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Dogs are left, and The Umbrella is posted
By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—The days before vacation are a time of great worry on our farm. I often need a vacation from planning a vacation with my wife, Melissa, who wants to go but doesn't want to leave.

Her reasons for staying put are many—including, among others, work obligations, travel expenses, travel hassles, digestive disputes, hotel bed bugs and her travel companion (me). I will consolidate all of her concerns into one category—her pets.

Melissa has two horses, two dogs and two cats, all of whom she considers siblings, or better.

Melissa's pets come here, live here and die here. They depend on us for food and drink, podiatry, executive direction, risk management, continuing education, long-term appreciation and waste disposal.

In return, I expect the cats to catch mice, which they do; the horses to carry Melissa in circles of her choosing without falling on their snouts or popping her off like a bloop single; and the dogs to...well, I don't expect the dogs to do much except maintain their unbroken record of never rising to any occasion.

Melissa gets very upset when I diss our Yellow Labs, Sophie and Lucy (S&L). She keeps poignantly silent when they diss me. I am, it seems, expected to obey their commands, but they are not expected to obey mine.

I have reminded her more than once that I am a 64-year-old adult with an SAT score in the high 200s and several graduate degrees to prove it, while S&L are...well, they're dogs.

"What's your point?" she asks.

If Melissa and I are walking on our one-lane road with S&L and a top-heavy logging truck of 60,000 pounds is roaring down at us doing 75, I will calmly call the dogs over to the side and suggest, "Stay. Sit." Melissa finds my paternalism offensive and my tone harsh. (Bear in mind, I'm not telling her to stay or sit.)

Melissa often scolds me for telling the dogs what to do rather than letting their instincts guide them. (Bear in mind that left to their own devices, S&L would not move one centimeter from the middle of the road where they have

been both eating and rolling in great green gobs of three-day-old greasy, grimy gopher guts, all of which they will process and redeploy in the middle of our living room and then bark at it.)

When the prospect of vacationing arises, Melissa rolls herself in a full-body stress wrap, because she realizes that her pets will be left to rely on substitute management and their own wits.

So, the first thing that happens is we get into a fight, which goes like this:

“I can’t go,” she says.

“We’ve planned this for six months. We have reservations in four states and two countries. I’ve paid for the tickets.” (I’ve advanced my three weakest arguments, which I know will be dismissed out of hand for being “typical of the way you think.”)

“What if Lucy gets a panic attack?” she asks.

“She’ll yawn, stretch and go to sleep.”

“You don’t understand dogs...”

(If this is my biggest failing, I’m doing better in this marriage than I thought.)

“...and you don’t care about me.”

(Anybody miss this leap from dogs to wife? Now it’s personal, not business.)

“Melissa, we can have [our neighbor] Joe feed and look after the dogs the way he has done for the last 27 years.”

“He doesn’t play with them.”

“I’ll ask him to play with them.”

“It won’t be the same.”

“They sit the same way when playing, regardless of which human is chasing the Frisbee that has just been thrown for them to fetch. They will sniff each other just as much, I promise.”

“They’ll miss me.”

“I’m sure that’s true.”

“What if they pine?”

“They’ll find comfort in each other.”

“I’ll miss them.”

“Well, I’ll comfort you.”

“Oh boy.”

(The discussion is now about to take a bad turn into how I was raised and the quality of my ancestors.)

“How about this?” I offer. “We’ll leave them a bark-activated video of you, retrieving the Frisbee you’ve thrown that has landed at their feet.”

“You’re solving problems again. This is not a problem.”

(Bear in mind that Melissa has just invoked the nuclear option, The Donald of all trumps: I’ve been accused of problem-solving. Under the universal rules of marriage, I am, of course, allowed to solve all manner of problems related to things like the number of hay bales we can store in the barn and what size spark plug the tractor needs. Those are problems that have evolved over the centuries specifically for men. Everything else is off-limits.)

Having been told to butt out of her beeswax, I left her with the local S&L crisis and turned to www.horizedocs.com, where everyone is free to post solutions for plugging the BP well and cleaning up the mess.

I’m more of a plugger than a cleaner, so I posted, The Umbrella.

It’s simple, cheap and requires no fancy technology.

The Umbrella would erect a barrier in the 21-inch-diameter borehole, a cross-sectional area of about 2.5 square feet.

Start by pounding increasingly smaller-diameter pipes into the borehole. Think of a telescope. A dozen or more pipes would fill in a vertical section of the existing borehole. Each of the telescoping pipes would probably be more than 100 feet long, which would provide both weight to offset upward pressure and sufficient surface to nest snugly against adjacent pipes.

The bottoms of these pipes would end at the same depth in the borehole, making either a level line of pipe bottoms or a slightly downward-facing mound.

The narrowest pipe -- three or four inches wide -- would be in the center of the borehole.

From the surface, a small metal umbrella in collapsed position would be pushed through the center pipe, all the way to the bottom of the telescoped pipes. The Umbrella would face down, its top advancing into the up-rushing oil.

When The Umbrella protrudes a couple of feet below the bottom of the telescoped pipes, it would be opened upside down. Its canopy would be embedded flush against the bottom of the telescoped pipes. It would form an impermeable barrier in the cross-sectional area.

The Umbrella's canopy would be overlapping, solid-metal flaps. Think of an expandable metal broccoli steamer. Its release mechanism and ribs would be strong enough to open against the rising oil and gas.

This was actually my second solution. The first occurred to me on the day the well blew out: Cut the pipe below the bend and bang a heavy, cylindrical plug into it. This is how I stop water flowing in pipes coming out of springs. I'm sure a good explanation exists for why a simple plug was not hammered in to stuff up a 21-inch-wide pipe.

Posting a solution is The-Digital-Age equivalent of howling at the moon, which I consider the obligation of all good citizens.

And while I was solving the BP spill, Melissa worked things out with herself about leaving Sophie and Lucy, both of whom slept through her churnings.

My experience has been that sleeping on a problem generally provides a better solution than barking at it.

And while I'm on vacation, I plan to solve two other problems that have vexed men for decades.

Why would any sensible road put up with the compulsive, back-and-forth crossing of a clueless chicken?

And, second, why hasn't this cluck been arrested for jaywalking?

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