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Sharing space raises issues of war and peace

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—I started thinking about space last week at about 20,000 feet, because the enormous guy sitting next to me was hogging the armrest between us.

Neither seat owns the armrest. It might be considered a shared asset that's available to both passengers. Armrest time can be alternated, or occupation can be simultaneous as long as unwanted touching is minimized.

Since I was not working my elbow very hard while doing a crossword puzzle, I didn't mind waiving whatever armrest rights I might lay claim to. A contentious debate over armrest rights is best avoided, even within your own head. (You see how well I follow my own advice.)

As his arm, from elbow to wrist, lay like a corpse atop the armrest, an Austrian shade of his extra flesh draped over onto my side where it sneered and jiggled in triumph. This forced me to turn my cognitive powers from being stumped over a three-letter word for "Barker" (first letter "d," third letter "g") to being stumped about space.

Our sense of personal space -- its definition and importance -- is probably related to our instinct for self-preservation. When an intruder violates that invisible envelope -- when someone "gets in your face" -- we tend to fight or flee, because the invader is too close, too threatening.

Some of us seem to be inclined to enlarge our personal space through strategic deposits.

I, for example, tend to build inoffensive mounds of not-that-dirty laundry (which may or may not be conscripted for a fifth workout after drying) on available level surfaces, such as the dining-room table and my wife's desk. I also build cairns of unopened urgent mail. I am fully committed to removing these deposits...and have been for the better part of two decades.

While it is completely unintentional on my part, these monuments do, in effect, plant my flags in shared territory. Melissa engages in similar behavior using potted plants, purses and saddles. She believes that her detritus differs from mine in ways that she alone understands. I think she feels that her stuff is more moral.

I respect the flags she has planted in our commons and now offer only a perfunctory, annual observation about the growing herd of saddles that

spends more time mounted on our dining-room chairs than we do.

I no longer brave entering our spare bedroom where her elephant ear philodendron has spread itself from floor to ceiling and wall to wall.

Several pretty good friends slept in that room and never appeared for breakfast. The last time I opened the door, it trumpeted and charged. If I need quick cash, I may poach a tusk while it's sleeping. Melissa's mother started this monster more than 30 years ago, which is the only argument for not gifting it to Osama bin Laden and taking a deduction.

My good-natured tolerance for Melissa's flag-planting is not reciprocated. She tells me to "get your junk off my stuff," which I have been meaning to do for the better part of two decades (just in case you missed my earlier claim of good-faith intentions).

Despite these differences, Melissa helped me out on "Barker," which she hinted might work with an "o" in the middle. "Bob!" I said and inked it in. I have not shared with her the additional problems her solution created.

Just like individuals, communities -- from neighborhoods to tribes and countries -- have a keen sense of their own space. While boundary lines define community territory, ideas, commerce and people find ways to breach them. No wall works perfectly, or even for very long. This is especially true for governments that build walls to imprison their own citizens.

I assume that when two people share space, they will allocate territory to each other and figure out ways to share their commons. However, when one acts as if all the commons is his -- the case with my airline seatmate -- the other must either accept the results or contest them. When both parties claim all of the commons, a fight is likely.

An armrest is a commons not worth fussing over. But an ocean fishery or new oil fields are.

When individuals were unable to regulate themselves in using the community's commons, government stepped in. America's national parks and forests, for instance, are a commons where everyone has some access to using it, and some parties have enhanced access to certain resources.

In the one instance where I was so foolish as to spend 10 years of my life in the citizen-planning process for the George Washington National Forest, I learned that many elbows have a hard time using the same armrest, no matter how small the elbows and how large the rest.

In the past, wars were often fought over one group's desire to occupy the

space occupied by another group. These were not wars over how to share a commons. They've been called wars for colonial empire, lebensraum and Manifest Destiny...to name a few.

Since WWII, however, conflicts of this type have been less frequent. Nation-states are not routinely attacking neighbors to acquire space not their own. Other ways of shaping a neighbor's actions are preferred.

Most boundaries, regardless of how they originated, have now achieved a high degree of acceptance. This reduces fights over space, though fairness may lose out.

Acceptance of boundaries is relatively new, something more good than bad, a break with history and a source of restrained optimism.

Sharing a commons is trickier than respecting a boundary line between what's mine and what's yours. Melissa says that if I object to having a man-eating plant in a commons next to where I write, I should consider moving to one of our other commons. The cattle barn came to mind...her mind, that is.

I cannot solve my grumble over the armrest commons so easily.

So I propose that the Transportation Security Administration adopt really invasive lower-body, pat-downs for anyone who refuses to share.

And if that doesn't work, install a second armrest next to the first.

And if that doesn't work, remove all armrests.

And as a last resort, I will invite armrest monopolists to spend a night at our place...in a certain bedroom.

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