

I confess under duress

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—It was only a matter of time before a righteous citizen turned me into The Authorities.

Monday morning I was at our county-run workout room with several others when the Sheriff walked in.

I was lying on my back beneath a recumbent bike. It certainly appeared that I was doing something suspicious, maybe even of a sexual nature, with the bike's under regions as both of us were consensually recumbent.

This is not part of my normal workout routine, though it may have looked that way.

My friend, Joerg, and I were replacing several screws that had fallen out of the seat. Two local ladies in their...let's just say, over 60...waited while we got the bike ready for them.

After we finished, the Sheriff asked me to step outside "for privacy." Which I did.

My first thought was that something had happened to Melissa, our Commonwealth Attorney, with whom he works closely. We have no security in our one courtroom, and she refuses to carry a pistol as her predecessor did. No one has threatened her, but a bad actor never would.

My second thought was that she had been injured either in a car wreck or riding her horse.

Most of us will get terrible news out of the blue.

Melissa was not the issue. The Sheriff said that he had received a complaint that morning—about me.

I took it like a man.

"What'd I do?" I squeaked.

I rummaged through my increasingly random access memory searching for recent transgressions—felonious behaviors; high crimes or misdemeanors; spousal abuse on the order of unwanted problem-solving not to mention hanging a wash incorrectly; cursing in public (which I admit to doing the other day when replacing a heavy lintel over one of my many block-barn windows and getting it in upside down and backward after carefully marking it correctly, but surely I wouldn't be sentenced to hard time for calling myself "a ***** idiot" out loud, given that truth is an iron-clad defense).

Well, there was talking (to myself) while driving (which is where I solve many of my wife's most urgent problems that she doesn't want solved).

I'd considered, but rejected, the idea of sending myself an email in which I would suggest the possibility to myself of blowing up the Statue of Liberty to see whether the National Security Agency was monitoring email content. I don't think I can be sent to Siberia for thinking a bad thought. Yet.

Forty-five years ago when I was a poor graduate student at Columbia University living in a very poor neighborhood, two Puerto Rican guys accused me of second-degree burglary. They said I had broken into their apartment next to my building's ground-floor entrance and stolen a small TV and seven iridescent suits size 26 short. (I am a 44 long).

I said I was looking for my lost dog and had never been in their apartment or taken anything from it. I had, however, asked two other guys who *were* robbing this apartment (I thought they lived there) if they had seen my dog, which explains why the burglary victims thought I was part of a criminal syndicate.

The charge was dropped after I passed a lie-detector test and told my dog story to a grand jury. My wife continues to watch me like a cop when I'm around suits that are 18 sizes too small, particularly ones that glow in the dark.

I've told her that my brush with criminal justice explains why I refuse to wear suits, even ones that fit. She claims I've cooked up a baloney excuse to avoid doing normal things, like dressing up for weddings and funerals. (Her father was the same way, which says something, but I'm not about to venture just exactly what.)

Was my old burglary rap resurfacing after all these years?

The one time that I wanted to get arrested -- a number of us were conducting a sit-in at the mayor's office in Charleston, W.Va., on behalf of sanitation workers -- the mayor refused our offer.

The chief of police did arrest a bucket that I was using to lift food from the street to the second-floor window. I asked the chief what charges he was bringing against the bucket and when it was to be arraigned.

As the bucket was led away, I reminded the chief that indigent buckets had a right to be represented by counsel and told the prisoner to say nothing during interrogation. It may still be held in solitary for all I know.

The Charleston chief made a note on my permanent record card: "Suspect was armed with metal pail that could be converted into lethal weapon when connected to the string that suspect was also carrying without a permit."

But aside from these dalliances with the criminal underworld, I've managed to escape detection and prosecution for decades.

"Someone has complained about the way you park here," the Sheriff said as we stood outside the workout room.

We are a county of 2,100 residents. Tiny infractions in our tiny community merit our attention. It's not every day and in every community that a nonconforming parker like me gets the attention he deserves.

Here's my story—which has nothing to do with a lost dog, size 26 short suits or an innocent bucket.

An n-shaped driveway off Spruce Street in our county seat, Monterey, serves several buildings, including the workout room, which is located on the right leg of the "n." Everyone enters this one-lane, one-way road at the foot of its left leg. The top of the "n" is the driveway's highest point. The road there is concealed by tall, dense bushes.

Everyone, save me, parks along the right leg by driving in at a down-slope angle, front end first and back end pointed uphill. I, too, parked this way for a while.

But I discovered that when I parked front end down in a low-slung vehicle, I couldn't see descending traffic when a large SUV, van or full-size truck was parked uphill next to me. Twice, I almost backed out into an oncoming vehicle.

For that reason, I started backing in uphill, so that my front end faced down and toward the driveway. From that position, I could see traffic and exit safely.

But this put my car at a right angle toward all the other parked vehicles. I didn't back in with my front end facing uphill -- which would align me with the others -- because I would have difficulty making a very acute left turn into the narrow driveway in the tight circumstances presented by parked vehicles and structures.

Bottom line: I had destroyed the unofficial symmetry of a public parking strip. An anonymous note was left on my windshield a few weeks ago.

I should add that the county has painted no parking lines in this area or posted instructions as to whether cars are required to park front end first (the dangerous present practice) or back end first (the safer alternative preferred by one local unorganized underworld operator).

It goes without saying that no one followed my example of good vehicular citizenship.

My wife would, I think, prefer that I park like everyone else, since my asymmetry reflects on her marital judgment.

“I park this way for safety,” I told the Sheriff. “I don’t want to back out and hit a car coming downhill that I can’t see.”

This, he said, made sense, and I was released on my own recognizance. Nonetheless, suspicion clings to me like an iridescent suit size 26 short.

Aristotle observed that habit is one of the seven causes of human behavior. The others are chance, nature, compulsion, reasoning, anger (passion) and appetite (desire).

Clearly, all of us are creatures of our habits. The interesting questions involve which habits we decide to establish and why we choose them over others.

Presumably, habits are functional, efficient and provide some advantage over the alternatives. Why then do we establish habits of thought and behavior that are dysfunctional, inefficient and put us at a disadvantage? Why do we binge on credit cards when we can’t afford it, or drive drunk, or gamble with the rent money, or invest without research or not study for exams?

It appears that we start a habit by the way we first respond to a new situation or cue. And that decision is shaped by what we’ve seen others do in similar situations, our own analogous experiences, peer pressure, our ability to reason and our sense of right and wrong.

Once we install a habit, our brains slip into an automatic mode, a kind of sleep, which leads us to do what we’ve done before. That’s why habits are hard to break.

Excellence is a habit, as Aristotle said, as is its opposite. It’s often a roll of the dice of life as to whether each of us starts one way or the other.

For the moment, I’ve evaded arrest and punishment. But the long arm of our local prosecutor is reaching in my direction, her nails wiggling with possible menace.

“A new shade? Pink?” I ask.

“Coral,” she said.

“I confess. I didn’t notice.”

“A bad habit,” she said.

“A bad habit,” I agreed.

“You have others,” she noted. “This parking thing....”

“I’ll turn myself in,” I said. “I’ll do community service. I could paint parking lines at the workout room.”

She sighed. “Kid, you need to rehabilitate yourself.”

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