my not eating.

“You’re not going to get to go home, young man, until you start eating.”

“The reason I can’t eat is because my throat is so sore,” I rasped.

“You mean you’re in pain?” she asked, utter amazement and horror coloring her features.

“Well, certainly. I’ve had my throat slit, after all. Also, now that you bring it up, how much sense does it make for you to give me a pain-killing injection and immediately put me to sleep? Then, when I’m awake, I’m in pain and can’t eat. Wouldn’t it make more sense to give me the pain killer when I’m awake? I don’t need it when you knock me out.”

I cringed slightly, expecting her to explain in highly technical medical terms why my hare-brained notions were best kept to myself seeing as how I was scarcely above a low-grade moron with regard to things medical. Instead her answer floored me.

“Hmm. You think that might work? I guess it might be worth a try. Tell you what, I’ll give you just the pain shot now. Then, instead of giving you the sedative, I’ll come back in an hour or so and see if you can eat something. Okay?”

The plan worked perfectly and I was released from the hospital the next day. I was also frightened at the prospect that a 17-year-old could have more common sense than a whole team of doctors and nurses.

To this day it scares me when I come away from a medical exam of some kind feeling I know more about what’s wrong with me than they do. Especially since I obviously have no clue what’s wrong or I wouldn’t be coming to *them*!

I just recently had another foray into the hospital world, and must confess that despite all those intervening years, I still don’t understand hospitals.

The first person I encountered in the emergency room was the nurse behind the emergency desk. She took out a fresh multi-part form, entered my insurance number and name on it, and then asked what the problem was. As I spoke she furiously wrote copious notes on the form.

“Well, I just came from a conference in the Santa Cruz Mountains. When climbing one of the steep hills to my quarters yesterday I felt a pain in the center of my chest and down my left arm. Knowing that my father had a heart attack at 42 and died of one at 54, it worried me.”

“Was the pain severe?” she asked.

“No, fairly mild.”

“Are you in pain now?”

“No. I feel okay right now. I tried to take it easy up there but whenever I exerted myself in the least the symptoms would recur. Last night I took my time getting to my quarters but still my left arm was tingling by the time I got to the top of the hill.”

“Any shortness of breath?”

“No. Just from going up the hill.”

“Any sweating?”

“No.”

“Swelling in the feet or legs?”

“No.”

“How long did the pain last? Less than five minutes?”

“Yes.”

She had me wait for a while. Eventually they took me into an examining room and had me lay on one of those examining couches. A different nurse came in. She had a clipboard with another of the multi-part forms, blank except for my name and insurance number.

“Mr. Hamilton?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, what problem brings you here today?” As I spoke she furiously wrote copious notes on the form.

“Well, I just came from a conference in the Santa Cruz Mountains. When climbing one of the steep hills to my quarters yesterday I felt a pain in the center of my chest and down my left arm. Knowing that my father had a heart attack at 42 and died of one at 54, it worried me.”

“Was the pain severe?” she asked.

“No, fairly mild.”

“Are you in pain now?”

“No. I feel okay right now. I tried to take it easy up there but whenever I exerted myself in the least the symptoms would recur. Last night I took my time getting to my quarters but still my left arm was tingling by the time I got to the top of the hill.”

“Any shortness of breath?”

“No. Just from going up the hill.”

“Any sweating?”

“No.”

“Swelling in the feet or legs?”

“No.”

“How long did the pain last? Less than five minutes?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, I’m going to hook you up to this machine so we can get an EKG.”

With that she proceeded to place a number of little sticky “chips” on me in a variety of places—ostensibly wherever my body has the most hair—and attach wires to them. Soon she left, stating that a shift change was about to occur. My wife and I were in the room alone for a while when a young male doctor came in. He had a clipboard with another of the multi-part forms, blank except for my name and insurance number.

“Mr. Hamilton?”

“Yes.”

“Um, what problem brings you here today?” I looked at my wife, then took a deep breath. As I spoke he furiously wrote copious notes on the form.

“Well, I just came from a conference in the Santa Cruz Mountains. When climbing one of the steep hills to my quarters yesterday I felt a pain in the center of my chest and down my left arm. Knowing that my father had a heart attack at 42 and died of one at 54, it worried me.”

“Was the pain severe?” he asked.

“No, fairly mild.”

“Are you in pain now?”

“No. I feel okay right now. I tried to take it easy up there but whenever I exerted myself in the least the symptoms would recur. Last night I took my time getting to my quarters but still my left arm was tingling by the time I got to the top of the hill.”

“Any shortness of breath?”

“No. Just from going up the hill.”

“Any sweating?”

“No.”

“Swelling in the feet or legs?”

“No.”

“How long did the pain last? Less than five minutes?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, Mr. Hamilton, I’m going to have them do a chest x-ray and move the sensors around a little and take another EKG.” Then he left. I never saw him again.

Next a new nurse came in, apparently from the next shift. She carried—yes, you guessed it—a clipboard with another of the multi-part forms, blank except for my name and insurance number.

“Mr. Hamilton?”

“Yes.”

“So, what problem brings you here today?” As I spoke she, too, furiously wrote copious notes on the form.

“I just came from a conference in the Santa Cruz mountains. When climbing one of the steep hills to my quarters yesterday I felt a pain in the center of my chest and down my left arm. Knowing that my father had a heart attack at 42 and died of one at 54 it worried me.”

“Was the pain severe?” she asked.

“No, fairly mild.”

“Are you in pain now?”

“No. I feel okay right now. I tried to take it easy up there but whenever I exerted myself in the least the symptoms would recur. Last night I took my time getting to my quarters but still my left arm was tingling by the time I got to the top of the hill.”

“Any shortness of breath?”

“No. Just from going up the hill.”

“Any sweating?”

“No.”

“Swelling in the feet or legs?”

“No.”

“How long did the pain last? Less than five minutes?”

“Yes.”

She then proceeded to inspect the little sticky chips that were wired to me.

“What idiot put these here?” she muttered. She then pulled a few of them off (those that would pull out the maximum amount of chest and leg hair) then added double the number at random (hairy) points on my body, often less than two inches from another existing chip. She reattached the wires then left.

My wife and I waited quite a long time until another doctor, a woman, came in. As it turned out, she would be my actual doctor during my hospital stay. I almost wept when I saw that she was carrying a clipboard with another of the multi-part forms, blank except for my name and insurance number. I knew what was coming, but figured that since she was THE doctor for my case, I better give her the slower version of my story.

“Mr. Hamilton?”

“Yes.”

“What problem brings you here today?” As I spoke she furiously wrote copious notes on the form.

“Well, I just came from a conference in the Santa Cruz Mountains. When climbing one of the steep hills to my quarters yesterday I felt a pain in the center of my chest and down my left arm. Knowing that my father had a heart attack at 42 and died of one at 54, it worried me.”

“Was the pain severe?” she asked.

“No, fairly mild.”

“Are you in pain now?”

“No. I feel okay right now. I tried to take it easy up there but whenever I exerted myself in the least the symptoms would recur. Last night I took my time getting to my quarters but still my left arm was tingling by the time I got to the top of the hill.”

“Any shortness of breath?”

“No. Just from going up the hill.”

“Any sweating?”

“No.”

“Swelling in the feet or legs?”

“No.”

“How long did the pain last? Less than five minutes?”

“Yes.”

Now, at this juncture I feel some questions are in order. Like, don't these people talk to each other? Mind you, none of them said, "I see here that you experienced some chest pains. Tell me about it." Each time it was as if they had no idea what I was doing there. I'm certain that if I had told the last person that I'd been bitten by a rattlesnake, they would not have expressed any surprise that this didn't square with the earlier versions of my story. Each one was hearing it for the first time. And then I also wonder, what on earth happens to all those forms they write all this on? Obviously NO ONE reads them. And they're *multi-part*, for heaven's sakes.

Anyway, this doctor had them put a nitroglycerin patch on my arm. I asked her if having someone pat me there would cause me to explode. She didn't find that funny, but did say I might experience a headache. They did a chest x-ray then pulled out a few more sticky chips (griping that whoever put the last ones on must have been a moron) and added a dozen sticky suction-cups to whatever remaining hairy places they could find and wired me up. Then they took me up to a hospital room and transferred me to a bed. Then the nurse for that area of the hospital came in and connected me to a portable heart monitor so I could move around. Then, to my utter dismay, she produced a clipboard with another of the multi-part forms, blank except for my name and insurance number.

"Mr. Hamilton?"

"Yes."

"What problem brings you here today?" As I spoke she furiously wrote copious notes on the form.

"Well, I just came from a conference in the Santa Cruz Mountains. When climbing one of the steep hills to my quarters yesterday I felt a pain in the center of my chest and down my left arm. Knowing that my father had a heart attack at 42 and died of one at 54, it worried me."

"Was the pain severe?" she asked.

"No, fairly mild."

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"No. I feel okay right now. I tried to take it easy up there but whenever I exerted myself in the least the symptoms would recur. Last night I took my time getting to my quarters but still my left arm was tingling by the time I got to the top of the hill."

“Any shortness of breath?”

“No. Just from going up the hill.”

“Any sweating?”

“No.”

“Swelling in the feet or legs?”

“No.”

“How long did the pain last? Less than five minutes?”

“Yes.”

It so happens that I'd been so concerned that morning that I hadn't eaten breakfast. I had left the conference that noon, two days early and left for emergency immediately upon my return home. I had not eaten anything all day. I had started griping about being hungry three nurses ago. This one said it was no dice. They needed to take blood for tests and I couldn't eat till after that, even though I was starving.

And take blood they did. They had already taken three or four of those little vials before I'd gone to the examining room—from my right arm, where it bends. They had inserted an I.V. in my right hand so that arm was no longer usable for blood-taking. So instead they took three vials or so from my left hand. Later they took some from my left arm, muttering that whoever had taken it from my hand was a blithering nincompoop. I never did get dinner. I discovered that I was on an every-four-hours regimen for taking blood pressure and temperature. I was also on an every-four-hours regimen for EKG, nitro patch replacement and blood testing. Unfortunately, they were not the same four hours. Thus, after I'd gone to sleep they woke me after two hours to take my blood pressure and temperature (like in four hours I'm going to suddenly catch the flu?). I'd just get back to sleep and two hours later they'd wake me to do an EKG, change the patch and take more blood. About ten vials this time. Unfortunately, this nurse had some problems. First, she couldn't find my vein very well. After probing around inside my arm for a while she finally—to my great relief—started getting blood flowing. Second, where the other nurses seemed to understand that once the blood started going you could release that rubber band from around my bicep, this one was unclear on the concept. When the tenth vial wouldn't fill she started squeezing the already-brutalized area around it trying to get more blood. Now, I know nothing about medicine, but wouldn't the fact that my arm was going to sleep due

to the band cutting off my circulation suggest that she'd have had more luck if she took it off? Instead she finally grouched that she'd have to go with the half-filled final vial and hope it was enough. Two hours later it was blood pressure and temperature time again, and so it went. Anyone who thinks you get rest in a hospital is nuts.

That morning, at last I would get something to eat, albeit much later than everyone else. Oh boy, French toast. I must confess that for a reason I didn't understand it was more the principal of eating after fasting the whole prior day that I relished, and not the food itself. I knew I should be hungry—but I really wasn't. I ate four bites of it and could eat no more. Actually I felt a bit bad to my stomach. Little did I know how bad it would get.

My doctor dropped by and said the cardiologist would be around soon. The cardiologist, a woman, did come around and to my great relief actually knew why I was in there. She did ask for additional details but at least *somebody* must have let her read one of those forms. (I wonder if they got fired for that.) She didn't have much in the way of bedside manner. I've seen undertakers who were positively jovial by comparison. My roommate sarcastically referred to her as Dr. Kervorkian. She told me I would be given an angiogram and that the odds of not surviving the procedure were about one in 500. I had hoped for something more along the lines of one in 50,000.

Lunchtime came and I passed on it. I told them it was because I'd eaten breakfast so late but in reality I was suffering from an ever-intensifying case of nausea. When dinnertime came, the nurse that was doing the EKG/patch routine asked if I wanted anything to eat. I had begun to feel just slightly better so I said yes. That was when I discovered what was causing the nausea. Not only had the nitro patch given me a headache, it was killing my stomach. The new patch had taken full effect by the time the food arrived and I couldn't eat one bite. I was miserably sick all that night.

My son and his fiancée came to see me about then and I told them about the angiogram and the one-in-500 odds. I told them that I planned to ask the surgeons if the last person they'd tested was number 499, and if so could I have a postponement.

