

Heat brings up evil

Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—I considered writing a moan-and-groan piece this week about the 100-degree-plus oven that baked Pittsburgh over the July 4th weekend. I could have added first-hand information about putting up 250 bales of hay in a 95-degree field and a 108-degree barn a few days earlier. And how could I forget four black, sweltering nights after the freak *derecho* took out the electricity?

Millions were hot, miserable and inconvenienced. Nothing is to be gained by adding my little whine to the memory of gasoline-powered generators in a continuous drum roll.

Instead, I've been thinking about evil for the past few days. This is not my normal train of thought, which always picks up unwanted passengers in the refrigerator.

This began last Friday when four of us who grew up together were having supper with our others at a restaurant-brewery in Pittsburgh. We could not agree about whether one of our departed high-school classmates -- I'll call him, Mike -- was evil. At least two of us thought he was; I didn't.

No one disputed that he was scary, volatile, violent, mean and unpredictable. He had black hair, blue eyes and a curled-lip sneer that would wither Elvis.

I'd heard in high school that he once threw a cat off the Highland Park Bridge into the Allegheny River. I saw him burn a cigarette hole into the back of his friend's sports jacket just as a goof. He stole the sophomore homeroom dues out of my locker. In our changing room after a basketball game, I saw him threaten to beat a larger student senseless with a heavy steel hanger used for football pads and uniforms.

Many classmates have a Mike story or two like these.

Rumor has it that he found a home in the Mafia after graduation, working drugs and what might be referred to as "miscellaneous assignments." He was a big muscle guy and launched his career by doing the grass-roots sluggo work at the bottom of the pyramid that keeps crime organized at the top.

Mike was capable of hurting or killing as part of his business obligations; that's what "made" Mafia members do. But he also had a sense of right and wrong, at least, he did in high school. He would often choose

wrong, but I don't think he was wired for it from conception, which is why I don't think he was evil. I also saw him choose right.

As a fellow senior, he told me that he had a 130 IQ. (Even better, he had been awarded the Good Citizenship Medal at his eighth-grade graduation. The criteria for these awards must have varied from school to school.)

I asked him why he wasn't trying to get into college on a sports/academic scholarship. "That's not for guys like me," he said.

Before class started at 8:05 a.m., he'd put in four hours in the Strip District unloading produce trucks to support his mother and himself.

He and I once talked about living at each other's house for a week. My parents quickly said no. Nonetheless, at our graduation ceremony, he agreed with my mother who was pleading with me to wear a necktie under my gown. I caved.

Last Saturday, a friend of 60 years and I got into an argument over the nature of evil. I'd been thinking about it since the Michael discussion of the night before in which she had participated.

The gist of her position is that some human beings just are. The gist of my position is that some human beings do things that are fairly described as evil. But I don't think any human being is beyond some humanity, which, by definition, rules out absolute evil and evil by nature. Religions support her, not me.

An evil person to me would have to be outside of being human. That can't be. No person, therefore, is evil, no matter how despicable.

Evil acts are, on the other hand, not uncommon. Acts of genocide and crimes against humanity, for example, have been committed by every nation, tribe, religion and ethnic group at one time or another. Evil acts are those beyond our moral boundaries.

Sane people can choose to do evil things for many reasons and rationales—politics, economics, nationalism, culture, greed, hate, fear, history, desperation, self-interest and ignorance. People who are insane can do evil things, because they're insane, not because they're evil.

Can an individual be evil by nature? Is that what makes them do evil things? Or are people by nature a mix of traits? Or might we be good by nature and flawed by our own practice? Opinions, as you might expect, differ.

If you accept the idea of human evolution, you probably think that people developed not-always-consistent attitudes and behaviors to survive.

Cooperation, compassion and empathy were as evolutionarily useful as the willingness to kill others for territory, food and mates. How would evil

promote human survival? Is the ability to commit an evil act an evolutionary aberration or a functional residue from a much earlier time?

Not all religions have a concept of evil human beings, but if you believe in one that does, evil comes from a source that is opposite to and the enemy of God. Good is defined in terms of God as is evil.

Most of us routinely do nice things and not-nice things, tell the truth and the not-quite truth. We are prone to doing unto others in not exactly the way we would prefer them to do unto us.

Bad acts are choices that we make. An evil act, I think, is also a choice, not something that flows from a core of absolute evil.

Bad guys balance their acts more toward the bad than good guys who balance the other way. But if you could measure it, I think that even the worst of the worst of us has some sense of balance in there, somewhere.

Being evil has to be something qualitatively worse than just being a run-of-the-mill bad egg. I think bad people are not evil, and I think many decent people commit bad acts, maybe even evil ones, every so often.

An evil person in my view would have to be completely demonic, without any capacity for love, empathy and compassion for anyone. Even history's leading cruds were not that far out. I'm not, incidentally, defending history's leading cruds.

My guess is that acts of bad and acts of evil are committed -- consciously and deliberately -- by people who simply use a means-justifies-ends logic to rationalize what they want to do. This logic is always available everywhere to everyone.

Since I'm often wrong, I'm willing to concede that I might be wrong about the core nature of people. I doubt that one person can ever know all of what's inside another person—that is, the core. But I could be wrong about that, too.

One reason that I think Michael was not evil is that he had a quirky sense of humor. I have a quirky sense of humor.

Quirks live on society's margins but we need a few friends who are insiders.

People are the way they are for many reasons, not just one. That's where I end up.

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Well, I can't help myself. Here's one story from the recent steaming.

A woman of marital familiarity and I were cooling in the pond at the end of a 98-degree day. She was floating on her back on an inflatable plastic raft.

I was sitting in a four-foot-long, flexible, polyethylene foam noodle. My weight bent the cylinder into a U-shape with each end about an inch from the surface.

Any normal fifth-grade boy would have tickled her toes with a weed to get a squeal. I did not. That proves something, if only, that she's wise to this trick.

Nor did I try to upset her raft from below, pretending I was a great white shark and she, a tasty fur seal. That proves something, too, though I'm not sure what. Maybe it's that old dogs need to find something better to do in their old age than old tricks.

I was minding my own business when I felt something grab one end of my support system and start steering me in circles. Gratuitous fifth-grade behavior belongs in my realm, not hers.

I drew myself up to a full sitting position and proclaimed with gospel dignity: "**Let my noodle go!**"

It was, I think, one of the memorable non-self-interested lines uttered in this marriage.

I blame it on the heat.

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 -- **Snowy Mountain Breakdown**, **Land Matters** and **Blue Grass Notes** -- are available through his website.

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