

YOU'LL KNOW YOU'RE THERE WHEN YOU ARRIVE

BY RON MARR

A **DECADE** spent in the northern Rockies—where winter runs from late September until early June—necessitated that I take up wood splitting as a hobby. Because the mercury spent a lot of time at zero and frequently traveled thirty clicks below that, I ran through about eight cords a year. I didn't have a fancy-pants wood-splitting machine, but I did spend an hour a day swinging a solid-steel monster maul.

I liked splitting wood; it was a mindless task that resulted in a satisfying “WHUNK!” It was an act of pragmatic destruction and controlled aggression, and I recall but a single serious injury. Luckily, my eye didn't completely leave its socket when it was assaulted by a hunk of lodgepole pine that reached escape velocity. I started wearing goggles soon after.

My seven years in the Ozarks were spent in a ramshackle cabin in the Mark Twain forest, located smack on the banks of the muddy Gasconade. Missouri winters are mild compared to their Montana counterpart, but I still did a fair piece of splitting. Four cords of wood kept me toasty over the entirety of the cold times, and lopping down dead trees during the warm months kept me from turning into a slug.

Then, things changed.

In 2011, I returned to the flatlands of west-central Missouri, the place of my birth. There were valid reasons for this move, none of which I feel like discussing. More pertinent is that, for the first time in twenty years, I no longer had any need to split wood. The house I bought had central heat and a big propane tank. That was a novel concept to my little pea-brain, and I'm still not used to it. I miss the chopping and splitting, the soothing

crackle of burning logs, and the dance of flame on a February midnight.

I'm just not a flatland type of guy, and though I'm too naturally lazy to go full primitive (damn you, Netflix), I've always preferred that my daily life be simple, old fashioned, and a bit backwoodsy. Moreover, I get a little agoraphobic when not surrounded by hills, mountains,

forests, and rivers. I'm a mountain boy by nature and temperament, not a farmer or small-town citizen. Mountain folk have their own ways, most of which strike the civilized world as somewhere between mildly odd and seriously touched.

I like to fantasize about a return to the wild places and old ways, but I'm keenly aware that the future might have something entirely different in mind. I'm neither young nor idealistic and have never been a big proponent of magical thinking. My hair is grey and thinning at a frightening and rather depressing rate. I get aches and twinges. Fate has its own plans, and it refuses to spill the beans.

On the other hand, I did quit smoking a couple years back and have resumed my old weight-lifting routine. That's mostly so, should the need ever arise, I'll be able to split more wood. Or, at the very least, I'll be able to move heavy furniture without pre-scheduling an appointment with the chiropractor.

I just turned fifty-six, and I've no idea where I'll be in five or ten years. Heck, I have no clue if I'll even be above ground. That's true for all of us, regardless of age and regardless of how much we like to avoid the topic. All I know is that, right now, I strive for contentment via two nutty dogs, my blues harps, a tiny cadre of distant friends, memories of wood-splitting past, and the diaphanous hopes of tomorrow.

All I know is that, at some point, I'll end up someplace. You never know where you're going until you get there.

I won't know I'm there until I arrive.



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Revenge of the KILLER GOLDFISH

BY RON MARR

I NEVER had a burning desire to become a juggler. The idea of tossing a bunch of balls in the air, over and over and over, reminds me too much of real life. Oh sure, some folks jazz up their routine by flinging around chainsaws and flaming torches, but I remain unimpressed. These refinements are merely variations on a theme.

When you think about it, juggling is just the hobby version of multi-tasking. There are few things I hate more than multi-tasking.

It's my fate to have been born in an era when simultaneously performing multiple, complex projects is both a cultural expectation and a career requirement. Human reaction to the technological innovations of the past few decades has had an inverse effect on quality and productivity. Used correctly, gadgets and doo-dads should simplify—or eliminate—mundane functions and pointless meetings. In an ideal world, we would celebrate this newfound freedom by looking at clouds, enjoying family time, petting dogs, killing fish, and gazing at our navels.

Unfortunately, because we're often not happy unless we're miserable, human nature can't accept such largesse. We immediately fill the void by creating new sets of mundane functions and pointless meetings. Our species seems to have an insatiable desire to be overwhelmed and stressed. Maybe it's the Protestant work ethic run amok, or maybe we're just masochists. Whatever the case, one of the defining characteristics of modern life is to load ourselves up with more problems, missions, and assignments than can be rationally handled.

The result is multi-tasking, which I define as trying to do ten things at once and doing none of them well. I'm not saying people shouldn't be able to walk and chew gum at the same time. I'm not saying they shouldn't be able to grill a steak while baking a potato.



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On the other hand, I really don't want the ambulance guy playing Kwazy Cupcakes on his smartphone while trying to correctly apply the defibrillator. I don't want him texting his supervisor about the upcoming diversity seminar or checking to see if healthcare.gov is still broken. Call me a narcissist if you must. Label me needy. But, if I'm in such bad shape that I need serious cardiac wattage, I want ALL the attention.

