

Humor lightens the load

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.--When I'm boxed in where it's hard and dark, I look for a little comedy in the corners.

It's gallows humor, I suppose, which seeks out something funny in the face of, and in response to, a big trauma or life-threatening situation. The person who is about to be clobbered diminishes the coming disaster and boosts his morale before being struck.

When close to death with cerebral meningitis, Irish writer Oscar Wilde -- penniless and bedridden in a run-down, French boarding house -- reportedly wisecracked: "This wallpaper and I are fighting a duel to the death. Either it goes or I do."

Robert G. Elliott, New York's "state electrician" who executed 387 men and women in the 20s and 30s, wrote in his book, Angel of Death (1940), that George Appel, a tough cop-killer, quipped as he settled in to Sing Sing's electric chair: "Well, gentlemen, you're about to see a baked Appel."

Elliott, a devout Methodist, grew roses and gladiolus in his garden, wore brightly colored ties and opposed capital punishment because, he said, it served no purpose. But he always liked electricity.

My friends and I, now in our late 60s, exchange jokes and cartoons about our eroding memories, the need for replacement parts from the Pep Boys, aches and pains (I'm not talking about spouses and kids) and fading mental faculties (none of which these days would get hired at even a fifth-rate, discredited community college). We bond through laughter, and, maybe, it bucks up our courage.

We try to remember what we forgot to remember while we were trying to remember not to forget what we've now forgotten.

We put on teeth-clenching grins and don't look at our losing cards. This bluff won't take the pot on the last hand.

Gallows humor doesn't stop the hangman or change the outcome, but it probably makes the inevitable a little easier. It can't hurt, can it?

There's also something that I've come to call, *post-gallows humor*. A few examples.

On Father's Day in 1982, my eight-year-old son died of a rare, inherited brain disorder. Batten Disease (www.bdsra.com) was such an outlier that we were unable to find a single other current case in the United States. Not much funny in that, I admit.

When John Nicholas was about two-and-a-half, I took him to see a prominent pediatrician in Charleston, W.Va., because I thought something was wrong. He seemed to have vision troubles. He was clumsier than either of his parents, which was saying a lot. He had a monosyllabic, 25-word vocabulary.

(A friend tried to comfort me with the information that Albert Einstein didn't talk until he was about four and then said very little until he was nine. The parallel didn't seem plausible, since John Nicholas wasn't going to get any Einstein from me or my ancestors, who were nice enough but basically poor-as-dirt hewers of wood and drawers of water. On the other hand, he might have gotten some good stuff from my first wife who, I think, graduated from Harvard and Yale Law School with all As. She never said exactly, and I certainly wasn't going to press her.)

Dr. Robert Young examined John Nicholas, thumped him up one side and down the other and had him walk back and forth in a hallway. "Nothing wrong with your child," he announced to me, "except that he has a middle-class father who wants him to go to Harvard."

How, I wondered, could unformed thoughts in parents create toe-walking and an inability to pedal a tricycle in a child?

Two months later, John Nicholas had the first of many grand mal seizures. And in 1979, first-term Governor Bill Clinton appointed Bob to direct the Arkansas Department of Health.

Two neurologists served Charleston back then. The more "intellectual" of the two told us that the seizures and other symptoms were occurring because John Nicholas was "minimally brain damaged. We'll go with barbiturates and other anticonvulsants."

“‘Minimally brain damaged’ isn’t a diagnosis,” I said, being my usual annoying self. “If something active is causing the seizures, the drugs will hide the progression.”

“I’ll treat him as if he were my own son,” he responded.

Geez Louise, I thought, I need to find a more curious doc, which I eventually did.

Before John Nicholas was sent home, his mother and I were required to see the hospital psychologist. We told our story. He announced that the tension between the two of us was causing the seizures and other symptoms.

It occurred to me then that if we had gone to this hospital’s janitor for counseling, he would have said the seizures were caused by the dust bunnies under the kid’s bed.

I find all of this amusingly sad...with the gallows in hindsight.

I slid into my current post-gallows-humor funk when I read that the United States, Russia and Iran are now allied in Iraq.

These countries and others are backing the Shiite-oriented government of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki against the newly proclaimed caliphate of the jihadist and largely Sunni, breakaway group from al Qaeda, the newly proclaimed Islamic State, led by the newly proclaimed Caliph Ibrahim, whose old *nom de guerre* is Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

The Caliph is hiding. From wherever, he has ordered all Muslims to join him in the Syrian-Iraqi desert, from whence they will “avenge” Muslims in all corners of the earth through terrorism. He is targeting, in particular, “Crusaders [Christians], atheists and Jews..., as well as all nations and religions of disbelief....” If you don’t swallow the Caliph’s hook, line and sinker, you deserve to die, and he will try to kill you.

So I found myself pining bemusedly and ironically for the somewhat limited lunacies of the Ba’athist secularist, Saddam Hussein, who, at the end, ruled over one small hole in the ground where he devoted himself to growing a beard and making weapons of myth destruction.

Post-gallows humor.

One last example.

Readers of this column may recall the following quotation from last week: “‘I may need you to powder my butt,’ she said.”

The “she” in this case has informed me that I made an egregious error. Either these words were never uttered (and I fabricated the entire sentence) or I might have heard something like: “‘I may need you to powder my butter,’ she said.”

I offer an apology and a retraction.

In the same vein, I’ve been instructed that “tandy bogus” and “wazoo” are not to be used in polite company, or even in a family newspaper. I’ve also been informed that these volatile regions should never be associated with the “she” referred to above.

“Bogus,” I’ve learned, is an Americanism that originally described the apparatus used to counterfeit money in the 1820s.

“Tandy bogus” might have been a feather cushion Romans sat on while watching people get killed in the Colosseum. But several bogus authorities suggest it is a Mediterranean fish-head casserole that glows in the dark.

Tandy bogus does not, let me repeat, refer to any bottom-dwelling area from Charlotte, as I reported.

“Wazoo,” incidentally, is a large version of a popular string-band instrument that’s been crossed with a double-reed duck call.

I regret these errors and pray the anatomical features associated with my reportorial mistakes find forgiveness in their hearts.

I need to be careful with post-gallows humor, not to get hung up.

Curtis Seltzer is a land consultant, columnist and author of **How To Be a DIRT-SMART Buyer of Country Property**, available at www.curtis-seltzer.com where his columns are posted. His latest books - **-Maple-leaf Rags, Snowy Mountain Breakdown, Blue Grass Notes** and **Land Matters** -- are available through his website.

He writes for www.RoelResouces.com and bimonthly for BackHome Magazine.

Use and Payment:

This original column may be reprinted or posted on websites for one-time use under the following payment schedule and terms. It may not be resold. Payment per column:

News services and magazines.....	\$50
Print weeklies and nonprofits.....	\$10
Print dailies, brokers, developers, online buy/sell sites, blogs, newsletters... ..	\$15

Author credit above should be included at the end of each column. Editing for length is permitted. Copyright remains with Curtis Seltzer and applies to the column's use.

Send checks to Curtis Seltzer, 1467 Wimer Mountain Road, Blue Grass, VA 24413.

All archived columns may be purchased for \$10 each, 60 days after the release date. They are posted at www.curtis-seltzer.com, click on Country Real Estate. Contact me for orders, and I will provide them by email.

Reporters and publications may obtain a complimentary review copy of my books by emailing a request to curtisseltzer@htcnet.org; include a physical address.