Feeling as sick as I did, my humor was less than sparkling, and it left me too weak to refocus my worry into something more productive—like faith. Inside I was as concerned about the procedure as about the “Hamilton heart” that I felt certain I'd inherited from my dad. One

way or another, I didn't think I had a whole lot more time on this planet. Not that going to be with the Lord would be a problem. But I wanted not to leave things so unfinished. What had I accomplished for the Lord? What difference was there that I had passed this way? To be sure, there were plenty of people who genuinely cared about me, but what tangible benefit was there to the world or the kingdom that I had lived? Plus there were all the almos and not-quites that would cause hardship and difficulty for my family. My older son was not quite on his own yet. My younger was only a freshman in college—not quite settled on his future plans. Both of the above would mean monetary and emotional demands on my dear wife in the midst of the turmoil of my passing. What if tomorrow's procedure found every artery nearly blocked? What if I didn't survive it? I would have little chance for any final words of wisdom for my older son and none for my younger—he was on a choir tour somewhere in the Midwest and wouldn't get back to his dorm until the end of the week. All my wife could do was leave messages where he was supposed to be next. The headache and brutal nausea only intensified my morose mood. But my family, particularly my precious wife, stood by me the whole way. I finally insisted she go home and get some rest, mostly for her sake but also for my own sick condition.

They'd give me Tylenol for the headache but only antacid for my stomach, which did little to help. Sleep, then, was the only antidote for my nausea, but of course I was back on the offset-four-hour routine meaning I was awakened every two. The wee-hours awakening for EKG, patch and bloodletting was done by a male nurse. He looked at my purpled arm and asked me what idiot had done that. Half asleep, I told him that whoever it was had trouble finding my vein.

“Trouble? You got perfect veins, how could anyone have trouble?” To my delight, he slid the needle in so deftly I didn't even feel it. He scored additional points by being logical.

“Hey, how about if I just take your blood pressure and temperature now too so we won't have to wake you again?”

Bless you, my child.

That morning I awoke still wretchedly sick. The word was that I'd have to go to a hospital in San Francisco for the angiogram since they didn't do them in Hayward where I was. They would take me there the following morning by ambulance. Mid-morning when they came to replace the patch (they didn't need more EKG's or blood at that point) I begged them not to.

Its purpose was to enlarge my arteries and capillaries, but I had no symptoms and was going the next day for an angiogram anyway. Couldn't they just dispense with the patch? Dr. Kervorkian was summoned and, seeing my pallor she decided they could cease and desist. By lunch time I was able to eat again and by dinner devoured every morsel.

Two ambulance attendants and a male nurse came the next morning and prepped me for the ambulance ride. As we boarded the elevator one of the attendants commented that they were fortunate that they had the "good" nurse with them. Next shift would be the grouchy one. They loaded me in and the nurse, his name was Rudy, stayed in the back with me.

He asked about my going for the angiogram but seemed more personally interested than wanting to fill out a form. I gave him a severely abbreviated version.

"I was at a Christian Writer's conference in the Santa Cruz Mountains and had mild chest pain when going up a hill. My dad died young of a heart attack so I thought I'd better get it checked."

"Christian writing, huh? Are you wanting to be the next Frank Peretti or C. S. Lewis?"

Slightly surprised at his familiarity with those writers I laughed lightly. "Yeah, that'd be okay."

"So, Don, why Christian writing?"

"Well, I am a Christian and that's what interests me to write about."

"So, would you say that you love the Lord Jesus with all your heart?"

I was taken aback somewhat by the question, but answered quickly. "You better believe it."

"Great," he said. "I'm not allowed to proselytize but since you brought it up, let's pray right now for your angiogram." He took my hands and prayed for me, and I could feel God's comfort relaxing me. We discussed our families and our respective walks with the Lord the rest of the trip. Just as we were nearing the hospital he also prayed for my wife, knowing how difficult it all had to be on her. I knew that it was going to be all right.

At the S.F. hospital one disconcerting thing happened. The nurse who first got me settled in my room said I was listed as "Barbara Hamilton." (I actually have a long-lost cousin by that name). My biggest concern was that somebody might get confused and try to do a hysterectomy

on me (or, being San Francisco, a sex-change operation). However the astute nurse simply deleted the information and completely re-entered it.

The surgeon visited me and corrected Dr. Kervorkian's statistics to one-in-a-thousand failing to survive the procedure. He also said they were skewed somewhat since many of the people undergoing the test were already in serious condition, unlike me. After all, I was without any symptoms even. When the time for my angiogram came, they gave me some Valium, which made me a bit loopy. My wife tells me that, despite my worries having been significantly allayed I went ahead and used my previously rehearsed "farewell" speech telling her that if the Lord wanted me, I was ready. This made her a nervous wreck sitting there in the waiting room. The procedure itself was less painful than the shot you get at the dentist's and took less than 20 minutes. Both surgeons told me my arteries were perfectly clear and my heart was in great shape. They still have no clue what brought on the symptoms, but praise God, I didn't inherit the Hamilton heart after all. Must've come from the Quinn side—the same place all the baldness comes from. So I tell my boys that they should look at those receding hairlines and monk-like bald spots and smile. It's evidence of a strong, healthy heart inheritance.

Anyway, after laying still for some five hours with a bandage and sandbag over the spot on my groin where they had entered my vein, they ripped off the suction cups and leftover sticky chips leaving an interesting set of board-game designs on what little body hair I retained. Then they let me go home.

I later called for Dr. Kervorkian to see what follow-up might be needed. The first two numbers they gave me had been disconnected. The third rang twenty times with no answer. Finally I got ahold of someone that said she was out of town until the next week. Sigh. Oh well, like I said, I guess I really don't understand hospitals.

7. I DON'T UNDERSTAND...

... *ENGLISH USAGE*

There is no question that the English language is complex, even baffling much of the time. I don't know a lot about other languages, but I know they have their peculiarities, too. Like French. They seem to want to use their entire alphabet in every word. As near as I can tell, you just ignore the last several letters of any word and substitute any one random vowel in their place. Thus "vous" is pronounced "VOO," the town of "Bourdeleaux" is pronounced Bor-dil-LO, "deux" is DU, and the hockey goalie's name spelled "Thibault" is pronounced TEE-bo. Go figure.

But getting back to English, one would expect that if anyone would have it nailed, it would be the British. And I suppose in some respects they do. I once heard a public speaker mention data processing and pronounce it "Datta PrAHcessing." A British woman in the audience near me grouched, "What's he saying? It's 'Dayta PrOHcessing.'" Actually, I'd have to say she's right, although I don't pronounce "processing" that way either. But the British have their own version of the language, especially when it comes to those old references to money of yesteryear. Whenever I read a book from the Dickens era or see a movie based in Jolly Olde England, they lose me big time when they start talking money. Of course the increments were always goofy, but the multitudinous ways of referring to money made it unfathomable.

FIRST BRIT: 'Ere, this bloke says it'll cost us six quid.

SECOND BRIT: Sorry, guv, I've only got one pound, tuppence and a ha-penny. You?

THIRD BRIT: No' ruddy likely. I've got two bob, three shillings and sixpence.

FIRST BRIT: Blimey! And me with 'alf a crown and three farthings!

Let it be known that I have no idea whether these chaps have the amount of money they want or not, or even what they said.

Still even with plain old Americanized English, there's no question that it has as many exceptions as rules. Like why doesn't "good" rhyme with "food?" Why don't "cough," "dough," "rough" and "through" all rhyme? Or "bomb," "comb" and "tomb?" Why is a single garment called a pair of pants? What would one pant look like?

Foreigners trying to learn English have a terrible time. Like, how illogical must it seem that to refer to a "bowl of peas" is correct but to refer to a "bowl of corns" is not only wrong it's mildly humorous. Or that oranges, apples and bananas are all "fruits" but, again, put them all in a bowl and you do not have a bowl of fruits, but a bowl of fruit. (Do you suppose it's something to do with the bowl?) I used to work with a woman from another country, who could never figure out why, when one searched through the items on his desk they were "papers." But the copier was loaded with "paper" not "papers." This despite the fact that the number going into the copier was far greater than the number strewn about the desk. Okay, not *my* desk maybe but most normal desks.

Unfortunately, a lot of Americans still battle the English language—and lose. Some mistakes people make are actually pretty funny. Like a friend of mine who remarked, "A person would have to be an extortionist to get into that small space." Since I can't imagine how blackmailing someone would help, I think the word he wanted was "*contortionist*." Then there was the time my former boss told me to write a status report for one group and then a second report (with the same information) for another group that was meeting later. When he saw me roll my eyes he said sympathetically, "I know that sounds like duplicity, but it's what they want." Oh great, now I not only had duplication to deal with but deceit as well. A document I received contained instructions to "dissimulate this to your entire department." Given that dissimulate means to disguise under false appearances, that may explain where so much corporate doublespeak and spin doctoring comes from. Do you suppose it meant to say "disseminate?" On multiple occasions recently I've read someone's appeal to "...please bare with me." Sorry, but I'm only allowed to do that with my wife, so please *bear* with *me*.

Some I've run across affect me like fingernails on a blackboard. One is not even English, but it really drives me nuts. I keep hearing people—especially sportscasters—talk about two competitors going "mano y mano." For example, two premier sprinters in a race who win all their qualifying heats meet in the final event. "So now it comes down to this, Williams and

Johnson squaring off against each other, *mano y mano*,” says the announcer. People seem to have the mistaken notion that the phrase means “one-on-one” or “man-to-man” or perhaps “man-versus-man”. Actually *mano* means “hand,” and the phrase is actually “mano a mano” meaning “hand to hand.” *Mano y mano* would mean “hand and hand” which sounds far more like a couple on a date than a competition. Also, two sprinters cannot compete “hand-to-hand.” That is a non sequitur. Nor (as I’ve also heard) can two jet fighters go at it hand-to-hand. By definition, the English phrase talks about personal hands-on combat. I would highly recommend that those who do not know what they are talking about, just say, “These two are going to go at it one-on-one.”

Some words have become so tangled as to their actual meanings they are probably best left alone. The word “moot” is often used in the vernacular to mean “a done deal.” Thus a moot point is one no longer worthy of discussion, since it is all settled. Yet the primary dictionary definition of the word is “subject to argument or discussion; debatable,” quite the opposite meaning from the above. So, depending on whether you’re listening to a regular guy or a verbal purist, you have no idea what the intent of the word is. Add to that some people’s strange habit of pronouncing the word “mute” and it truly becomes a word best deleted from the vocabulary. Myself, I stay away from it altogether. If something is settled and useless to discuss, I refer to it as academic. Otherwise it’s debatable.

My son thinks the same vocabulary purge should be applied to those little Latin notations *i.e.* and *e.g.* since so many people misuse them also. I’m not quite ready to concede that, but he has a point. It’s bad enough that they goof them up in writing, but I’m hearing people use *i.e.* in speech—nearly always incorrectly. Few people mess up *e.g.*; it’s *i.e.* that’s the problem. So let’s get it said once and for all: *i.e.* does NOT mean “for example.” That’s what *e.g.* means. *I.e.* means, “that is” or “which is to say” or “in other words.” The following sentence uses *i.e.* correctly:

“This is the action the military’s Commander in Chief, *i.e.* our president, should take.”

The following sentence does not use it correctly:

I will bring the food (*i.e.* hot dog buns and chips) for the barbecue.

Unless, of course, barbecued hot dog buns—without the hot dogs—and chips are all anybody plans to eat. Using *e.g.* in the sentence makes it more sensible:

I will bring the food (e.g. hot dog buns and chips) for the barbecue.

This way, the parenthetical phrase is giving examples perhaps to show that the volunteer will take care of more than just what goes on the grill. (Doesn't sound like anybody's going to get steak in any case!)

Now, it would be easy to just dismiss all this as the pet peeve of somebody with too much time on his hands. But misusing these could get you into trouble. Consider these two examples of a sentence in a memo from Big Boss to the supervisors who report to him:

1. "Bonuses are to be given only to our top performers, i.e. Joe and Mary."
2. "Bonuses are to be given only to our top performers, e.g. Joe and Mary."

Sentence 1 says that Joe and Mary alone are entitled to a bonus. Period. Sentence 2 says that some unstated number of employees will receive bonuses, namely those whose performances are of the same caliber as Joe and Mary's. If you're one of those people, you care a great deal whether Big Boss communicates what he really means to your supervisor.

How can you keep i.e. and e.g. straight? I do it weird of course. To me e-g sounds phonetically like the beginning of the word example (eg-zamp'l), which would be the far more frequently used of the two, by the way. As with the word "moot," unless you're sure you know what you're doing, maybe it would be best to use words like "that is" or "for example" and be done with it. In any event, if you do use e.g. and i.e., please cut us all some slack and use them only in writing, never in speech. Okay?