That's not likely. Microsoft recently surveyed two thousand people—and monitored the brain activity of another 112—to see how our electronic pocket protectors affected daily life. What they found was that the human attention span is lower than it has ever been. In the year 2000, our average attention span was twelve seconds. That's pathetic enough, but by 2015, it has fallen to eight seconds.

The attention span of a goldfish is nine seconds.

Another study, this one by the US-based National Center for Biotechnology Information and the National Library of Medicine, had equally disturbing results. They found that 79 percent of all respondents use their electronic gee-gaws while watching TV, and 52 percent checked their phone every thirty minutes. The study did show that people have gained in the ability to multi-task, but that's not a good thing. An inability to pay attention to what you're doing rarely turns out well.

Since I refuse to own a cell phone and a laptop with a cracked screen comprises my entire arsenal of high-tech devices, I'm fairly certain my attention span is still at pre-2000 levels. Thus, it's obviously my burden to save the world from enslavement by highly focused, fascist goldfish. Beware the fearsome, midnight knock of a tiny pectoral fin, for none will be safe when the denizens of the glass bowl realize their inherent superiority. Still, I'll do what I can.

Assuming, of course, that I'm not busy looking at clouds and petting the dogs. That's my version of multi-tasking.



Miss Manners VERSUS THE SACRED COW

BY RON MARR

I'VE READ *Lonesome Dove* at least six times. For the uninitiated—defined as those whose attention span is limited to 140-character tweets—*Lonesome Dove* is a Pulitzer Prize-winning book. At 864 pages, it has lots of words.

That I've read and reread this lengthy tome is inexplicable to those raised in today's silicon techno-verse. I get that. Books don't hold the allure they once did. A hefty percentage of those born after *Lonesome Dove* was published in 1985 are far more interested in the aforementioned Twittering, banal Facebook posts, and videos of dancing cats.

I'm forced to concede that sad reality. Times change, and my days as a spring chicken have long-since sprung. I'm more like a fall fowl with thinning plumage who knows that winter's chopping block grows ever more near. It's a cultural echo that the older perceive the younger as arrogantly naive. Likewise, the young tend to regard graybeards as annoyingly pertinacious. The generations are separated by a chronological chasm of vastly different experiences, or lack thereof. They also possess dissimilar social values. Again, this is no great revelation.

Which leads us to cows, courtesy, and author Larry McMurtry's thirty-year-old literary masterpiece. The character Woodrow Call, *Lonesome Dove's* protagonist, uttered one of my favorite quotes:

"I hate rude behavior in a man," said Woodrow, shortly after beating a particularly impolite fellow into something resembling a bowl of tapioca pudding. "I won't tolerate it."

I respect that philosophy and share Woodrow's opinion of uncharitable comportment. It's evident everywhere, exhibited by egomaniacal freeway psychos, snarling sales clerks, dictatorial bureaucrats, pushy salesmen, potential employers, and even friends, family, clients, and coworkers. Urbanity and basic manners are considered antiquated in the present social paradigm.



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But really now, is it a Herculean effort to smile and speak with a hint of grace? Does responding to questions or inquiries in a timely manner cause gastric dysfunction? Are people too lazy to kindly acknowledge basic requests? Are they so self-centered and/or frightened they'd rather remain silent than extend affable regrets when unable/unwilling to accept an invitation? Is it de rigueur that texting grammatically butchered sentence fragments is preferable to a thirty-second phone call?

Apparently so, for a near-complete absence of consideration seems the new normal. Forget the Age of Aquarius; we've entered the Age of the Cretin.

However, what really bothers me is a nagging feeling that our crass behavior is spilling into the animal kingdom. For instance, just the other day my front yard was invaded by about fifty of the neighbor's cows. The barbarian bovine horde munched and stomped young trees, left hoof-ditches in the muddy grass, and deposited large piles of steaming ordure into my yard. One depraved cow perversely licked my mailbox like it was an all-day sucker ... and smiled.

Such an affront cannot stand. With extreme prejudice,

I took action.

I happen to know that cows hate blues harmonica; they may only hate it when I play blues harmonica, since dogs and people exhibit identical revulsion. Whichever the case, I tore out the door, barefoot, with harp in hand.

I started with a deep-low version of "Amazing Grace." The cows looked up in fear. I launched into Sonny and Cher's "The Beat Goes On." They began trotting away with terror-filled eyes. By the time I hit the theme from *Sesame Street*, they were fleeing the impending harmonicapocalypse, stampeding down the gravel road. I wailed those trespassing future hamburgers back to their pasture. They've not returned.

I hate rude behavior in a cow. I won't tolerate it.

If only it were so easy with people.

