

Moose and I share a flaw

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Most of us have had the unsettling experience of watching a loved one harm himself or herself despite our best advice or intervention.

This came to mind over the weekend when Melissa, the resident horse person, asked my permission to take a heavy farm sock from my drawer.

As marital requests go, odd though this was, I didn't feel that I could be so small-minded as to deny it, even though I'm borderline small-minded. Maybe, I thought, she wanted to practice her darning.

"OK," I said, "I'll bite. Why do you want one of my socks?"

"For Moose," she said.

Moose -- her big, young lug of a quarter horse -- was officially named "Artfully Chocolate" by his first owner. This had morphed into "Mousse." To me, a big lug deserves to be named "Moose," rather than "Mousse," which is a slightly gummy confection whose life depends on raw eggs and air bubbles.

As a general rule, I do not give her horses my personal furnishings, even those items I shun for years owing to their newness.

"OK," I said, "and why do you need one of my socks for Moose?"

"To put on his foot," she said, giving me a look that indicated she thought I needed an immediate transfusion of IQ cells.

Well, where else would you put a sock? I thought to myself. You wouldn't put a sock on a horse's ear, would you?

"OK," I said, "and why do you need to put one of my socks on one of Moose's feet?"

"To protect the diaper," she said.

"That certainly clears things up."

"I should hope so."

I've learned not to ask too many questions of the resident horse woman about her horses. But sometimes I can't resist.

"Has Moose reconfigured his digestive tract?"

"No, Moose has not reconfigured his digestive tract."

"Does he still eat at one end and deposit from the other?"

"Yes, he still eats at one end and deposits from the other."

"So why are you diapering his foot?"

“Because he’s lame.”

A diaper is not exactly the first thing I would think of to treat lameness.

“And you think a diaper covered by my sock will cure lameness?”

“Yes,” she said. “And when I’m done with him, I’ll try it on you.”

“Sock it to me,” I said.

Moose came to Melissa with an inoperable cyst in his front right hoof. After his shoes were pulled a couple of weeks back, he developed a painful abscess there. I don’t think he did this on purpose.

Melissa planned to apply an Epsom-salt poultice to draw out the bacterial pus before it moved up Moose’s leg or broke through.

The diaper was supposed to cover the draining hoof and protect it from dirt and manure. The sock was supposed to protect the diaper.

As you might expect, Moose rejected the assistance that would have made his life easier by discarding both sock and diaper within minutes.

I now have one unmatched sock roaming free and a box of diapers in search of a bottom.

People, like horses, often don’t do what’s in their best interest even when they know better, and even when a helpful other points the way.

With Moose, his best interest imposed a small annoyance on top of his discomfort. So he got rid of the solution. In his mind, he showed somebody something.

Many books have been written about how to make decisions that are in your best interest. These methods usually involve favoring analytical thought over immediate feelings, exactly what Melissa did and Moose rejected.

Many decision methods slide into calculating costs and benefits and then choosing the option that presents the most benefits for the least cost. While all of us use this method in one form or another all the time, it gets harder to make it work when you have to figure in time, unknowns, risks, probabilities, anticipated behavior of others and improbable things that you can’t anticipate. So you use your brain to do the best you can with what you have to work with at the time.

People are constantly making decisions that are not in their best interest. They learn this only after the decision has played out. The advantage of age is that older people have more hindsight experience than younger people.

Sometimes, bad decisions are a matter of emotion eclipsing reason. Sellers often pitch their products and services to a buyer's emotions, because it's the most efficient way to get a buyer to buy. Emotion lights up the buyer's brain faster than a trudge on paper through advantages and disadvantages.

Business leaders make bad decisions from being overconfident in their knowledge and judgment, coupled with overconfidence in their ability to manipulate the world to their liking.

When I've made decisions that were not in my best interest, three factors were always present: 1) absence of advice from a person who's done it before, or failure to heed advice given; 2) trying something new in which I had not enough supporting experience, and 3) an inability or failure to research the decision adequately.

These three factors led Moose to shed Melissa's diaper-and-sock poultice that would have relieved the pain in his hoof.

I'm not sure why she likes big lugs like us. Maybe it's because we're lugs.

Traditional societies empower age as a one-stop provider of research, experience and advice. Age is thought to be insurance against making self-destructive decisions.

The problem is that age leans toward the familiar—no change, slow change and last change. Age is captive to the changing balance of life knowledge, which, as we get older, is increasingly weighted toward the knowable that's happened rather than the unknowable that could happen. Age befriends the static; youth gambles with upstarts.

There are not many books around about how to take advice for your own good. (Mentoring provides it, but availability doesn't guarantee that it will be followed.)

I'm sure I would have laughed meanly had my father given me such a book as a young man. My loss. It's taken a lot of hindsight to type those two words.

I've discussed this with Moose by the way.

I explained an abscess to him. I showed him a photograph of a pus build-up in a horse of a different color. I made clear that his discomfort was caused by the abscess and not my sock. I, then, went over treatment options with him.

"Poultice-diaper-and-sock," I suggested. "For your own good."

"Neigh," he said.

“Nay is not the answer that’s in your best interest.”

He looked at me, and then he kicked over his full feed bucket with his bad foot.

What can you do with boys who won’t take good advice?

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 a bimonthly column for BackHome Magazine.

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