Whew. Glad I got that off my chest. But I'm not quite through. Very recently I've noticed that people have lost track of the word "led." I keep seeing it spelled "lead." It is correct to write, "Tomorrow I will read the book. Yesterday I read it." But read and lead do not behave the same: "Tomorrow I will lead the group. Yesterday I *led* it." The only valid use for the word lead that rhymes with led is the heavy metal. No, no, I don't mean *that* kind of heavy metal, I mean the stuff they use in bullets and fishing sinkers. Oh, never mind.

Just so I don't come across as totally negative, there are some words that I really like. Not their meanings, just the way they roll off one's tongue when spoken. Two of my favorites have almost no use nowadays. I think that's a shame and someone should find new definitions just so we can use them. One is "Ticonderoga." Yes, I know it's a fort that was involved in the Revolutionary War (or was it the French and Indian?), but it sounds so cool. It also is (or at least

was) a brand of pencil, but that still doesn't provide much use for it. I don't know what definition it should have, but something a politician would use in speeches. I can just hear a State of the Union address with something like:

“...And so my fellow Americans, we must press on. Not only for greater opportunities, but for peace, for education and above all else, for Ti-CON-deroga!!!!” At this point the entire congress, from both sides of the aisle, stands and cheers wildly even though the congressmen have no clue what the president was talking about. Which would pretty much be government as usual.

Another word I like is “Constantinople.” Yes, yes, I know it's an ancient name for what is now Istanbul, but it also ought to be given a new definition and used by speechmakers. Only this one has a more negative connotation. For it the speech would be more like:

“So with courage and determination we must prove to the world that America will never bow to aggression, will never give-in to tyranny, and, most of all, will never yield to Constantinople!!!!” Once again thunderous applause followed by three hours of boring analysis by solemn-faced TV journalists who also have no clue what the president said. But they'll tell us what it meant anyway.

8. I DON'T UNDERSTAND...

... RAISING CHILDREN

I have raised two children and I still don't understand it. How is it that a small, innocent, cuddly little angel can turn an otherwise normal human adult into a blithering nincompoop? That is precisely what happens as soon as that "normal" adult becomes a parent. All at once he or she is no longer able to talk sensibly, a problem that continues for years, although it changes form over time. I know whereof I speak since I have fallen prey to nearly every oddity outlined below.

It first manifests itself in how one speaks to the infant. This is particularly pathetic when the child is only days or weeks old and has absolutely no capacity to react. But that doesn't stop mom and dad from getting their voices way down in their throats in a kind of half growl and saying, "IIIIIIIIII gonna gets soo." Once is never enough, it's always repeated, less throaty and a few notes higher on the scale. "I gonna GETS soo!" This is often accompanied by a finger tickling under the chin or on the tummy. The problem is that this three-day-old infant is NOT ticklish and does NOT laugh nor exhibit even the mildest form of amusement. This child's capacity for actions is limited to exactly four: screeching, wetting, eating, and pooping—in that priority.

I realize that, given that this tiny child has no concept of language yet, there is no real need for proper grammar. To say, "Ain't she just the cutest thing?" will not scar her in any way. But why do we parents insist on such weirdness when we talk to babies? Such as: "Hers is just da tweetest iddow ting! Yes hers is!" Would the baby somehow be frightened or dehumanized if we said, "You're just the sweetest little thing! Yes you are!"? What is it about talking like a moron that we think is so beneficial to babies, anyway? And then there's the speaking on behalf of the as-yet-unable-to-speak infant: "He theth, 'Oh boy, mommy, thith ith YUMMY!'" Since he can't REALLY "thay" it, does it have to be with a lisp?

Once they reach toddlerhood, we might expect that improving our language usage would really give the little one a head start. During these formative years, many parents seek diligently to get their children into books and are enraptured if their three-year-old can read the word “cat” from Dr. Seuss’s *Cat in the Hat*. Yet, when demonstrating speech to this formative little mind they make no such academic effort. Instead they speak in fractured sentences, omitting most prepositions and staunchly refusing to use pronouns. It’s never, “I’ll take you to go play, honey. Come with me.” Instead it’s, “Gam-ma take you go play. Come with Gam-ma.” Is it any mystery that the poor kid gets D’s in English when he gets to school? Inexplicably we think it helps if we struggle as much with language as the child does—only we usually butcher it far worse than any kid would. Maybe it’s part of that same syndrome that causes me to assume that foreigners will understand me better if I *also* speak in broken English.

(Foreign Tourist: ‘Scuse, please. How I get to McDonald hamburger?)

Me: Drive car three block. It on left side. You no miss.

Foreign Tourist: You make fun my language? You sashupu nahminna neenee American smart aleck! I break you face!)

Anyhow, I don’t know if it’s related or not, but for whatever reason, the urge to use baby talk ourselves seems irresistible. And so, otherwise normal, eloquent, Ph.D.-wielding adults say things like, “Mommy’s punkin hafta go kee-kee?” Which brings up another point. Why on earth do some parents resort to calling things by the words their toddlers invent while still learning to talk? I know of parents who go around asking the kid if he wants his “ga-ga” referring to his pillow. Hey, now there’s a great idea. Instead of helping our child learn to speak, let’s all us adults change our vocabularies to match his. That’ll really help his communication skills grow and mature. Brother!

All this idiocy gets compounded when we invoke discipline. Then our English improves but we start asking asinine questions. Like, “Do you want me to spank you? Huh? Is that what you want?” I’m going to guess that most normal children treat this as a rhetorical question. Or, upon finding the child doing a crayon drawing of a space ship on the living room wall, “What are YOU doing?” I’d say that’s pretty obvious, so why ask? Plus so many of us are such awful liars, like when we say, “This is the last time I’m going to tell you...” Despite how pleased the kid would be if that were only true, it rarely is.

I remember as a child having that strong sensitivity to fairness common to most children. It frustrated me how arbitrary my parents' decisions often were. I vowed that if and when I became a father I would listen carefully to all sides of any issue with which my children presented me. I would weigh the evidence and their respective arguments carefully, like Solomon only on a smaller scale. Then, after giving it all due consideration, deliberation, and contemplation I would pronounce a fair and just decision, indisputable in its wisdom and absence of bias.

To my dismay as an actual parent, very few of the many squabbles I was required to referee between my two boys lent themselves to the Solomon approach. In fact the majority of them had the same theme:

“I had it FIRST!”

“Nuh-UH, *I* did and *you* took it!”

I found that trying to get to the bottom of what really happened—on those rare occasions when I actually had the patience and energy for it—was like trying to unscramble an egg. As each sibling told his version, the quarrel would escalate until nearly all such disputes came to the same conclusion.

“All right then, give it to me. Neither one of you can have it.”

By the way, this problem of who gets a toy has its roots in a very fundamental truth about children (or at least boys). Child “A” can ignore a toy for months, I mean have absolutely no interest in it. Until he sees child “B” playing with it. Then “A” has to have it immediately. Thus when child “B” sets it down for any reason, child “A” grabs it, claiming “B” didn’t want it anymore. “B” objects and the fight is on. The only successful strategy I developed for this was to have “A” return it to “B” but for a specified time limit.

“You can play with it for 15 more minutes, Paul, but then Scott gets to have it for 15 minutes, okay? I’ll time you.”

Interestingly, more often than not the toy would be set aside and picked up peaceably by the other before the time was even up.

As the boys got older, fewer of my decisions were applied to sibling squabbles and more to their requests. Once again, so often there was no clear-cut, black or white answer. Usually it was them wanting to go somewhere or do something or get something that was neither obviously

good nor obviously bad. So my wife and I adopted a policy we hoped would work. We decided that (assuming that cost vs. monetary responsibility were not the issue) we would always default our answer to “Yes” unless there was a reason to say “No.” I’ve seen an awful lot of frustrated teenagers whose parents restrict their movements with comments such as, “I just don’t think you need to be doing that,” when the request is something harmless. Many times they turn thumbs down on something simply because it is not anything *they* would have wanted when *they* were young. Now, I do believe that extreme permissiveness is evidence of a lazy parent. It’s easy to just let your kids do anything they want. It’s also very destructive to the children. However, I believe that responding to your children’s every request with a “No” is also evidence of a lazy parent. And it also can be very destructive to your children. Thinking the myriad of requests through is not easy—not nearly as easy as I’d thought it would be. For one thing their wants—whether for activities, involvements, or goods—can seem absolutely limitless at times. For another, I’m no Solomon. Many times the question of “Is there a reason to say no?” was very borderline. But all in all it seems to have resulted in young adults who’ve averted a lot of the rebelliousness and self-destruction so prevalent nowadays.

However there is one childhood influence that gives one pause to question whether it might be responsible for some of the deep-seated confusion and resentment in some children. I refer, of course, to nursery rhymes. Most are so bizarre that children couldn’t help but have some kind of neurosis from hearing them. On second thought, they’re so incoherent I suspect kids pretty much ignore them. Only someone trying to make sense of them would suffer disorientation. One has to wonder what weirdoes came up with these things, or at least what narcotic they were on at the time. The authorship is generally credited to Mother Goose. It’s just as well. A goofy name like that fits right in with the loony poems themselves. The single-authorship may be legitimate, though, since there are a few common threads.

One of those threads is an obsession with the name Jack. Consider: Jack (be nimble), Jack Spratt, Little Jack Horner, Jack (and Jill), and even The House that Jack Built. Then there are certain key words that could not possibly be coincidental. Like “diddle.” As in:

Diddle, diddle, dumpling...

and:

Hey, diddle, diddle...

But while we're at it, let's examine those two for a bit. Here's the first in its entirety:

Diddle, diddle, dumpling my son John
Went to bed with his stockings on.
One shoe off and one shoe on,
Diddle, diddle, dumpling my son John.

My first reaction to this little poem is that it's pretty thin on plot. Of all the cute things kids do—y'know, the stuff you tell the grandparents and anyone else who can't find an excuse to leave the room about—this is pretty lame. Even the most exuberant mom who described to you how her son went to bed without completely removing his shoes and socks would cause you instant eye-glaze. Am I right? My son used to think it said "mice and John" instead of "my son John." I think his might have been more interesting. But this next one really slays me:

Hey, diddle, diddle, the cat and the fiddle,
The cow jumped over the moon.
The little dog laughed to see such sport,
And the dish ran away with the spoon.

Although illustrators have had a field day with this one for years, I cannot imagine who came up with this collection of totally random, incomprehensible sentences. If I wrote an equivalent poem, to wit:

Hey, lobo, lobo, the mule and the oboe,
The tortoise climbed up the North Pole;
The elephant fainted to see such a sight,
And the toaster ran off with the roll

and somehow got it out to the public, I'm certain a search warrant would be issued immediately to check my home for illegal substances.

Not all nursery rhymes are total nonsense. I've heard it said that some were related to current events during the days they were first created. For example:

Ring around the rosy,
Pocketful of posies,
Ashes, ashes, all fall down.

This was actually a rather morbid depiction of the black plague in Europe during the middle ages. Now there's a fun subject for your toddlers to sing about, huh? Others were rhymes of political satire:

Mary, Mary, quite contrary,
How does your garden grow?
With silver bells and cockle shells
And pretty maids all in a row.

I believe this one had to do with Mary, Queen of Scots, whose opposition ("quite contrary") to Queen Elizabeth got her imprisoned and eventually executed. Another fun childhood theme. This next one fairly drips with satire:

Goosey, goosey, gander,
Whither shall I wander?
Upstairs and downstairs and in M'lady's chamber.

I can't recall who the slam-ee is here, but for someone to be wandering around in "M'lady's chamber" (bedroom) certainly casts a bad light on somebody in royalty. From a purely technical standpoint, though, these are supposed to be nursery *rhymes*. Gander, wander, and chamber do not rhyme, not even if you're British!

I've heard that "London Bridge is falling down..." was also a slam at royalty. But I absolutely have to say this: please note that it's "London Bridge *is*..." NOT "London Bridges." Though there were (and are) several bridges in London, only one was called "London Bridge." It's the one that has since been moved to Lake Havasu in Arizona. By the way, could there *be* a less appropriate spot for an ancient English landmark?

All in all, though, most nursery rhymes are just gibberish and nonsense. I realize that small children like nonsensical rhyming stuff. That's why Dr. Seuss has remained so popular. But at least his rhymes were clever. There is no excuse for pathetic stuff like: "Little Miss Muffet, sat on a tuffet." None of us has even the mildest idea what a "tuffet" is. Unfortunately neither does *Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language*, a tome some three and a half inches thick. Illustrators depict it as a three-legged stool, probably just from the need for it to be something one would sit on. Whatever, it shows a wretched lack of creativity to pick screwball names just so they rhyme. Like "Little Bo-peep has lost her sheep..."

Come on, NOBODY has ever been stuck with a name like Bo-peep. You certainly wouldn't name your daughter that. What's next, "Little Mee-wawa lost her chihuahua...?"

