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Every bunch needs to think about one bad apple

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—A special October time is that warm and sunny afternoon when you sit among the hardwoods and let their golds, oranges, yellows and reds “droppeth as the gentle rain...upon the place beneath.”

They glide down, whispering dryly among themselves, and land with the humblest of note.

The butterflies knew this was coming, so they skedaddled.

This is about as Zenny as I get, which isn't much. I'm sure Buddhism would improve my prospects.

When I was a college senior, I took Chinese Literature in Translation. I learned a little about Taoism and remember the discussion on *wu-wei*—the idea that some things get done without doing, that doing nothing can be “doing” something, that knowledge can be expressed in knowing when and when not to act.

The professor, William McNaughton, was one of the best I had at Oberlin College. But he didn't fit in very well. In one sense or another, he was considered a bad apple who might spoil the bunch—his colleagues.

I take great comfort in knowing that when I sit around staring dully into space, I am doing something Chinese, even though it looks like I'm just being an American slug.

And on occasion, I even do something beyond nothing, which I call, thinking. I admit that this version of *wu-wei* is a hard sell to a certain nameless party with whom I share a tube of toothpaste.

I'm sold on the idea of working out a problem without consciously thinking about it. The trick is to set it up so that the subconscious knows what to solve. Then I'm off to wash dishes or muck a stall. Tasks like these allow my grindstones to turn against each other and produce a solution that satisfies both intuitively and analytically. That's the theory, at least.

Because I'm not entirely on board with *wu-wei*, I find it helpful to have out-loud Q&A conversations with myself. I do this in private; I wouldn't want it to get around.

Late October is the season to watch out for a bad apple.

Apples, like other plants, communicate through hormones. Most of this coordinating chatter occurs within a plant. But ripening apples produce a hormonal gas -- ethylene -- that accelerates the process in surrounding fruit. Ripeness eventually leads to rot, as do bruises and cuts.

Every bunch, I suppose, has a right to protect itself from rot. But we sometimes forget that a different apple is not necessarily a bad one.

When our daughter, Molly, was in second grade, her teacher asked her to draw a line of pumpkins. Being a good child, she did as she was told...and received a failing grade.

I went in for a parent-teacher chat. I was told that “Molly's pumpkins were not symmetrical.”

I replied that Molly lived on a farm and knew firsthand that pumpkins were *never* symmetrical. And neither were apples, cows or people. (By this time, I was in high dudgeon. An undocumented-alien rumor has circulated for years that I may have said something about throwing this lady through her classroom wall so that she could see asymmetrical pumpkins for herself. It's a good thing this exchange took place at a fancy private school where parents were encouraged to communicate openly and honestly with faculty.)

Despite my public indignation, I knew that Molly couldn't draw five symmetrical circles in a row if my life depended on it. Neither could I.

I take bad apples seriously. I keep my eyes open for the genuine article all year long, as well as the bunch behavior they inspire.

I've often wondered why a bad apple has such an easy time leading a bunch astray. Perhaps it's because every dictator promises a better future while wrapping himself in the ribbons of group pride and homeland defense. He always needs to set up An Enemy. It's a simple formula that works for every ruthless leader who lacks the quality of mercy.

I think people shut up in front of dictators from fear, but they cheer him because they're desperately hoping for something better than they have.

I get spooked by group cheering, where everyone shouts one thing, the same thing, in unison. Fervency builds; it gets hypnotic. Individuals become a mass. I'm afraid there's a little *Sieg Heil!* in most of us.

I've been in a few mobs, though none recently. If you don't keep your wits about you, they'll carry you off like a glacier and leave you who knows where.

Group cheers must be conceptually simple, musical and usually no more than two or three syllables. Repeated enough times, everyone gets used to their meaning. Advertising uses the same technique.

Snap, Crackle and Pop!—Kellogg's said. Peace! Land! Bread!—the Bolsheviks said.

Keep Hope Alive.—Jesse Jackson said. Nine. Nine. Nine. Herman Cain said.

I've always had a hard time with call-and-response situations at political demonstrations. My answers tend to be different from the one the leader expects from the group. Mine include a couple of if-thens, a few "under certain assumptions" and at least one "perhaps, generally speaking." A former girlfriend blames my character flaw on "too much college."

In any event, I'm a bad demonstrator. I like peace and quiet.

I remember one anti-war rally from the 60s.

Leader with a bullhorn: "Whadda we want?"

Crowd: "Peace!"

Leader: "When do we want it?"

Crowd: "NOW!"

Leader: "Why do we want it?"

Crowd: (Bewildered silence. We were stumped. The leader was only supposed to ask What and When, not Why or How. Feet shuffled.)

Then a small voice piped up, "Because."

I considered shouting: "Because why?" But this would have fingered me as a bad apple at best or an *agent provocateur* at worst.

The crowd was grateful for "Because." It filled the gap in our rigorous analysis.

We went on to 2-4-6-8s and P-P-P Power to the P-P-P People.

Finally, we got to my favorite farm chant from that era, one that captured all the nuance and elegance I demand in sloganeering:

Hay! Hay!
Hoe! Hoe!
LBJ is a big fat toad.

This cheer had barreled through the Midwest like a fullback, but it never made a first down among the *protesterati* in less worldly areas like New York and San Francisco.

October is a good month to pick apples, but the blemished ones go bad in November.

I hope our bunch won't be spoiled.
I also hope they're not symmetrical.

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