

Suggesting works

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—A friend asked recently for a contribution to a book he's doing on writer's block and ways to defeat it. I must come across as one who stoppers himself up, or maybe as one who should be more stoppered than I am.

I never had much of a problem with it...until he asked. Then I got stumped for a subject to write about this week.

No mindless farm chore with existential significance rose to rescue me.

The best political snipe I could lob at Newt Gingrich was that he seems to have taken one of two positions on every campaign issue: either he was for it, then against it and now for it; or he was against it, then for it and now against it.

My wife, Melissa, said she is off limits unless I write something nice about her new horse, Moose, (written as Mousse, from the French word for lather.) I couldn't stretch Mousse into a column, no matter how much I frothed and foamed.

My writer's wings would not flap. I was stuck fast in the hangar of malaise.

Therefore, I would write about the source of not being able to write, namely, the pernicious power of suggestion.

Here's the first draft of my lead paragraph.

It is no cliché to say that the power of suggestion is more powerful than a locomotive and able to leap tall buildings in a single bound. A good cliché, like the hammer of Thor, is always ready to bang a reasonable point into smithereens.

(I'm rolling now.)

Suggestions are sneaky. Some work their will on first hearing. Others need to drip against your consciousness, slowly, constantly.

I think we are more susceptible to suggestions that play on our fears than those that invoke our better nature. It always seems easier to think badly of someone than goodly.

Positive reinforcement is a form of suggestion. It requires repetition to work its magic.

You cannot say too often that someone has done a good job, whereas a single "You really screwed this up!" yields long-lasting self-doubt.

Suggestion is often packaged with group pressure.

Psychology majors may still run a 1950s “group-dynamics” experiment from social psychologist Solomon Asch to demonstrate how pressure and suggestion work together.

A student researcher recruits a “subject” to help in a lab experiment for psychology class. The subject is asked his opinion of the length of various lines against a reference line. There is no penalty for a wrong answer, and no reward for a right answer.

A “confederate” -- a plant -- sits next to the subject and is also asked for an opinion. The plant usually suggests the wrong answer to each question and works to get the subject to agree. The original experiment used a group of confederates against the subject.

About one in four subjects consistently held out against a group united on an obviously wrong answer.

When the Asch test was pulled on me in college, I confirmed the predicted results. A friendly coed kept suggesting the wrong answer. Even I knew that this _____ was longer than this _____. I thought it was unfortunate that she was uncommonly dense.

But she seemed so earnestly invested in her judgments, I saw no reason to hurt her feelings. Let the final score -- not me -- show her how linearly challenged she was. I certainly didn't want it to get around campus that I was the guy who had bullied a pretty girl in psych lab.

I suppose I should now confess that I had read about the Asch experiment before I walked in the room. I was willing to do my bit to support rigorous social science and launch my classmate's career. Give a fledgling psychiatrist an inch, and he'll think he's a ruler.

It's hard to stand against the pressure of a group suggesting that you commit to a wrong answer.

Repetitive suggestion is all around us.

Advertising uses it to promote products and services.

Hanging out on a street corner brings repetitive word-of-mouth suggestions that promote other types of products and services.

It's impossible to keep endlessly repeated suggestions from penetrating your consciousness. True or false, they sink in.

Repetitive suggestion is threaded into the news every day.

A tide of statements, for example, has been rolling toward our beach this month about how consumer confidence is growing and the economy is likely to be better in 2012.

This, I think, is an effort by insider confederates to change the country's perception of reality as a way to start changing reality itself.

Consumers are being encouraged to spend their way forward into better times. If it doesn't work, well, individual consumers are not too big to fail.

In the run up to January 1st, we spend a lot of time wishing each other a Happy, Healthy and Prosperous New Year. I don't think these *pro-forma* expressions accomplish much. They can't hurt, of course. They certainly comfort the giver.

And then on January 2nd we stop wishing each other anything at all.

What might happen if we were to continue this repetitive suggestion throughout the year? Could we all become confederates in a great experiment? Could the power of repeated suggestion -- happiness, health and prosperity -- trick ourselves into changing our own lot?

Even if it doesn't, everyone would be in on the same sappy joke.

The key to writing is to start typing. The key to having written is to stop.

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, **Land Matters** and **Blue Grass Notes**, are available through his website.