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How much is enough?

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—I was never very interested in philosophy, but occasionally one of life's riddles locks me up. Then I'm not fit for anything until I forget what I've been unable to solve.

Forgetting vexatious questions is one of the few benefits of getting older.

Forgetting is far more rewarding than providing answers.

Proof, you ask? I have it on rock-solid authority that two women of my acquaintance do not like a male I know to solve female problems.

I, on the other hand, am more than willing for women to solve all of my issues, because I'm both lazy and broad-minded. Volunteers have yet to appear.

I've been cutting and splitting firewood for the last few months. Most of it comes from hardwoods -- red oak, sugar maple, locust, cherry and black birch -- that were blown down or damaged in last summer's windstorm. I now have about six cords next to the house.

Is that enough?

Our yearly firewood needs depend on how long and cold the winter is. It also depends on how warm we want to keep ourselves.

The resident Yankee's thermostat is comfortable in the high 50s. The resident Southern thermometer doesn't stop ringing her alarm function until ambient temperature is steady in the very high 70s. Like most couples who try to get along, we compromise—at 78.

Having fallen short of enough firewood several times in years past, I no longer try to cut it close, in a manner of speaking. Flailing around with trucks and chainsaws on iced-over rocks in foot-deep snow in 20-degree weather is an experience similar to writing: It's fun to have done, not much fun to be doing and no fun at all to be anticipating.

I, therefore, try to gauge my rising pile of firewood against what I think I might need in light of the unknowable future, plus a little extra for peace-of-mind security.

Of course, I'm never quite sure when enough ends and extra should begin...or end. So the pile keeps getting bigger. I am a driven prisoner of my own fear.

You can never have more than enough security, I've heard it said. It seems, however, that no one is quite sure what security -- financial, emotional, physical and firewoodal -- actually is, or when enough security is enough.

We seem to believe that security is prevention and then quick reaction. The latter usually shows up after it's needed. We rely on prevention.

Sizing a woodpile is similar to sizing a pile of needed money. How much money is enough for you? When should a little extra be added to your pile?

All of us -- from the most abjectly poor to the most needlessly rich -- proceed from day to day with some net worth and cash flow. With the exception of the very wealthiest, most Americans would say that their level of money -- in its broadest sense -- is not enough for their needs, let alone their wants.

Needs and wants are defined individually, according to circumstances. Were I hungry, I'd need a loaf of bread. Were I a billionaire, I might need a yacht on which to loaf.

On the whole, I'd guess that most Americans need less than they think—and want more than they need. But the pursuit of more is what drives us. In my case, it's more firewood.

[For reasons on my own mental health, I'm considering retiring the woodstove next year and switching to propane.]

And yet, poor or rich, we all move on to the next day, the next year, anchored in whatever money we currently have and living with a sense of chronic shortfall.

We measure whether we think we have enough in comparison with what we had, what we have and what we think we'll need.

We also measure enough by how dangerous the risk is of sticking with what we have, and how much we fear the consequences of making a wrong change.

If you park both risk and fear in life's long-term lot, you end up accepting the size of your firewood pile as is. So, most of us try to throw on another stick or two, and maybe more.

When you have enough, adding more than you need is simply sawing firewood for the sake of sawing firewood. It's making more money because it's something to do and not because you gain any increment of security or satisfy any need that isn't already met.

More than enough doesn't bring extra security, because absolute security is undefinable and unachievable no matter how much we fort up.

Neither Bill Gates nor Warren Buffet, for example, has enough money to buy his way out of a three-month-maximum cancer diagnosis. We just have to accept that some predicaments are unchangeable. They're the ones that you can't weasel out, buy yourself out or lay it off on someone else.

Maybe we should define enough differently. Maybe the trick is to go after whatever more is needed, but not a great deal more than that.

I will keep this message to myself and not spread it around through sneezing and websites. It's not exactly appropriate for the shopping days between now and Christmas.

The first New England Thanksgiving in November, 1621, was a celebration of having produced food enough on a communal farm to get through the coming winter.

Fifty-three surviving Pilgrims and 90 Native Americans sat together for a meal. The spirit of this bring-a-dish buffet did not last for long.

The Pilgrims were not much for partying with each other, let alone the Been-Heres.

I must have some anti-social Pilgrim in me, since the last time I was invited to a party, I holed up in the library working on another big philosophical question: When do we eat?

The idea of having more than enough, of stockpiling surplus in the form of money, took root in Plymouth's rocks a few years later. Those Natives who survived Pilgrim cooking were ushered West with the blessings of the colonists. They left behind a memorial plaque: "No good deed goes unpunished."

In the spirit of enough, I offer again my Thanksgiving prayer of sorts, along with the promise that I may be able to stop piling up firewood before Christmas, or thereabouts.

*We are thankful today for those who are with us,
and for those with whom we once shared this meal.
We are thankful today for what's good in the world,
and for when we've done the right thing in the right way.
We are thankful today for what we have, and for what
we don't need.
We are thankful today for any help we've received, and
for any we were able to give.
We are thankful today for the freedom we have, and*

for the times we've used it.
We are thankful today for those who love us, and
for those we have loved.
We are thankful today for today, and for the possibility of
tomorrow.