

Country Real Estate, #330: July 11, 2014

Work is for the dogs, and me

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.--On weekend mornings, I walk Nellie, our Yellow Lab, along our two-lane road to the top of Wimer Mountain and back, about four miles. Although her turbo-charged engine is always locked into four-wheel-drive, she is pretty good about walking beside me and not yanking my shoulder out of its familiar socket.

For Nellie, these trips are serious work.

Road kill needs to be sniffed and affirmatively disrespected. Trash needs to be investigated. Scents need to be identified and recorded. (I see her asking: Why did this scent cross the road?)

Birds need to be pointed. Deer need to be shown whos boss. Cattle need to be stared down. Sheep need to be spooked and scattered like billiard balls on a hard break.

The bear-dog kennel needs to be passed quickly—Nellie doesnt mess with guys who never smile and have no sense of humor.

Nellie ignores the five chained beagles farther up the road even though they stand on their hind legs and bark their heads off when we pass.

A local friend told me: For hunting bear, a man needs hounds; for rabbit, a man needs bagels.

(Bagels?—the new carrot?)

You bait rabbits with bagels? I asked.

Bagels, not bagels. Little hunting dogs—bages. I am understanding-disabled.

For a long time, I thought Nellie liked to take walks with me,

because she liked me. (I had the same thought about women I dated and even married. One girlfriend liked walking with me because she was

faster and always walked ahead. At the time, she was going through her hear-me-roar phase.)

I now think Nellie sees our walks as assignments to do important work. I'm not the alpha dog on these jobs; I'm the accompanist.

While Wimer Mountain Road is not Nellie's fenced homestead, she takes on a good-for-the-community duty to patrol it for trespassers and troublemakers. She knows them by their scents, which is how, I suppose, she knows me as well.

Why does Nellie want to work? (I need to be honest here: Nellie spends most of her time sleeping, not working. On the other paw, she *could* spend her waking hours being actively idle.)

She would be fed, watered, petted and praised even if she just galumphed along as zonked out as a zombie. Why work?

The genetics of many dog breeds were manipulated to produce working behaviors—dispositions to retrieve, herd, track or hunt, for example. Is that why Nellie polices the road?

If dogs can be hard-wired for certain behaviors, could it be that some of us have been selecting ourselves to want to work and others of us have selected over several generations to, in the words of one of my critical neighbors, just lay up all day?

We all know people who are idle by choice and as a lifestyle. Whether rich or poor, they do as little work as possible, whether paid or unpaid.

Think of Maynard G. Krebs, the good-hearted beatnik on the *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis* television show who twitched and yelped whenever the word work was used in his presence.

Or P.G. Wodehouse's Bertie Wooster, the minor English aristocrat whose life as an idle-rich layabout in the 1930s focused on nothing more than mucking things up in order for his valet, the omniscient Jeeves, to rescue Bertie from himself.

Recall gentle Onslow Smith in the BBC's series, *Keeping Up Appearances*. Played by the late Geoffrey Hughes, Onslow describes himself as work-shy and bone idle. He spends his days watching the telly, drinking beer, smoking and betting on horses. He is above paying attention to the inconvenience of working.

But he reads books on advanced physics and archeology.

These three *chose* to live without working.

I've usually found that people don't work not as a matter of choice but for various reasons—disabilities of one sort or another, advanced age, social and economic handicaps, lack of genuine opportunities, learned behaviors from their family environments and rational decisionmaking where not working for low pay is economically wiser than doing so.

To the extent that reasons underlie not working, it's reasonable to conclude that those of us who are chronically idle are not this way from genetic selection. Generally, it appears to me that laying up is either an adaptation to circumstances or a learned behavior.

I don't equate having paid employment with being productive, by the way. A lot of paid work is meaningless, and much unpaid work is worth doing.

It's also clear that many of us work hard -- at either paid or unpaid work -- when we don't need to.

Why work when your survival is not at stake?

Is it a matter of being unable to escape learned behavior? Is it mostly a cultural reflex to hearing the work bell ringing in your head? Do people work when they don't need to out of habit? Is the work process addictive? Do we improve our physical or mental health through the process of doing something we define

as work?

Do too many of us simply fear doing little or even nothing? Working may be a behavior we carry with us from our earliest survival requirements. Our ancestors didn't last if they didn't work at hunting, gathering, planting, storing and preparing food. Every creature, including most -- but not all -- of us, works to provide for its existence.

When idleness is a lifestyle choice rather than a condition forced by circumstances, it is facing off against our history as a species. I don't think much good can come of that.

The people I've seen who've adapted best to retirement are those who do something in it, whether paid or unpaid. I have no objection to doing nothing at all for a time or two, here and there, but I can't see it as a full-time job. What would Nellie think of me? She, too, would roar.

I think Nellie and I work because we both think that's what we're supposed to do. It could be as simple as that.

UPDATE: The resident rough-and-tumble girl is on the mend. Her teeth and jaw are properly aligned. The titanium plate in her chin is staying covered. The lip-to-chin scar has healed. The chips out of her two neck vertebrae should not cause problems. Her bruised lung is getting better. She's now allowed to wean herself off the neck collar.

She will be on liquids and sludges for another couple of weeks. And because her vocal cords were twanged when a breathing tube was inserted, she still sounds like a cross between Mickey Mouse and the old professional wrestler with the gear-grinding voice, Crusher Lisowski.

She began working this week.