Then there's still the problem of plot. No, not even plot. These are, after all, quite brief. Let's just say point. They have no point.

Little Bo-peep has lost her sheep,
And can't tell where to find them.
Leave them alone and they'll come home,
Wagging their tails behind them.

Huh? Let's see. She lost the sheep, but they'll return. And the point is?

But that isn't even the worst. Think about this one:

Peter, Peter, pumpkin eater,
Had a wife and couldn't keep her.
He put her in a pumpkin shell,
And there he kept her very well.

I'm not sure but I think this has something unfortunate to say about spousal abuse. Speaking of abuse, how about:

There was an old woman who lived in a shoe.
She had so many children she didn't know what to do.
She gave them some broth and also some bread,
Then spanked them all soundly and sent them to bed.

I'm not a fervent opponent of corporal punishment, but this seems pretty arbitrary to me. But before we even go there, I can't get past this thing about living in a shoe. A *shoe*. Now, these are either extremely tiny people—a fact one would think merits at least *some* comment in the poem—or this is one large shoe. Ignoring the size of the person who would wear such a shoe, why would one live in a shoe even if it was that big? Even a cave would be preferable; at least it wouldn't need a Guinness-record size odor-eater, not to mention the chances of the kids getting athlete's body. I don't know, though. These have been around an awfully long time. I guess I just don't understand.

9. I DO NOT UNDERSTAND...

... *ANYTHING*

Written from a Dog's Perspective

by

Sparky Hamilton

My name is Sparky. I live with the Hamilton's. I am a dog. Apparently I am a special species of dog, because they include unique designations when they call me a dog. I think I might be a "Get-out-of-here dog!" or maybe a "Get-out-from-under-my-feet dog!" or even a "Dog: You're-in-the-way!"

I also have titles, which they use in addition to my name, or sometimes by themselves. One of them that I hear frequently is Moron. The more formal version of it is "Stupid Moron." The full and complete rendering is "Sparky U. Stupid Moron." I hear that a lot. It actually gets kind of confusing because they refer to me so many different ways and with a variety of inflections. Like when I stand at the patio door and whimper to go out, there's usually a deep sigh and they murmur under their breath, "O. Sparky." I am not sure what the O. stands for. Then when I turn around immediately and, just as they get seated, scratch at the door to get back in, their tone gets louder and they begin using my titles. Then, when less than two minutes later I see something interesting outside, like a bird in the yard, and want back out again, they get very loud and agitated. I do not understand why. Once Don (he is one of the Hamilton's—more about him later), he opened the door for me, closed it behind me, but did not go back and sit down. Instead he just opened it back up. So, of course, I came right back in. He closed it. Then he opened it again and I naturally went back out. He continued to repeat the process. He did it over and over again and each time I went in or out. We did this for ten full minutes. Finally I

was inside and when he opened the door I did not go out, but just looked at him uncomprehendingly. He then told me I was the dumbest thing he had ever seen. I did not understand his point.

Just now I am checking throughout our little house for someone to Be With. Dogs like to Be With someone. Most of the time we just lay down close-by and sleep. It would never occur to us that, since we are asleep anyway, we could do that off by ourselves. We look to Be With someone. While I look, let me introduce you to the family. The youngest is Scott. He has been my friend since he and I were puppies—only I do not think they called him a puppy. Anyway, he is away at something called college, so I do not see him as much anymore. He is not here tonight. Then there's Paul. He and I are also friends. He is older than Scott. He spends lots of time with Nikki. She is very nice. She is something called a fiancée. Paul and Nikki are in the family room watching a video. If I wanted, Paul would let me up on the recliner to lie next to him. Paul likes me to Be With him. Paul would welcome me. Nikki actually invites me into her lap. Nikki likes having me Be With her, too. She would also welcome me. Next I find Becki. She is Paul and Scott's mom. She is in the living room reading a book. She also would let me up on the couch next to her. I know Becki likes me Being With her and would welcome me. Now I go down the hall to the study. Don is there typing on his computer. Don does not like me Being With him. He will not let me onto his chair or in his lap since that would interfere with his typing. He thinks my breath stinks and that I am a nuisance. He does not welcome me even if I lay on the floor. He hates listening to me lick my various bodily orifices. Let's see. Which place should I go? I will do what I always do. I will go lay near Don. I like Don.

I come into the study and lay quietly three centimeters from the wheels on his desk chair. I have done this countless times before. Each time he starts to get up, my tail gets run over and I yelp. He yells various things at me and uses my titles. He seems to indicate that he doubts my intelligence. But I am not so unintelligent. I have learned from these mishaps. I have learned that Don's chair squeaks. So now whenever I hear the squeak I jump up and run across the floor, even if Don was just leaning back to stretch. He rails at me and asks why I do not just move a foot or two away from the chair. I do not get the point.

This time Don has purchased a nice new chair. One with no squeaks. Don did not even hear me come in. He rolls his chair back and over my tail. I yelp loudly and leap in the air. Don

also jumps in the air and clutches at his chest. He uses all my titles and many new ones. There are so many I cannot remember them all, but I think some of them are “Brainless,” “Idiotic,” “Worthless,” “Fool,” and “Pain in the Neck.” Now he yells at me to go away. I slink toward the door a few steps. He goes back to his computer and mutters to himself. I know he is thinking of me, though, because I occasionally catch my name and titles in what he is muttering. Quietly I sneak back in and curl-up 1.5 centimeters from the wheels of his chair. I like Don.

Everyone always makes a big deal out of walking through the house. They complain that I am always orbiting around their feet wherever they walk. I do not understand why they fail to see the importance of my accompanying them when they go down the hall. After all, they might be going to some new part of the house I’ve never seen in the 13 years I’ve lived here. Or they might be going to do something I would find incredibly exciting—although up to now they never have. But you never know. So I make sure to jump up and follow anyone who goes from one room to the other. And then follow them back again. Actually I do not really follow. I get right in front of their feet and trot along. You might say I’m leading! Except I have no clue where they are going, so I keep slowing down and looking back to see if they’re still following. This causes them to yell out my species. It also causes me to come close to getting stepped on. But I have developed a technique for that. I stop completely and back up. Sometimes this works and I end up behind them. Sometimes it causes them to stumble over me—especially when they are carrying something through the house.

It is a new day. Oh boy! Today is a Special Day. It is lawn-mowing day. I see Don rolling the lawn mower into the back yard. I whine and agitate at the patio door to go outside. Don sees me but only makes a face and ignores me. I like Don. Becki calls me O. Sparky Forheavensakes and lets me out. Yippee! I run all around the yard like I have never seen it before when actually I have been out here every day of my life. Don is searching through the grass. He finds an old Prime Rib bone they gave me a long time ago. He tosses it onto the patio so the mower will not hit it. I run over and examine it as if it were a newfound treasure, as if it had not been laying out here for weeks. Don starts the mower and heads toward the far end of the yard. I pick up the bone. It is old. It is bleached. It is not very good for chewing anymore. I walk out across the newly mowed part of the grass. This insures that the fur on my legs and feet will be loaded with clippings that will end up all over the carpet once I go back inside. I go into

the grass where Don has not mowed yet. I decide I do not want to carry the bone anymore and drop it in the grass. I continue trotting all around the yard, exploring new places I have only seen 4,981 times before. There is a loud clanging noise and a projectile rockets out from under the mower and onto the patio. It is my bone. Don shouts in my direction but the mower is so loud I cannot catch most of what he says to me. Something about me being a waste of perfectly good oxygen. I am not sure but I think he is honoring me with several new, creative titles. I do not understand his point. As he heads back toward the far end of the yard, I go pick up my bone and put it back where it belongs, in the part of the grass where Don has not mowed yet. I love lawn mower day. I like Don.

It is another day. This is an Unusual Day. Lots of new people are here. I am beside myself with excitement. I like new people. All except the mail carrier for some unknown reason. I jump up on their legs. Because I am a little dog they just laugh and pet me and tell me I am cute. So I keep it up. I would keep it up forever if someone did not yell, "All right Sparky, that's enough, calm down!" When they do that I go to the next person and start the whole thing over again. I do this with someone called Cousin, someone called Grandma, someone called Grandpa, someone called Aunt and someone called Uncle. They all talk a lot about something called The Wedding.

It is a time of great excitement. No longer do I lie around most of the day waiting for Becki and Don to get home from work. Instead there are people coming and going, in and out all the time. I run around and follow everyone with great interest even though I have no clue what is going on. I stay very close to anyone walking through the house. I am called by my species a lot. Besides Cousin, Grandma, Grandpa, Aunt, and Uncle there are many others who come and go, people I do not see very often. Here is someone I remember! Scott is here! He is glad to see me.

Now there are people Doing Things and Getting Ready but for what I do not know. They are scurrying and hurrying about. It is nighttime. Everyone left for something called The Rehearsal. They have been gone a long time. Wait! Here they are! I jump around and act like a lunatic. They all talk for a while then go to bed. They stay in rooms that are no longer what they were. Scott stays in his room like when he is not at college. But others stay in rooms that have been cleaned out. The only one that I can Be With to sleep is Cousin. He is sleeping on the

living room couch and I am on the floor right next to him. This room does not have a door that he can close. He has no choice.

It is now the busiest day of all. They Wear Special Clothes and scurry more than ever. Then, everyone leaves for The Wedding. It is a long day alone. After many hours people—even more of them—return. They talk on and on about Paul and Nikki, but I cannot find them. They often use a word with their names that I do not know: honeymoon.

Now it is Sunday and I am alone. They have gone to church. They say they will be back soon. They do come back, and now there are other Aunts and Uncles. People have suitcases. I do not like seeing suitcases. They make me worry that people will leave and I won't get to go. They cause me to stand around and whine for no apparent reason. That makes Don use my titles and tell me if I do not shut up he will strangle me. I do not understand. But I like Don. Grandma, Grandpa, and several Aunts and Uncles take suitcases and leave.

It is Monday. Everyone leaves. After all day, Don and Becki come back. Scott does not—he is back at college. It is much quieter with just the three of us here.

It is Tuesday evening. Grandma, Grandpa, Aunt and Uncle are back, but they still have suitcases. So does Don. They talk about how they are going back home the same time Don is leaving on a business trip, whatever that is.

It is Wednesday. It is so very early, much earlier than Don usually gets up. Everyone has suitcases. I am anxious. I am afraid I will not get to go. There are many good-byes. Then it is just Becki and I. She gets ready and after a while she leaves. When I whimper she says she is just going to work and she will be back soon. I do not understand. But after all day, she returns. I greet her excitedly as I always do.

Tonight she is especially nice to me. She holds me on her lap and calls me Sparky instead of just “Dog” or my species. It is so very quiet. Even with the TV on, it seems much quieter than I am used to, except for when I am alone. Somehow, the little house seems too big. I do not look through the empty rooms for someone to Be With. I know it is just she and I. I know this, and yet I do not understand.

10. I DON'T UNDERSTAND...
... STUFF WE'RE SUPPOSED TO LIKE

Perhaps you have noticed, as I have, how often things that critics hate, people love, and vice versa. My own observation is that most of the time truth is both opposite and in equal proportion to how critics perceive it. Of course, it goes beyond critics alone. Once they have established what the “in” thing is, huge numbers of people immediately agree. I suppose they hope in that way to establish themselves as high-class people of discriminating tastes. I’m sure it comes as no surprise that I am neither high-class nor discriminating.

Take food for example. Two of the more readily identifiable gourmet-proclaimed delicacies are caviar and escargot. For us down-home types, that’s fish eggs and snails. I’ve actually tried caviar and can honestly say that it tastes exactly the way fish eggs sound like they would taste. Like bait—only saltier. I cannot fathom why anyone would refer to caviar as something enjoyable to eat. As for escargot, I confess I have never tried it. Nor can I see myself doing so. I cannot bring myself to eat anything that leaves a slime trail when it crawls. In fact, I cannot imagine how anyone got the idea to try eating the first one. Upon observing a live snail, the last possible thought that would occur to any normal human is, “Mmm, I’ll bet *that* would taste good!” It’s for sure whoever that space cadet was he didn’t first try a little salt on it.

In fact not eating anything that, were it still living, would leave a slime trail is one of a list of Eating Commandments I have developed. The others are:

1. *Never eat anything raw that doesn’t come from a plant.* This eliminates raw fish, raw oysters and steak tartare. The truth is, such “delicacies” could not be any less appetizing. I made that point to my wife recently as we were walking past a row of shops and restaurants. The aromas emanating from the pizzeria, the barbecue place, and the steak house were marvelous. Then we walked past the sushi bar. Absolutely no enticing food

fragrances at all. As for raw oysters, I think I'd be ill if I stepped on one barefoot, much less put one in my mouth! Steak tartare (a.k.a., raw hamburger) sounds like an open invitation to some dread disease like E. Coli. Besides, burgers are meant to be cooked on a grill and served with a thick slab of cheese melting on them. I suppose if I were stranded on a desert island with no way to cook and managed to catch a fish, an oyster, or a steak tartare, I'd probably get hungry enough to try one of these. But since modern restaurants have stoves, I figure they should use them.

