

Big decisions are hard to make in the dark

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—When I come downstairs on winter mornings between 5 and 6 a.m., I face a choice.

First, I can choose my own self-interest, which is entirely focused on brewing the French Roast as quickly as possible.

Or, I can choose the interest of others, in particular our two Yellow Labs. They expect a timely and flawless performance of their morning routine: large biscuits all around at the kitchen door, a yard visit, then breakfast, followed by a daylong snooze.

Or, I can choose the general welfare by firing up the smoldering woodstove. All parties benefit from a warm house, but those with less fur benefit more.

Since all three tasks are performed every morning, the question I face is simple: which interest gets served first.

Decisions that juggle self-interest, others and community are among the most fundamental in political thought. Entire ideologies are based on who comes first.

I often argue that coffee will make me more efficient at feeding the dogs and rebuilding the fire. Therefore, I should coffee up first.

Critics, on the other hand, point out that efficiency is less needed in scooping two cups of dog food into two bowls than simple production.

On my hand, however, I point out that opportunities to mess up four cups of dog food at 5: 15 a.m. are more numerous than you might think. Before coffee one morning, I confess to dumping one full cup into the trash can. I will note for the record that the dog bowl was also in the kitchen.

I often argue that the interests of others and the general welfare will benefit if, before starting anything, I put shoes and socks on rather than walk barefoot on cold hardwood floors. The Labs accuse me of stalling. Their silence speaks.

The Labs lobby hard for first position. When they see me, they sniff me up, rub against my legs, shake all over and wag their tails. On extra special mornings, my presence will so excite them that they begin to sneeze.

The party asleep upstairs does not try to influence my decision-making with sniffing, rubbing, shaking and tail-wagging, though I'm the first to admit that I'm easily influenced by such measures.

When Europeans settled these mountains, their first building was often a barn to shelter livestock and store winter feed. Animals came before people, because both people and new communities depended on them.

In moments of national crisis, people often put community above self-interest.

There is no cosmically correct rule on first serves.

For most of us, shoes and coffee would usually start things off.

I've been wondering how presidential candidates choose which interest to serve first.

I confess to gagging when I hear politicians describe their motivation for office as a civic duty to spend their time in "public service." My reflex is bipartisan. It's the same for Romney, Huntsman and Bush as it is for Kennedy, Kerry, Rockefeller and Clinton.

The politicians I've known combine wolfish, competitive ambition with some profound insecurity and need for affirmation. The rich ones need something apart from money to validate their self-worth.

The "poor" ones -- like Johnson and Clinton -- need a job and the adulation that passes for love. They're not poor for long. The financial rewards of high office these days arrive after serving, instead of during.

Every once in a while, you come across an idealist in political office, a sheep in sheep's clothing. They spend most of their time, "Baaaaaing."

Today, our political culture expects presidents to do something different after being elected. That simple expectation forces them to offer campaign ideas that promise change. These are rarely fulfilled. Approval ratings for the incumbent always decline. Everyone invests in the next promise.

Governing in office is harder than winning office, because doing with opponents is harder than talking to supporters.

All of us have expectations to fulfill. The coffee has to start dripping; the dogs think of me as the solution to all of their problems; and the embers of the fire in the woodstove await my breath.

"Day is a-breakin' in my soul."

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