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Breakdowns wad up, here and abroad

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va. The evolutionary theory that Charles Darwin failed to see is the one that applies to internal-combustion engines and the four farm wheels theyre supposed t o turn.

In scientific terms, this companion theory states that when something goes kablooeey in one species of vehicle, other things will go kablooeey in other species, one after the other.

Because Darwin was mesmerized by beetles and giant tortoises, he failed to observe farm vehicles adapting genetically to their habitat on the Galapagos Islands in 1835. How he could have missed their behavior, I do not know.

As it applies to internal-combustion engines, natural selection is a lightning-quick process by which farm vehicles reproduce an infectious break-down trait, which then runs through related species like a sneezywheezy flu through a pre-school of grubby-handed four year olds.

Breakdowns require adaptive repairs, which advances the survival of these species. This theory is so classy and elegant that I know it would shoot me down if I asked it out on a date.

An empirical example proves the theory.

I took my reliable 1957 Ford 850 tractor up to the woods two weeks ago to bushhog several miles of roads that were knee-high in grass. I noticed smoke coming off the engine. (I had noticed this several months earlier, but I counted on the Ford healing itself through prayer and self-generated, homeopathic remedies like grit in the carburetor.)

I diagnosed the problem as oil leaking from a blown valve-cover gasket onto the engine below. Amid the fumes, it occurred to me that burning oil on a hot-running motor might be a fire hazard. Still, I wanted to give the Ford a chance to plug itself up without becoming totally costive.

Weve had a drought in Blue Grass for the last two months. Our lone downpour occurred around 7 p.m. during the very hour that Id designated as the proper time to drive the Ford to the repair shop about seven miles away.

My wife and daughter quite reasonably asked me: Why not wait until the rain stops?

Well, it was because that was the hour Id set aside to accomplish that chore. So what if I got rained on? Ive been wet before. I didnt think I needed to mention that the rain would cool the burning oil on the engine.

I would not have been wetter after this drive had I jumped fully clothed into our pond for that 20 minutes. When I sloshed into the shop of genius-welder Steve Good, my dripping and squishing frightened his young son who was too polite to flee.

Steve understood my behavior: You started, so you finished.

Steve discovered that the Fords valve-cover gasket was fine. The smoke off the hot engine was not burning oil; it was burning gasoline! Ford engineers had shrewdly positioned the tractors gas tank directly above the motor so that gravity would draw fuel to the carburetor and eliminate the need for a fuel pump. Ive always admired technology that saves dollars at the risk to life and limb.

I use the old, regular ethanol-free gas in the Ford, because the 10percent ethanol blend has a lower boiling point. When I want to boil fuel in the Fords tank positioned just above a hot engine, I use the 10percent blend.

Cranks like me who complain about running around with a tank of boiling gasohol are the ones to blame for all the nannies pouring into the nanny state. I should accept the consequences of boiling my fuel when I want and just shut up about it.

So the leaking gas tank had to be fixed, along with the hydraulic pump, along with the front forks, along with the fork extenders and along with four or five other things all of which decided to either act up or break down in anticipation of having

Steve nurse them back to health.

Then I was cutting firewood the other day when the battery died in my 2012 ATV, and I had to walk home in my old-school, steel-toed logger boots that weigh 45 pounds each. So the ATV went to the shop to check its circuitry and get a battery transplant.

And then I had a full load of firewood in the trusty Cheetah, my disintegrating 1980 Toyota pickup that has shed more steel than it retains, when the slave cylinder on the clutch housing blew out leaving me in the clutch without one. Another two-mile walk to the house. More repairs.

I blame Charles Darwin for not evolving better internalcombustion species for farm use.

Other bad things run in clumps, too.

Libya, Egypt, Nigeria, Israel-Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Sudan, Yemen, Afghanistan and Ukraine are engines that are running too hot in recent months. The gas tank above each one seems to have sprung a leak. Maybe they wont explode, but a smok ing burn is a dangerous way to go through life.

I laugh when I read columnists who rage at Obama for doing nothing in these situations. What hes doing is n ot getting caught up in millennial-old wars between religions and within a religion, in conflicts where our military intervention would escalate the fighting and do nothing to end the grievances, and in chronic, irresolvable disputes over land and governance.

If only these problems could be solved by sending in the Marines to shape things up.

Why is it hard to understand that people who have wanted to kill each other for generations dont want -- and wont keep -- a peace that we impose?

Over the years, Ive learned that some problems are fixable, some are not, some are quagmires, some are good deeds delivering punishment, some should be ignored, some resist sensible settlements and some dont lend themselves to being

solved with either a toolkit or a rifle.

If only breakdowns like Iraq or Syria could be driven down to Steve Goods shop in a rainstorm for a little patching and a tune up.

Once he welded together the Sunnis and the Shiites, he could figure out how to get the Israeli and Palestinian cylinders firing together, not at each other. Surely, Steves Mennonite ways would work better than rockets and bombings.

It makes me wonder, how do persistent breakdowns contribute to the survival of our own species?

Darwin left a lot of work undone.