2. *Never eat vegetables that taste like they were boiled for two weeks along with the dirty sweat socks of the entire Green Bay Packers football team.* In other words, avoid Brussels sprouts at all costs.
3. *Never eat the glands, organs, or recognizable body parts of farm animals unless they are obscured by being finely ground, chopped, and formed such that you can't tell what they originally were.* For example, eating a pork chop is okay—it doesn't look like part of a pig. But pig's feet are out. Stay as far away as possible from weird stuff like Rocky Mountain Oysters, tripe, chitterlings, tongue, pig's snouts, and brains. However, hot dogs and lunchmeat are perfectly okay, even though they consist of the same objectionable kinds of things I've been talking about. Somehow having it ground-up into a frankfurter makes eating pig adenoids and steer sphincters acceptable.

Of course, my tastes in food may not be in step with Joe Average either. For instance, I love a good cheeseburger (well, I *said* I wasn't sophisticated). Therefore, I consider it a great mystery why McDonald's is far and away the most popular burger seller in the world. I mean, I do eat there from time to time, but would put their burgers near the bottom of my fast food list. Even more inexplicable is Pizza Hut's popularity. With all the wonderful pizzerias around—even the chains—why would anyone eat theirs? All you need to know about their pizza is that one of their optional selections is something they call "Ground Pork Topping." Other pizza places offer sausage, linguica, pepperoni, etc. But none of them serves a meat product so mysterious it has no name, only a description. That strikes me as analogous to "Imitation American Cheese Food Product." It also reminds me of an out-of-the-way taqueria my son and I happened upon while traveling out of state. It advertised the following:

- | | |
|-----------------|------|
| 1. Beef Burrito | 1.75 |
|-----------------|------|

2. Chicken Burrito	1.75
3. Pork Burrito	1.75
4. Meat Burrito	1.50

Meat burrito? Not only were we highly suspicious of what other meat it could possibly refer to, my son refused to eat there at all. Smart boy.

There are, of course, numerous other venues where critics' views run counter to the public at large or even rational thought. For example, many people complain about what supposedly constitutes art. Myself, I do not insist that every painting look like a snapshot. I find that I like some art that is even unclear as to what it portrays. In truth, tastes in art are naturally subjective. Thus it is difficult to state what constitutes art I like. I do, however, have a very simple rule for art I dislike: anything that looks like I could have done it. I have zero artistic abilities. Even my stick figures don't look right. So when I see a painting that looks like something I might have done, I know I am in the presence of, not merely mediocrity, but ineptitude. Of course, often that which the art critics laud the most possesses that same talentless quality. The famous story of the fellow who won acclaim for his abstract art only to reveal it had been done by holding a canvas near horses' tails dipped in paint tells a lot about such critics.

Another area is literature. Certainly many of what are considered classics rightly deserve that distinction. Some of them, though, are nearly indecipherable. I suspect it's another case of intellectual elitism. You can almost hear some snooty literary critic saying, "If only you were as bright as I am you'd see that these unintelligible ramblings are literary masterpieces."

Some of the difficulty in following classic literature is not the author's use of a bizarre writing style but the age of the work. Several years ago I saw the movie *Billy Budd* based on Herman Melville's book. It was so intriguing I decided to read it. It is a tiny little thing, scarcely more than a short story. Unfortunately the average sentence in the book is close to 50 words in length. That is unthinkable in modern writing (except as comic relief, as in some of my previous essays). Worse yet, the sentence structure was so convoluted it required me to reread each several times. Even then, as often as not I would simply give up and move on, hoping the context would clarify it. It didn't. I managed to plow through the book but if I hadn't already seen the movie I'd have made no sense of it. Back in Melville's day, long complex sentences were commonly used. Today, classic author or no, he would never get it published.

Age even plays havoc in trying to understand Shakespeare. No one could dispute him as the great master at the craft of writing. Yet I, for one, find myself on about a five-second delay trying to follow what's being said when I watch one of his plays. Even reading them can be difficult due to the changes in the language from his time to ours. His dialogues contain a daunting mix of complex and outdated expressions, similar to the following:

[Enter Rubella and Prosciutto]

FELONIUS: In sooth Rubella, thy countenance waxeth chapfall'n.
'Twere not thus, I shouldst bethink myself
Unbidden to entertain upon such vagrancies.

RUBELLA: Nay, m'lord, tis but an antic whose
Loathsome portion is the unloosening
Of this mine bodice. Alas, Felonius, I am
Undone!

PROSCIUTTO: Say what?

I confess to similar problems with the King James Version of the Bible. I admit it is has served as an old and trustworthy friend to many a dear saint. However, I have come to abandon it almost completely in favor of reliable modern-English versions that don't need every other word explained. Moreover, KJV punctuation does less to help the meaning than to fog it. Here is an actual example.

But call to remembrance the former days, in which, after ye were illuminated, ye endured a great fight of afflictions; Partly, whilst ye were made a gazingstock both by reproaches and afflictions; and partly, whilst ye became companions of them that were so used.

Eh? A gazingstock? I don't quite follow. The other difficulty I have with the KJV is those italicized words. I realize those who translated it were being cautious to denote words they themselves added for clarity but I can't help wanting to emphasize them as I read. See the following.

And when the children of Israel saw *it*, they said one to another, It *is* manna: for they wist not what it *was*. And Moses said unto them, This *is* the bread which the LORD hath given you to eat.

My addled brain wants to read this as:

And when the children of Israel saw ***IT***, they said one to another, It ***IS*** manna: for they wist not what it ***WAS***. And Moses said unto them, This ***IS*** the bread which the LORD hath given you to eat.

They wist not? I'm afraid I wist not what I read in the Elizabethan English the KJV uses. Don't misunderstand, for those who know it and love it, may God richly bless them. As for those misguided and, in my opinion, egotistical unfortunates who insist that the KJV is the only version acceptable to God, they have my sympathy. I say egotistical because that's the kindest word I can use for someone who thinks we English-speakers are of greater importance to Him than any other race or tongue. Obviously King James did not authorize a version in Spanish, Swahili, Tagalog, or any other language used by those just as precious to God as we English-speakers are. Fortunately those with such views are in the tiniest minority.

But back to my issues with things we are supposed to like. Take actors. One highly regarded oldie was Gary Cooper. Unfortunately Mr. Cooper did not merely sound as if he was reciting his lines, he sounded like he was *reading* them. Except for *Sergeant York* where he was supposed to sound stilted, he never gave a performance I would consider even remotely believable.

As for movies themselves, it puts me under that any film done in a foreign country and shown here with subtitles, or on a risqué subject (or especially both) is a sure bet to garner critical acclaim. Meanwhile, those films that are universally liked are given short shrift by critics—from tepid reviews to downright vicious ones.

Okay, so what have we learned from all this? You're probably saying, "We've learned that this goober probably considers chili-dogs a delicacy, paint-by-number pictures fine art, *Hop on Pop* great literature, Bullwinkle J. Moose a marvelous actor and *Ernest Goes to Camp* an epic movie." But you would be wrong. All right, I do like Bullwinkle. Still, I realize that critics,

reviewers, gourmets and others who determine what is supposed to be chic, popular, “in,” base their conclusions on nuances that only those highly trained in the given discipline can appreciate. Nonetheless, I would expect the differences between them and reality to be subtle and highly subjective, like whether Pepsi or Coke is the better cola. Instead they seem to be light-years away from what is really good. I guess they figure we just don’t understand.

11. I DON'T UNDERSTAND...

... *PORTRAYALS OF JESUS*

Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* was an exceptional film, but for more than the reasons that come most readily to mind. The main uniqueness of that movie was that it made at least a reasonable attempt to hold true to scripture—something completely ignored by other portrayals of Jesus.

While we have little information regarding Jesus' physical appearance, the four Gospels provide more detail about Jesus himself than can be found for any other ancient figure. In addition, they contain page after page of fascinating events, vivid characterizations, and high drama. Why is it then that artists, "intellectuals," writers, and especially moviemakers are completely unable to resist overhauling Biblical truth with their own fabricated versions? Here are some common mis-portrayals that drive me nuts:

1. **Jesus as a Wimp:** For centuries Jesus has been the subject of the painter's brush. In every picture, regardless of the artist, He is portrayed with two common—albeit inexplicable—characteristics. For one, He is thin, frail—even malnourished. As to the other, He always has his palms out as if testing for rain. As previously noted, no record of His physical appearance exists. I recall that there is a highly suspect description of Him in one historical writing but few people consider it accurate and even so it does not match the artists' renditions. Nonetheless, applying a small bit of logic yields a very different picture of Him than those commonly seen. For one, he was not a small man, as Luke's specific mention of Him growing in stature (a phrase that would not have been used for, say, Zacchaeus) attests. Also, we know his stepfather Joseph was a carpenter and we can be fairly certain that prior to His

ministry's beginning (around age 30) Jesus would have worked at that same trade. Carpentry in the first century meant dragging huge logs around—sort of a ready-made weightlifting regimen. We can also determine that He was neither small nor frail by His effectiveness at clearing the temple. Those He chased out were merchants and moneychangers. Let that soak-in for a minute. The key word here is *money*. Scripture says He overturned their (money-laden) tables and ran them off. Suppose you were one of these people to whom the almighty shekel was so important you would shamelessly set up shop right in Yahweh's temple. How would you react to some guy knocking over your cash drawer and scattering your day's take all over the ground? Okay, He's got a whip. But you are not alone. There are dozens of your fellow crooks, er, merchants there with you getting the same treatment. Would some skinny little wimp always checking for rain scare you so much you'd abandon your money and flee? Or would you and your competitors take that whip away and turn the tables on him (if you'll pardon the pun). Granted, the Son of God undoubtedly had a Presence that went far beyond His physique. And I'm not suggesting an Arnold Schwarzenegger look-alike. Still, I have to believe He was of sufficient size and strength to make it clear He was One to be reckoned with.

2. **Jesus, the angelic:** Many artist renditions of Jesus picture Him with a halo. No. Jesus did not glow as He taught the Sermon on the Mount, healed the lepers, or took the Pharisees to task. He looked like a person. How do I know? Two key reasons. First, in that most amazing of prophecies concerning Him, Isaiah 53 says, "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him." I don't know about you but a guy with a halo would definitely attract my attention even if he had nothing important to say. Second, Judas Iscariot had to point Him out in the garden with a kiss. If Jesus had glowed in the dark, I doubt the mob would have needed help identifying Him.
3. **Jesus, the morose:** A couple of the more recent portrayals have gotten away from this more so than the older movies. In those older ones, Jesus is shown as being a melancholy, downright unhappy fellow, totally devoid of humor. While it is clear that He was intense, he was also a "people person." It is true that He wept at the pain

around Him, but He also evidences a sparkling wit. Consider: He tells the religious hypocrites that they “strain out a gnat and swallow a camel.” Think about that word picture. That’s funny! Nearly every comedian’s primary stock in trade is exaggeration. Here Jesus pictures one of these religious leaders carefully working the edge of his spoon to pick a gnat out his bowl of soup—totally ignoring this huge beast laying in it. Not only does he ignore it, but actually swallows it! What a perfect way to tell them they worry too much about the small stuff and neglect the important. Why a camel? Because camels are funny looking. Our more modern humorous description of a camel is that it looks like a horse designed by a committee! Jesus uses this same technique in the following: “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?” Obviously nobody’s eye really could have a plank in it, but Jesus carries the satirical comment even further by saying that the hypocrite, by removing this plank, could then see clearly to remove the speck from his brother’s eye. The speck being that tiny fault the hypocrite was so quick to notice in someone else while ignoring his own whopper! Yes, Jesus definitely had a sense of humor—a very effective wit that, to be sure, his opponents did not particularly appreciate.

4. **Jesus, the insecure:** It has become popular in recent times for every modern portrayal of Jesus to show Him as uncertain of His identity. He is supposedly reluctant to accept the mantle of divinity or even Messiah-ship. In reality, Jesus said things like, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” and “I am the Resurrection and the Life. He who believes in Me will live even though he dies.” During a prayer to God He makes the following rather startling references to Himself: “Father....Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify You....that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom You have sent....And now, Father, glorify Me in your presence with the glory I had with You before the world began.” Notice He includes His name, His title as Messiah (Christ), and His position as the Son of God the Father. Wow! Sounds to me like He knew exactly whom He was. It could be that such a nonsensical depiction is fueled by the bunch of pseudo-intellectual clowns participating in the so-called “Jesus

Seminar.” There, they sit around and vote on what parts of the gospels really did happen and which are made-up. Of course, since their primary premise is that Jesus is not divine, anything even suggestive of the miraculous or of His divinity is immediately dumped. Of the tiny portion still remaining they vote on the accuracy of each portion based on—well, as near as I can tell, based on what they had for breakfast, or some other criteria just as inane. Personally I’d like to get on a committee and conduct a vote on whether these guys are morons or not. Bet I can guess the outcome of the vote. And I bet it’d be unanimous!

