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**Winter sets in, and the loonies arrive**

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—“Blue Grass fields are mottled brown in January, except for patches of mottled white. The wooded mountainsides are mainly mottled gray. I’m feeling a little mottled myself.

Still, this is our season of hope.

We hope the next two months are not like the Arctic icebox of last year. We hope there’s enough precipitation to charge our water supplies without flooding. We hope the pile of split firewood gets us through to warm nights.

Above all, we hope winter ends. On this, the odds are on hope’s side. This is not often the case.

For many thousands of years, the end of winter here has been neither a matter of local farmers hoping it back into its cave nor dumb luck.

Blue Grass stops being in cold storage when the Earth moves toward a place in its elliptical orbit where its tilted axis allows sunlight to hit at an evermore direct angle. More sunlight landing and longer daytimes mean more warmth.

It’s easy to pooh-pooh planetary science when I’m walking to the barn. I cannot feel or see the earth moving in orbit, or rotating every 24 hours or tilting at a 23.4-degree angle. My senses tell me the Earth is a big pancake that stays in one place as a good pancake should.

Scientists call the Earth’s axial tilt the “obliquity of the ecliptic,” where ecliptic refers to the planet’s orbital plane. (Stay with me.)

The next time a police officer asks you to get out of your car and walk a straight line, you can refuse on the grounds that that trying to stand upright -- that is, perfectly perpendicular to our orbital plane -- on a spinning, curved slope is next to impossible. The obliquity of the ecliptic is the source of many undeserved DUI arrests. (When the judge asks for evidence to support your position, show him this column and seek permission to call Issac Newton as a defense witness.)

When my wife, Melissa, complains that her North Carolina feet are cold in the middle of January in our home at the foot of Snowy Mountain, I tell her to blame the obliquity of the ecliptic instead of me. (This column is packed with handy, how-to marital advice, isn’t it?)

On those rare occasions when scientific truth does not totally meet the needs of her cold feet, she might move the discussion toward a practical response by saying: “Do something!”

Whereupon I offer to either change the degree of our axial tilt or let her wear a pair of my treasured white wool socks from the 11th grade.

For my 65th birthday, she enrolled me in a better-listening class.

I feel lucky to live in a four-season place even though I’d vote for any candidate who promises to repeal winter without raising taxes.

Feeling lucky and luck are different.

Belief in our own luckiness is something we rig out in our own brains. Luck doesn’t exist. Chance exists. Many will disagree.

Many people try to influence chance or contrive a strategy to control its seeming mystery. They see luck as something that might be acquired to direct chance. It’s hard to accept that chance cannot be influenced, decoded or appeased.

I'm not superstitious about most things, but I did come to sort of think that my grandfather's pocket watch was lucky, and that events would turn out better if I carried it. Over the years, I never observed that either bad situations were less bad because of having this timepiece in my pocket or that it made good situations better than I had a right to expect.

As lucky charms go, it was neither here nor there. But I certainly felt less stupid hauling around a round-faced working clock than a rabbit's foot or a horse shoe.

I don't think certain individuals attract more than their share of good luck or bad. I don't think a lottery winner is lucky, and all who lost are unlucky. It wasn't luck that chose a winning number; it came up by chance. Many will disagree.

I don't think good luck is a reward and bad luck is deserved. Either happens, independent of our character. Many will disagree.

The shooting in Tucson got me thinking about chance and luck. All of us bear the risk of a nut firing a gun into a crowd. Since none of us know in advance when something like this will happen, it's chance -- not good luck or bad -- that determines whether we are hit or missed, killed or nicked.

The alternative to chance as a way of explaining such things is to believe that a supreme being guides these matters...and everything else.

It's possible, of course, that both chance and design are at work. Whichever way you land on this question, luck loses out.

When I was 14 or so, I was walking home from high school with a friend when I noticed a toy pistol on a lawn by the sidewalk a block from where I lived. I picked it up. We played around with it, squeezing the trigger. And then a loaded clip fell out of the handle and bounced off my shoe.

The cops told us that a burglar had been caught on that block the night before. He had pitched his gun, leaving the safety on. Otherwise, I would have shot my friend, or he me. We were lucky, but luck had nothing to do with it.

We hope for luck, which can't hurt as long as we don't put any money on it. We also hope for hope itself when hoping for luck falls short.

So it's 10-below freezing out here, and I've given up on both luck and hope. Melissa and I are fighting over my socks.

I try to explain all this to her—how feeling lucky is a trick we play on ourselves; how she better grab a stout tree lest she fall off our turning, curved and tilted landscape; how her feet are cold because of Kepler's laws of planetary motion, not because I dragged her off to Virginia's Little Siberia 27 years ago.

She says that I'm "crazy as a loon." (Melissa has yet to tone down her rhetoric in keeping with the President's call to be more civil with each other.)

I reply that loons like me are not crazy; we just sound crazy.

And I point out for the record that I have plenty of company flying around on the thermals of hot air.

Curtis Seltzer is a land consultant who works with buyers and helps sellers with marketing plans. He is author of How To Be a DIRT-SMART Buyer of Country Property at [www.curtis-seltzer.com](http://www.curtis-seltzer.com) where his weekly columns are posted. He also writes for [www.landthink.com](http://www.landthink.com).

Contact: Curtis Seltzer, Ph.D.  
Land Consultant  
1467 Wimer Mountain Road  
Blue Grass, VA 24413-2307  
540-474-3297

[curtisseltzer@htcnet.org](mailto:curtisseltzer@htcnet.org)  
[www.curtis-seltzer.com](http://www.curtis-seltzer.com)