

Country Real Estate, #339: September 18, 2014

Balance is needed

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va. The window of summer opportunity is closing, and I object.

Most of July and August in Blue Grass was droughty and dreary. Most of September has been rainy and dreary. I'm facing a winter that promises to be shivery and dreary. Even now, our evenings clamor for a woodstove fire to cut the damp and chill.

Summer each year, like life itself, happens only once. Every summer day spent in the drearies is lost forever. When President Obama stops global warming, I hope that he'll leave some nice 85-degree days around here to show his generosity of spirit toward local Republicans who hate him more than death and taxes.

Those Americans who share the opinion that we've gotten too many bad days this summer should petition the Weather Channel to stop predicting cloudy mornings and stormy nights in May through September. Televised forecasts become self-fulfilling prophecies if you ask me.

We have a local radio announcer who says if you want to know your weather each morning look outside your window.

This down-home approach has worked well for millennia around the world. It's one of only a few transnational bonds that unites our species against The Universal Chaos. Another is cheesecake.

This summer -- for reasons that are deeply classified but have to do with Obama being a closeted Muslim socialist and George W. Bush having reached his level of competence as a Yale cheerleader -- lacked the typical balance between 75 sunny, summery days and 25 lonesome, gloomy days.

Odd ideas pop up when the traditional 75-25 balance is skewed one way or another. One starts looking for reasons that explain the skewing.

This leads to theories like the one that says a nightly fire in our Virginia woodstove is the principal cause of melting glaciers in the deserts of Syria and Iraq, which has raised sea levels in California thus encouraging more Midwestern teenagers to take up surfing, which has, in turn, given rise to the ISIS campaign to behead any Westerner caught wearing both sunscreen and a bikini.

The idea of balance as a philosophical and practical good has been around at least since the days when Aristotle was talking up the golden mean the point between extremes, between too much and too little. Everybody from Confucius and Muhammad to Buddha and Goldilocks came to the same conclusion.

Over the years, I've endorsed 10 life balances, which I offer in no particular order of importance:

The first is the balance between head work and hand work (which does not include thumb twiddling on smartphones). I find myself spending a lot of work time sitting and allegedly thinking, which I offset by digging holes, cutting wood and repairing the barely repairable.

This is different than simply incorporating a vigorous exercise component into an otherwise sedentary life. It's using hand and head in a way that values hand more highly, but still requires your head in the game.

The second is establishing a lifelong balance between doing productive things and doing things that aren't. (Doing nothing at all can be very productive as long as it's labeled deep thought, possibly metaphysical and, at the very least, secular with no more than a dash of wishy-washy humanism.) Doing unproductive things brings no benefit. Failure, on the other hand, can be enormously productive.

The third is the balance between working for your own self-interest and doing something for the common good.

The fourth is the internal balance between good cheer and

melancholy. This provides a stable architecture that keeps to a minimum unilluminating, emotional ups and downs.

The fifth is to keep self-doubt and self-criticism on one side balanced against confidence and risk-taking on the other.

The sixth is to find a position of comfort between life's frequent absurdity and the daily, mundane duties that keep the boat afloat and moving in your intended direction.

The seventh is to find the balance between staying busy and keeping quiet. There is virtue in moving for its own sake—something like jogging for hours around a track. But there's equal virtue in taking a conscious time out. I don't meditate, but maybe that's what I mean.

The eighth is the balance between seriousness and humor. Even matters of life and death can be usefully leavened with a half-decent joke.

The ninth is the balance between kindness and whatever you think is its opposite.

The problem with the idea of balance is that it's almost always presented as the middle spot between two opposites. My humble contribution to western philosophy is to say, Nonsense.

A workable balance need not be the spot where 50 is on one side and 50 is on the other.

Achieved balance might be 90-10 on something like balancing busy and quiet. The quiet 10, however, is a minimum value that shouldn't be shorted either by work pressure or for convenience.

Well...this summer is water over the bridge as a friend used to say. It's too late to do anything about the unfair 40-60 division between wet and dry. The refs never called a penalty, so the game went on.

The tenth and final balance is between knowing what you can affect and what you cant.

(An illustration: I have begun lobbying The Authorities for a return to 75-25, dry-wet Normalcy in Blue Grass for next summer.

To that end, I have given them Rolex watches. Ive paid for a couple of their daughters weddings. Ive offered them swigs from my personal, \$5,000-a-bottle cognac. Ive let them drive my Ferrari and stay at my vacation home. Ive given them loans that I dont expect to be repaid. And Ive taken a few of their wives on clothes-buying trips to New York so that they dont look like ragamuffins at official functions.

I, of course, expect nothing in return. This is, after all, the Commonwealth of Virginia where our Authorities are above being corrupted by cash or kind so they can take whatever is offered.)

If The Authorities decide to go back to the old 75-25 split between nice and not nice next summer, Im sure theyll do it on the merits.

No lobbyist, including me, ever expects to get a *quo* for a given *quid*. We are just generous by nature.