5. **Jesus, the lost and confused:** Similar to the above, it is in-vogue to portray Jesus as a reluctant, ambivalent lost soul wandering around wondering what he’s doing here. He is shown as garnering only the vaguest notion of his mission, which reveals itself only gradually and incompletely. The truth is no one has ever lived who had a better handle on his mission in life and precisely how it would unfold. Consider the following:

- As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.

- Now as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside and said to them, “We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!”

- “Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour.”

- Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father....Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God...

- “You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.”

Simply put, Jesus had a clearer, deeper understanding of His mission in life than any other person who has ever lived.

6. **Mary Magdalene, the harlot:** This portrayal of Mary Magdalene comes from two mistakes. The first is that early in Jesus' ministry, as described in Luke 7, there is an incident where a "notoriously sinful woman" anoints Jesus' feet with expensive perfume and wipes them with her hair, and He pronounces her forgiven of her sins. She is not referred to by name. In the next chapter, a list of women who were followers of Jesus appears that includes Mary Magdalene. It is hard to fathom why, if she became His follower, she would be left unnamed in her dramatic story but then named in an incidental list—without any mention of her being the woman in the previous incident. The only qualitative statement made about Mary Magdalene is that Jesus had removed seven demons from her. In the Bible (unlike in Hollywood) people with demons were seriously ill NOT seriously evil. Nowhere is harlotry even suggested as a symptom of possession. Years later, not long before His crucifixion, a similar perfume anointing—of Jesus' head—is done by Mary the sister of Martha and Lazarus. It is clear this Mary and Mary Magdalene are two different people; Mary Magdalene was not the woman who was notoriously sinful. Yet every modern depiction of her is as a redeemed prostitute. Even Gibson's *Passion* fell prey to this myth by portraying Mary Magdalene as the woman caught in adultery described in John 8; which she definitely was not. Of course, Jesus stands as ready to save and sanctify a harlot as He does anyone else, but just because it jazzes up the story doesn't make it truthful to depict Mary Magdalene as such. Nor is there the slightest shred of evidence that she had a romantic interest in Jesus, despite innumerable modern attempts to spice up the gospel in that way. From what scripture says, Mary Magdalene loved Jesus in the same way countless millions of us have and still do.
7. **Judas Iscariot, the well-intentioned quasi-hero:** This is another common modern theme. Judas Iscariot is depicted as a pure-hearted trooper whose only error was a miscalculation—which, they indicate, was Jesus' fault—of the Messiah's true mission. Interestingly, the same Scriptures that we trust as truthful when they tell us Jesus lived, that He had disciples, and that Judas Iscariot was one of them, those same Scriptures say that Judas Iscariot was sold-out to Satan. They say he was the Devil's dupe, that he embezzled money from the other 12, and that he sold Jesus up the river

for money. Even Jesus speaks of him in frighteningly negative tones: “The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born.” If that’s what God’s word and God’s Son say about him, where does some screen-writer get off proclaiming him a hero? Granted, there is evidence that even this thief was smitten by guilt when he saw the Lord crucified. He even gave the money back. So far gone was he, though, that his regret did not lead to repentance, but to suicide. This guy was no hero.

I think the bottom line to all this is: Okay, Hollywood, enough! Cut everybody some slack and find some other theme for your movies. If you are unable to resist trashing the most magnificent and dramatic story of all time about the real Son of the living God, then go back to making Indiana Jones movies or something. Leave the Truth alone.

12. I DON'T UNDERSTAND...

... *THE OLYMPICS*

There are various things I don't understand about the Olympics. One is the more recent set of events that have been added to them. For almost any normal person the phrase "Olympic Games" immediately invokes visions of people running down a track, pole-vaulting, swimming, performing gymnastics and the like. So how did we end up with some of the goofy events they have now? Events that are in no respect sports? Like those quasi-modern-dance events where a young woman runs around whirling a long ribbon on the end of a stick, or tosses a little-kid's ball in the air then lets it roll down her arms. Something like that might be appealing to watch, especially for any wannabe choreographers in the audience. But one of the last words that would enter the mind of one seeing such a performance for the first time would be "sport." Worse yet is "Synchronized Swimming." I'll grant you that it takes effort (especially holding one's breath that long) and skill to make those movements in precise unison with the other team members. But then precision is also required of cheerleaders, marching bands, and those Marine units that do the fancy tricks with fake rifles during parades. None of those is a sport, nor should they be. Of course, the ultimate in moronic non-sporting Olympic events is *individual* synchronized swimming. It is not possible, by definition, to synchronize one's movements with the others on one's team, if there *are no others* on the team. What the audience is left with in this idiotic event is watching a pair of legs go through a bunch of motions (the swimmer spends almost the entire event upside down in the water) to music the swimmer—being underwater—cannot even hear. What could be dumber than watching a person's torso-less legs whirl around and bend for no earthly reason? Even if it is to a rhythmic beat. Okay, as long as professional wrestling exists,

there will always be something dumber. (Does it worry anybody else that some of the people who watch WCW might actually vote? But, I digress.)

Besides being non-sports, these events are based upon the bane of both Summer and Winter Olympic events: judging. To my observation, in fully three-quarters of the events that depend upon judges, their decisions are at best inexplicable and at worst blatantly biased. Back in the days of the Iron Curtain, the bias was along national lines. A Soviet gymnast that did a strong, stylish floor exercise could get a 9.95 from the Soviet, Hungarian, and East German judges, while the U.S., Canadian, and Italian judges gave the same performance a pathetic 9.50. Since the demise of the Soviet bloc, a new bias has moved to the forefront. It is reputational bias and it is nowhere better illustrated than in figure skating.

Bias based on reputation works like this. A skater (or pair) is well entrenched as the favorite based upon performances at other World Cup events. Another skater is relatively unknown, being fairly new. There is absolutely no possibility that the newcomer will win. Period. In fact, only when multiple skaters are highly regarded and considered equal in talent will there even be any question. Indeed, the following scenario is not too far-fetched:

BOB: Welcome, everyone, to the Free-Skate portion of the Olympic Pairs Figure Skating event. I'm Bob Broadcast and with me tonight is three-time gold medallist Rick Hutton. Rick, first up is Nate and Nora Newcomer from Providence, Rhode Island. They surprised everyone with their flawless performance in the Short Program and are now all the way up into 13th place.

RICK: Well, that's right Bob. These two kids have very little international exposure, but if they keep it up it's possible that in five or ten years they could really be top contenders.

BOB: Okay, they're on the ice and ready to start. Rick?

RICK: My, don't they look elegant in those stunning outfits? I understand Nora was signed to a \$200 million contract with Glamour magazine to pose for cover photos and was voted most graceful and gorgeous female of all time by 98% of the earth's population. Meanwhile that same percentage chose Nate as "World's Most Perfect Human." Okay, here they go. Now, this first element of their routine involves them both doing four-and-a-half somersaults in the pike position

followed by a sextuple-toe-loop-octuple-axel combination. There it is! Wow, did you notice how they were able to do that in perfect unison all the while locked in a desperate embrace of deepest passion, Bob?

BOB: It's the most amazingly perfect skating I've ever seen, Rick. I understand their routine acts out Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in its entirety. There! Now they're doing the balcony scene with Nick holding Nora high above his head with one finger. I—I don't believe I've ever seen anything so, (sniff) so beautifully moving (sob)!

RICK: Now they're doing the tragic suicide scene with the most magnificent (snivel) death spiral (blubber) I've ever SEE-HEE-HEE-HEEN. BAWWWW-HAWWW-HAWWW-HAWWW. I'm (sob, sniff) sorry (blubber), folks. It's just so (gasps) beautiful. BAWWWWWWWW!

BOB: (Snivel) Now for the big finale, he's thrown her over 40 feet in the air! Watch out for those rafters! How about that!? She, with the grace of a gazelle, deftly jumped over the rafters and came down doing a full gainer in the layout position with three and a half twists and landed light as a feather in Nate's arms. As their music stops the crowd here has gone absolutely berserk. They are cheering like I've never heard before.

RICK: Look there, Bob. This audience is showering them with flowers, currency, even credit cards. Who is that running out onto the ice? Could it be...I believe it is! It's Steven Spielberg signing them both to movie contracts. Now look! Can we zoom the camera in on that? It looks like...Yes! It is! Bill Gates is in the audience and was so moved by their performance he has tossed a new version of his will onto the ice naming the Newcomers sole beneficiaries to his fortune.

BOB: Here come the marks. Remember, a perfect score is a 6.0, with anything less than 5.0 almost unheard of. Here they are now: 5.2, 5.0, 5.1, 5.0, 5.0, and from the Russian judge, 4.8.

RICK: Bob, I'm afraid those marks are not very popular with this audience. People are ripping the seats right out of the arena floor in frustration. Armed National

Guardsmen are having to use tear gas on the full-scale riot that has broken out in the area just behind the judges.

BOB: Yes, and six people in various parts of the arena have just set fire to themselves over the injustice of the decision. Why do you suppose the marks weren't better for what was clearly the greatest skating performance mankind will ever witness, Rick?

RICK: Well, remember, the Newcomers were the first to skate. The judges need to leave room for those coming behind them.

BOB: Speaking of which, now that the rioters have been moved outside where they are behaving much more normally by looting stores and burning police cars, our next pairs contestants are on the ice.

RICK: Well, that's right Bob. These are the favorites, Viktor and Ludmila Babushka. This couple has won the gold in the last eleven Olympics.

BOB: Do you think they still have another winning performance in them, Rick? After all, they *are* coming onto the ice using walkers. Viktor looks awfully frail, especially considering that the barely-five-foot Ludmila now weighs in excess of 300 pounds.

RICK: That *is* a minor concern, Bob, but there is no reason to believe they won't win their twelfth straight. Their musical selection tonight is the theme song from *The Three Stooges*. And here they go. Their first jump will be simple side-by-side single—oops! Looks like they've gotten their skates entangled. Oh, no, they've both fallen and are skidding along the ice on their faces!

BOB: Yes, but isn't that an interesting pattern they're making on the ice? Now that they've slowed to a stop, Viktor is grimacing and trying to reset his dislocated shoulder. Looks like he'll be okay, though. They seem to have composed themselves somewhat and now Ludmila is going to jump into Viktor's arms. There she goes. Yeeowch, both flat on the ice! I wonder if Viktor is all right under there? In fact, I wonder if he even *is* under there. Ah, yes, now that Ludmila's gotten up I see him. He seems to be having some trouble, Rick.

RICK: Yeah, Bob, he's got something lodged in his throat. Ludmila is pounding him on the back and—whoa! There they go! I believe—yes, it's Viktor's dentures. That last whack sent them flying and their long-time coach caught them in mid-air and is returning them to him. Now they are resuming their routine, which, quite honestly hasn't been quite up to their usual standard, Bob.

BOB: I agree, Rick. But here comes the part where they lock hands and take turns tossing one another—oh-oh! Viktor's hands slipped! There goes Ludmila skittering across the ice and oooh! She hit feet-first into the sideboards and crashed right through! Looks like she's stuck in there, Rick

RICK: No question about it, Bob. There are all kinds of emergency personnel trying to extricate her feet from the boards. Ah, now they're using the jaws-of-life. There! She's free, finally, and they're both being taken off the ice on stretchers. Well, that wraps up their performance. Now for the judges' marks.

BOB: And here they are: all 6.0's across the board, except, from the Russian judge, a seven! Do you suppose they'll be out of the hospital in time for their gold medal ceremony, Rick?

Of course, the televising of the Olympics is, in itself, pretty mystifying. One problem is that they are frequently held in rather out-of-the-way places, like Borneo or Dutch-Indo Sudatenland where the International Dateline means tonight's 9:00 pm Eastern prime time falls at 2:51am the day after tomorrow. Thus either TV wields such influence you have groggy-eyed half-asleep javelin throwers getting turned around and skewering unfortunate fans in the audience, or everything shown is on a tape-delay basis. The latter scenario is why we tune-in to watch Olympic events only to discover they're showing tape of events from a week ago last Wednesday—events of which we long ago already heard the outcome.

