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To quit or not to quit, that is sometimes the question

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—It has been raining in Blue Grass for a month. We've been sprinkled on, drizzled on, dumped on and gullywashed.

Spells of bad weather settle in every so often. They combine two toos—too much and too long. I've had to complain before about extended stays of head-shrinking cold, head-spinning heat and head-aching drought. Now, it's head-drenching rain.

On Sunday about midnight, I lay awake watching the fireworks. Lightning cracked and sizzled. Darkness turned halogen-bright. Thunder lumbered through the house.

Materials from 100 years ago -- red oak boards sawn from trees on this farm -- stood between me and that. I was amazed at how much comfort I found in a false sense of security.

Weather in the country means something, usually a lot. Bad weather means that we can't do the farm work that needs to be done, or that doing it in spite of the weather will be unpleasant and, perhaps, dangerous.

We are often forced to gamble on weather breaking our way. It's a losing bet about half the time.

Twice, I've had to pour outside concrete in heavy rainstorms, because that's what you do when the mixer trucks roll up wanting to unload. On timberland, you're always gambling that the next hurricane won't flatten your trees, the predicted ice storm won't break them in half and the invasive bug du jour won't eat them alive.

When you're forced to do something inside a box of bad weather, you can think outside it all you want but you will soon face a choice: quit and come at again when conditions improve or continue.

If you choose to continue, you can then keep on until it no longer makes any sense or try to finish no matter what.

To illustrate a no-matter-what choice, I can report that this week I was pre-soaked while mowing the grass and then run through the heavy-duty wash cycle while finishing some tractor work. At some point, being wet no longer matters, because you can't get any wetter.

Quit-or-continue choices abound, both on the farm and even elsewhere.

I often mull them by not mulling them. This requires that I do something useful and emotionally therapeutic, like shoveling out the cattle barn.

Some years ago when we were carrying 60 steers through the winter, I would have the feeding barn's dirt floor broom-clean before they arrived each October. With access to pasture during the entire winter, I always hoped our visitors would make their deposits out there in the field of dreams rather than in the dining hall where I was the floorboy.

Another audacious hope dashed.

By the last of April, a 30-inch-thick layer of lazy sanitary judgments covered my one-half-acre barn floor. This goopy muck had to dry for six months before I dared to disturb it with either a shovel or serious mulling.

With great foresight, I left one corner untouched for the last 15 years just in case I developed mental-health issues that needed work. (People who have no muck to move are an at-risk population. I provide mulling opportunities for a select few each year. Apply early.)

This weekend I ruminated over several quit-or-continue choices as I dug through the barn's stockpiled memories.

First, I decided to continue breathing in and out rather than quit the Earth at 6 p.m. on Saturday. At that precise moment, I was drawing out and drawing in the deeper meanings of a reasonably expensive cigar in our woods by the pond where I go to avoid cleaning out messy barns of my own making.

Then, I decided to continue working full-time rather than retire, which I think I actually did about 30 years ago when I stopped working for paychecks.

Finally, I decided to stop doing things when they stopped making sense. It's quite easy to continue doing things that don't make much sense, because we understand costs already paid better than costs coming due.

I wrote a paper in 1968 on this very subject in a graduate-school class on American foreign policy. I received a C, which was the equivalent of a flunk. The professor considered me "impudent."

He went on to advise President Carter. I went on to advise cattle on issues of waste management.

However, the one time the Carter White House did ask me for advice, I told Eizenstat to not do something stupid. The White House paid no attention and never sought additional advice of the type I had provided.

"Into each life some rain must fall," Longfellow wrote.

Some's okay.

But I went down Virginia seekin' shelter from the storm.

So who'll stop the rain?

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