I feel pretty certain the Olympics will never again have the magic they used to have. Remember the famous U.S. Hockey team? No, not that one—not the one that threw all the chairs through their hotel room windows. The one that won the gold when no one thought they could. Remember Mary Lou Retton, Jesse Owens, Jean-Claude Killy, Bob Beamon, Florence Griffith-Joyner, Carl Lewis, Alberto Tombo, Bonnie Blair and the scores of others who captured

our imaginations with their excellence and flair? The Olympics just don't hold quite the same fascination for me. Or is it that I just don't understand?

13. I DON'T UNDERSTAND...

... *PLANTS*

No doubt you have heard the expression “a green thumb”? It refers to having a knack for being able to make flowers, trees, shrubs, vines, fruits and vegetables flourish. Given that definition, my wife and I have decided we must have *black* thumbs. Any plant, no matter how hardy becomes doomed once it enters our possession. Take those indoor vine varieties that, in most people’s homes, grow so uncontrollably that in mere weeks they take on the appearance of something out of one of those 1950’s sci-fi movies. We have had friends and relatives give us cuttings from them along with dire warnings that they will take over the world if we’re not careful. Hah! Three weeks in our possession almost guarantees a pot of moist soil containing only a pathetic-looking dead twig. We actually do have one living plant in our house. It’s one of those that a friend who heard about our black thumbs gave us amid assurances that no one—not even we—could kill it. Unfortunately for the poor plant, so far he’s right. This is one that should have covered our entire entertainment center by now. Instead it struggles though a prolonged, lingering terminal condition with six pale, feeble leaves that seem to be crying-out for merciful death. I actually think the reason most plants that we get die so quickly is that they simply commit suicide upon arrival at the Hamilton household. Either our plant-aura is that bad or word has gotten out that going to the Hamilton’s can only mean a wretched, miserable death—thus, why forestall the inevitable? Even plants have better sense than that.

It is not only inside plants, of course. Some of our relatives have characterized our backyard—rather charitably, I must say—as looking like one belonging to renters. Of course, these are people whose yards (or in their cases, the British term “gardens” is more appropriate) are abundant in a glorious profusion of flowers, fruit trees, and plants that they actually intended

to grow there. Not only that, but they spend untold hours landscaping and perfecting the entire scene with fountains, flagstone paths, and thematic floral organization the equal of any public arboretum. They take great delight in giving plant-morons such as I guided tours replete with explanations only a botanist could appreciate. It is all just gibberish to me:

“Now, over here under this Weeping Titanium are my Night-Blooming Diphtheria, which are doing very well. These pretty purple flowers over here next to them are Matriculating Fiduciaries and then, of course, we have my lovely Wuthering Hypothalamus. I’m a little concerned about my Pythagorean Myopia, though. Hope it’s getting enough sunlight.”

Whenever they go on like that, I just wander around nodding and exhibiting the same depth of comprehension as that yellow smiley-face from the WalMart commercials.

In stark contrast, our backyard has two coexistent, yet diametrically opposite, features. One area contains a plethora of fascinating weed varieties, some of which may not actually be native to this planet. I nonetheless water them from time to time since they do, after all, provide at least a modicum of greenery. When mowed, this provides the fleeting illusion—to the visually impaired—of something reminiscent of grass and, hence, of a lawn. The other area apparently suffered a nuclear accident at some point in the past (presumably one day while we were at work) since it consists of only the most barren and sterile of soil. Even star thistles and milkweed are no match for this foreboding landscape and succumb quickly to its apparent toxicity. My attempts to water this area manage only to convert dry, unfertile dirt into wet, unfertile dirt (i.e. mud). The only thing that breaks up the monotony of this otherwise featureless section of the yard are the random “doggie gifts” Sparky has left behind. No Night-Blooming Diphtheria here!

Our plant ineptitude is somewhat hard to explain given my wife’s and my heritage. Both of our fathers came from farming backgrounds and were avid vegetable gardeners. When I was growing up in a rural area of the Sacramento Valley, my dad made an attempt at a garden every year that I can remember. His efforts resulted in about equal parts success and failure, but a typical summer would yield at least a few tomatoes, cantaloupes, carrots, watermelons, potatoes, some corn and, of course, the ubiquitous zucchini. Thinking about it, zucchini might be the one plant my wife and I could successfully grow. If you live near or are acquainted with anyone who grows it, you know what I’m talking about. They’re the ones who walk up to you with those soulful, please-don’t-hurt-my-feelings eyes and say, “Would you like some zucchini from our

garden?” Being the soft touch you are, you respond with something idiotic like, “Sure.” At this point he rushes out to his truck and drags a 100 lb. gunnysack filled with zucchinis. Of course, that might be only three of them given how large they get. He then speeds off down the street looking for another victim leaving you literally holding the bag. While a small amount of the vegetable can be useful, you can find no way to deal with such an enormous quantity. You are forced to attempt disgusting-sounding recipes like zucchini peanut brittle and pineapple-upside-down-zucchini-on-a-stick in an attempt to rid yourself of at least some of it. Then, one day as you are choking down a slice of zucchini meringue pie and notice that there is still 70 lbs. of it on your kitchen counter, you are driven to do the unthinkable. You load it in your car and go off to find some poor, unsuspecting dupe upon whom *you* can use the soulful-eye routine.

So, although zucchini’s ability to grow far beyond what any normal person would ever want could actually supersede my black thumb, I have resisted planting it. It would be just my luck that the only thing I could grow would be something that would alienate me from my neighbors even more than my eyesore of a backyard already does.

However, lest anyone think that I am plagued with regret at having no horticultural talents, please know that I also have no horticultural interests. Like anyone else, I would love to have a paradise-like backyard. But I have no interest in things botanical. It would be hard to say whether my lack of ability fosters my lack of interest or vice versa, but both conditions are equally true. The idea of spending countless hours watering, weeding and scratching around in soil simply does not appeal to me. Fortunately there are those who do enjoy it, otherwise we would all starve to death. Worse than that, there would be no florist-to-the-rescue when a guy says something stupid to his wife and winds up sleeping on the couch.

Yes, those who love and have a flair for plants are truly valuable contributors to society. But how they can do it, I just don’t understand.

14. I DON'T UNDERSTAND...

... *MISSOURI*

Given that—as I write this in early March—I’ve only been an official resident of Missouri since November, it would not be surprising that there are things I don’t quite comprehend yet about the state. However, at least some of the peculiarities of my father’s native state I doubt I’ll ever fathom. Furthermore, evidence suggests that, with time, I will only become more confused, not less. Anyway, based on my early observations, here are some mysteries I have uncovered about the state:

Weather: Many places can relate to the old saying, “If you don’t like the weather, wait around a few minutes.” Missouri epitomizes that saying—sort of. The questionable part is that the saying implies that eventually this ever-changing weather will turn to something likeable. That’s the one type I haven’t seen yet. In the short time I’ve been here I’ve seen sun, overcast, fog, rain, sleet, snow, freezing rain and something called “wintry mix.” That sounds more like an assortment of after-dinner mints than a weather forecast. But then, this is Missouri; nothing here has to make sense to anyone. The worst of it is that the weather makes the least sense to the weathermen. About the only thing Missouri weather reports are good for is a vague generalization of what category of weather is coming—maybe. If the prediction is for snow, temperatures in the 20’s or 30’s, ice, sleet, etc., it’s likely to be cold and may or may not do anything else. If the prediction is for snow, temperatures “in the teens,” “bitter cold,” wind-chill of below zero, ice, sleet, etc., it’s likely to be *really* cold and may or may not do anything else. If they predict warm weather, I don’t know what happens because since we moved here in November they’ve had “record cold temperatures.” Lucky us. I feel like a member of the Donner Party (except their dietary regimen). Like them, when we set this whole move in motion

it was nice warm summertime and by the time we got here record-setting cold was here to greet us. We've pretty much decided it's Missouri's way of saying, "So, California city-slickers, you think you're ready to live in the Midwest? We'll just see about that..." Anyway, weather prediction here is so laughably inaccurate they simply hedge their bets by contradicting themselves within a single forecast. For example, the newspaper has a text 5-day weather forecast accompanied by little pictures summarizing each day's prediction. In Missouri, the pictures never agree with the text. They go something like this:

MONDAY — <little picture of a snowflake> Possible tornadoes with intermittent periods of drought accompanied by hailstorms with temperatures in the high 90's.

TUESDAY — <smiling sunshine picture> Dense fog until mid-morning followed by Noachian-like torrents of rain turning to near blizzard conditions with six to eight feet of snow between 2:00 and 3:00 pm—wind-chills of -30 degrees. Overcast throughout the afternoon and evening.

WEDNESDAY — <picture of clouds and rain> Clear with temperatures reaching over 100 degrees by mid-morning, dropping to the low teens by noon. Seven-year locust swarms expected by early afternoon...

Anyway, you get the idea. The irony is that as bizarre and contradictory as these forecasts are, here in Missouri they actually *could* happen. Forecasts aside, among the most confusing aspects of Missouri weather is how it progresses through the day. California followed a predictable—and logical—pattern. The coolest temperatures were just before dawn. The temperatures would gradually rise throughout the day (corresponding to the sun's strength) then cool-off as evening arrived and the pattern repeated. Here, the pre-dawn can be relatively pleasant with bitter cold accompanying the sun at its zenith, only to warm-up again after dark. Or not. I guess it's understandable why the weather reporters are so clueless. Who could be accurate in such conditions? Maybe they should just admit defeat. Every forecast should just be: "Folks, go

outside and see what it's doing. Whatever you find, that's Missouri's weather. At least, for now."

Speech: I think some of the rather strange speech patterns found in these parts may be attributable to Missouri's identity crisis. Back in the Civil War, as I get the story, Missouri couldn't quite decide if it was a northern state or a southern state. Vestiges of that dilemma still remain in the way people speak here. Some native-born, multi-generational Missourians speak with ordinary "broadcast" English—not the faintest trace of any kind of accent. Others have a deep southern drawl straight from the heart of Dixie. However, Missourians don't seem to find this the least bit odd. They even run furniture-store commercials here with a backwoods couple called Edna and Earl, who insist, "Y'all kin come own down here an' gitchee a re-clan-er fer jest semdy-nahn bux." I somehow expect to find they're actually selling-off furniture and appliances that have been accumulating over the years on their front porch. Upon viewing one of these commercials my wife and I agreed that, whatever else they are, they're something you won't see in California. However, please note that I do not mean to imply that everyone with a southern accent is a backwoods hick. I actually like southern accents and have no doubt that I would readily pick one up, were it not for the fact that only about 5% of Missourians have one. As I mentioned, no one here considers that the least bit peculiar.

Odd speech is not limited to accents, though. It is also found in pronunciation. Somewhere in Missouri's past, an early settler must have happened upon an atlas of the Old World. Intrigued by the names it contained, he (or she) proceeded to use many of them for Missouri locales. Unfortunately, this enterprising individual had never heard how they were pronounced. Thus, while the rest of the known world knows Milan as mee-LAWN, the Missouri town is pronounced MY-lann. The Egyptian city of Cairo is, of course, KY-roe. That is, until it is within Missouri's borders, then it becomes KAY-roe. But I think the worst has to be Versailles. As we all know, French words are notorious for simply ignoring the last several letters they contain, thus the city of this name in France is pronounced vair-SIGH. While that may not seem quite right to us English-speaking types, the name is, after all, French. So they ought to be the ones to decide how it is pronounced. Not in Missouri. The town here is called ver-SAILS. Yes, I know it looks more like versails than vair-sigh, but then how many people call the capital of Iowa dez-MOY-nez? Des Moines also looks more like it should be dez-MOY-

nez than duh-MOYN, but not even Missourians pronounce it that way. Of course, if they ever decide to use that name for a Missouri town, watch out! And it's not just towns. The infamous earthquake fault that runs through part of Missouri is the New Madrid. Can you guess? Yep, you're right. Unlike everyone else on the planet that says muh-DRID, Missourians say MAD-rid. There is even difficulty with the name of their own state. Some say Missour-*ee* and some say Missour-*uh*. Given their track record, I somehow can't escape the feeling that neither may be correct. Sometimes I think maybe I better get away to someplace like ar-KAN-zuss or maybe our tiniest state, ruh-HO-dee IZ-land and clear my head before I start talking the same way.

More peculiar, though, than how some Missourians talk, is what they say. For example, the local newspaper quoted the head of a blasting company, commenting on a freak blast that damaged some homes: "I've been in this business for over 20 years and I can count the number of times that's happened on less than one hand." Um, exactly how many hands *is* less than one? Or how about this scintillating fact from a local radio news report on the effects of tourism on the Missouri economy. "Also, the report noted that 71% of visitors to Missouri come from out of state." Okay, I give up. Where is it that the other 29% of visitors to Missouri come from? Wait, never mind. I think I might be afraid to find out the answer to that one anyhow.

Behavior: For the most part, Missouri drivers do not have that same blood-in-the-eyes, stay-clear-I've-got-a-loaded-gun-on-the-seat aggressiveness as California drivers. In fact, there is a school zone near our house with a 20 mph limit when school is in session, and people actually slow down to 20 mph! I lived next door to a school in California and I don't think I've ever seen that before. In fact some of the cars didn't slow down that much to let their kids out! But for all that, Missouri drivers do have one extremely irritating habit: tailgating. I'm honestly considering proposing to our legislature that they officially change it from "The Show-me State" to "The Show-me What's in Your Trunk State" since everyone that gets behind me seems to want to drive their car into my trunk to find out.

Then there is "throwed rolls." Yes, you read that right. Not "thrown rolls" but "throwed rolls." I remember during an earlier visit to the state seeing an ad for a restaurant that referred to itself as "The home of throwed rolls." I wondered aloud at the time what on earth that slogan could mean. Was it the same connotation as "tossed salad" or "rendered lard?" I now know. I recently visited the place and it means just what it says—or what it would say if better English

were used. They do, indeed, bring out freshly baked, still-hot dinner rolls every few minutes and throw them from the middle of the room to anyone holding up his or her hand. Is this stupid? Is it a crude gimmick? Is it the height of unsophistication? Is it totally un-California? Absolutely. It is also some of the best food (especially the rolls) you'll ever eat. The portions of delicious food are huge beyond belief. As if that weren't enough they come around and spoon-up generous helpings of additional irresistible side dishes for which you have no room but which you cannot refuse. In a way, it's kind of a microcosm of the whole Missouri experience.

Jefferson City, Missouri, is not at all a sophisticated place, even a tad backwoods, and you won't spend a lot of time at the opera or eating abalone like you could in the S. F. Bay Area. But you also won't spend a lot of time in bumper-to-bumper traffic listening to accident reports every ten minutes or wonder how you'll ever afford a house payment on "only" \$75,000 a year income. Here the Wal-Mart greeters actually greet you rather than eyeing you nervously hoping that bulge in your pocket isn't a weapon. Here, when you go to the hardware store or the mall, you very likely might bump into a friend. Here homecoming at the high school is almost a whole-town event. Here most everyone is friendly, plainspoken and genuine. Here, on a clear night you can see every star—not just the handful the big-city lights don't obscure. Here life is a step slower, a notch simpler, and absolutely marvelous. Missouri may have its peculiarities, but we love it. And, if it be the Lord's will, we're here to stay.

15. I DON'T UNDERSTAND...

... *THE OFFER*

It's true. I don't understand the offer. I don't suppose I ever will. Not really. Not totally. Even more than that, though, I don't understand the offer being turned-down. The whole thing is at once one of the most complex, and yet simplest things you'll ever run across. Maybe this story will make it clearer...

"Okay, then, this is the last of it," said Cindy, an edge of tension in her words. "I want you to leave me alone from now on, Nick. I don't ever want to see or hear from you again." She stiffened and stuck her chin out as she spoke to show she wasn't intimidated. But the tremor in her voice gave away how nervous she was. She had psyched herself for days to come across cool and calculating. Unfortunately it didn't quite work. Nevertheless she was committed now. There was no going back.

"Aw, Cindy," said Nick with an amused smirk. "My dear, this is only the beginning. I expect us to be seeing quite a lot of each other. You wouldn't want to mess up our little arrangement, would you?" His tone hardened slightly. "Besides, there's really nothing you can do about it, is there?"

"I mean it," Cindy shot back. "It stops here and now. I want you out of my life. I'm warning you—"

"Warning?" said Nick with a sarcastic laugh. "You? Warning me? Oh, that's funny. That's real funny. You're no threat at all. You wouldn't do anything even if you could."

"I'm not pretending," she shouted in frustration. "I am deadly serious. If you don't leave me alone I won't be responsible for my actions."

“Ooh, I’m so scared. Here, I’ll tell you what. Here’s my gun.” He laid a pistol on the cluttered kitchen table that stood between them. “Go ahead, pick it up. Use it if you’ve got the courage—which you haven’t. I won’t even try to stop you. See I’m headed out the door. This is your big chance, Cindy Black. You can be rid of me once and for all.”

“Don’t tempt me, Nick Cromwell.” His impudence, combined with the hold he had over her, was so infuriating she was literally shaking with rage.

He turned toward her at the doorway; his demeanor changed to one of defiance. “Why? You aren’t going to do anything. You may as well face it, our little arrangement is just gonna go on and on. You ain’t never gettin’ rid of me.” Then he laughed, cruelly and hatefully.

“Stop it,” she screamed. “Stop laughing at me. Stop it, you hear me?” In one motion she scooped up the gun, held it out front of her with both hands and fired. The force of the bullet—shot from scarcely ten feet away—propelled him through the partially opened apartment door and flat on the hallway floor. Cindy stared and slowly lowered the pistol as if in a trance. A bloodstain grew on Nick’s shirt as he lay motionless in the corridor.

The door from apartment 206 across the hall flew open as Mr. Duncan investigated the commotion. He recoiled in shock at the scene directly in front of him. “What’s going on? What’s happened?” He looked from the body on the floor to the motionless Cindy and back again. “What have you done?” He collected his wits enough to kneel down and feel for a pulse.

Seeing him bending over Nick brought Cindy back to her senses. She threw the gun aside in revulsion. “Oh my gosh. He’s—I—call 9-1-1. Get an ambulance!”

Mr. Duncan struggled to his feet, obviously shaken. His words were solemn. “Forget the ambulance. I better call the police. He’s dead.”

* * *

“Thank you again, Warden Peters, for convincing her to see me.” J.C. was in his early thirties and his words conveyed genuine appreciation.

“It is rather irregular, you know,” said the warden. “Prisoner Black says she doesn’t even know you. It took considerable coaxing on my part to get her to agree to talk to you. I’ll need to remain in here with you, and you can’t talk long.”

“I know. And I truly appreciate your assistance.” Cindy was brought in. She stared at J.C. apprehensively. “Ms. Black?” he said extending his hand. This evoked a frown from the

intimidating Warden Peters. He pulled back and pointed to a chair. “Cindy Black? Hi. Have a seat.”

She sat down warily, never taking her eyes off him. “Okay. Now what’s this all about?” she asked.

“I’ve just come to offer you some words of encouragement. To let you know I’m pulling for you. You just hang in there. Oh, sorry, poor choice of words.”

She looked at the warden. “Is this guy for real?” Then she turned back to J.C. “Look, am I supposed to know you or something? Who are you anyway?”

“Oh, sorry, my name’s J. C. Immanuel.”

She scrunched her face trying to remember. “Hmm. Seems like I may have heard the name before. But why are you here wasting your time seeing *me*?”

“Wasting? Oh my no. I’m not wasting my time. You are so important, so valuable, so full of potential.”

“And you’re so full of baloney. Potential? Listen, buddy, I’ve got less than a month to live, unless this last appeal goes through. I wouldn’t exactly call that potential.” Suddenly her eyes lit up. “Wait a minute,” she said suddenly. “You haven’t heard something about my appeal have you?”

“No, sorry, I haven’t.”

Cindy sighed. “I didn’t think so. There’s not much chance anyway. I mean, I am guilty. Yeah, I’ll admit it. I did just what they convicted me of. It was a fair trial. There are really no grounds for an appeal, just some technical mumbo-jumbo the lawyers dreamed-up. So you see, Mr. J. C., my only potential is to end up in that lethal injection chamber in a few days.”

“Cindy, I know it looks bleak right now, but you can’t give up hope.”

“Hope? I have no hope.” She turned to the warden. “I want to go back to my cell now. Get this lunatic away from me.” She stood to leave.

“It’s okay, I’ll go,” said J.C. “But Cindy, I believe in you. You just keep the faith, okay?”

“Yeah, right, Pollyanna.” As he left she shook her head incredulously.

* * *

Their footsteps echoed eerily as the guard brought Cindy down death row toward the chamber. The warden led the solemn little procession as the chaplain, following them, intoned the 23rd Psalm.

At the entrance to the lethal injection chamber they stopped. There were guards doing the last-minute preparations. “Is everything ready?” the warden asked them. When they nodded, she turned to Cindy. “Prisoner Black, have you any last words?”

Up till this moment it had all seemed surreal to her. Now a wrenching fear gripped her throat and stomach. She was trembling and fighting back tears. “No. I’m guilty and I’m paying for my crime. There’s nothing else to say. Let’s just get it over with.”

The chaplain took her hand gently. “They—they say if you try to stay relaxed it’s over quicker. I wish there was something I could—”

The sound of running down the death row corridor caused everyone’s head to turn. “Wait!” called the runner. “Hold it! You’d better read this, Warden.” It was J.C. with a document in his hand.

The warden was irritated by the disruption, but read the paper over quickly. Her eyes bulged and she looked up at J.C. Then she read the document again more carefully. “Does this mean what I think it means? This is most irregular. I’ve never heard of anything like this.”

“I think you’ll find everything is in order,” said J.C.

“What is it? What’s going on?” asked Cindy.

“Just wait over there while I sort this out,” said the warden. “Most irregular.”

“All properly signed and authorized?” J.C. asked the warden.

“Well, yes, but I’ve never—”

“Is it my appeal?” asked Cindy. “Did the governor approve it?”

“High enough authority?” continued J.C., ignoring Cindy’s question.

“Yes, but—” stammered the warden.

J.C. removed his jacket and began rolling up his sleeves. “Then let’s get on with it.”

“It is my appeal, isn’t it?” Cindy said excitedly.

“No,” said the warden bluntly. Then with astonishment in her voice, “It’s something—amazing.” She offered no further explanation, but only watched in shock as J.C. entered the chamber. To the mystified guards she ordered, “Yes, that’s right. Strap him in.”

“Wait,” said Cindy. “What’s going on? I don’t understand. They’re strapping him into the execution chamber. Why?”

“For the murder of Nick Cromwell,” said the warden.

“What?” Cindy looked around at the guard and the chaplain hoping without success for someone to help her understand. “The murder of Nick—? He can’t die for that. He’s not guilty! He wasn’t even there.” The chamber door was closed and the warden gave a nod. “Stop it,” cried Cindy. “You can’t do that, let him out.” She turned to the chaplain. “They’re doing the injection! Make them stop!” He could only shrug helplessly.

The world seemed to stand still for the next few minutes. The warden broke the silence. “That it? Official time of death 8:06 a.m.,” she called. She sighed deeply and shook her head. She turned to the dazed Cindy. “Prisoner Black?”

“Yes?”

“According to this agreement, J.C.’s death has paid for the crime of the murder of Nick Cromwell in full.”

“He can’t do that,” Cindy protested. “That’s impossible. He’s innocent. It isn’t even fair.”

“You don’t seem to understand. He’s already done it. Now all you have to do is sign this agreement, and you’ll be completely exonerated. You’ll be released.”

“You’re telling me that just by signing that paper I can walk out of here?”

“More than that,” said the warden. “As bizarre as it sounds, you’ll not only be free, you won’t be a convicted felon any longer. You won’t even have a record.”

“I can’t believe this. It’s too good to be true. But why? Why would that J. C. guy do this for me?”

The chaplain spoke up. “I believe it’s what’s called love. He considered you that valuable. He saw your tremendous potential.”

“Me? But I’m nobody—nobody special, anyway. I just don’t understand.”

The warden offered a pen and the agreement document. “Just sign here.”

“One last question, just out of curiosity. What happens if I don’t sign?”

“You go back to prison. Back on death row.”

Cindy took the pen and looked around at everyone. “I still don’t get it, exactly. But who in their right mind would turn down an offer like this?”

Who indeed? This little story may seem far-fetched. Truthfully, though, Someone has already done something very similar. The difference is that you and I are the ones on death row. And just like Cindy, we deserve to be there. What’s that you say? You’re not a murderer? Perhaps not. Actually you and I, nice as we are, are much worse. For we have offended the God of heaven and earth, the One who made us, who gave us life and whose mercy allows us to live. Every time we have committed a selfish act toward anyone or failed to help someone in need, we have first of all offended Him. Every time we have failed to acknowledge Him, been too busy for Him, or gone off into our secret little world of wicked thoughts and desires, we have spit in the face of His dying Son. Like J.C., Jesus Christ cut in front of us at the scene of Judgment and took our punishment upon Himself. And now we can be set free—with no record of wrongdoing—if we just accept His offer. We commit our lives to Him, and He gives us eternal life, forgiveness, and a thousand blessings besides. What a deal!

Like the lady said, I still don’t get it, exactly. But who in their right mind would turn down an offer like this? Yet every day there are people who do, sometimes over and over.

No question about it. That is definitely something I will never understand.