

#160 FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: December 2, 2010

It's time to share Thanksgiving leftovers

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Americans spend the week after thanking their turkeys dealing with the leftovers from the family holiday, like bruised feelings and stains on the good linen.

As you get older, you find that more and more things get left over. It's also true that it's a little harder to do something with what you have left over to work with.

As I approach 65 this month, I'm feeling a bit left over myself.

A recent report estimated America's joblessness: almost 15 million officially unemployed; more than nine million considered involuntary part-time workers; and another 2.6 million classified as "marginally attached to the labor force" but not counted as unemployed because they had not looked for work in the previous four weeks. I'd guess that we have another four or five million unemployed, underemployed or marginally "self-employed" who are neither counted nor estimated.

That's 30 million individuals, about 20 percent of the U.S. labor force.

More than one observer has suggested that unemployment would largely solve itself if workers over 55 forgot about employment for pay and moseyed into retirement's green pastures.

A second article, however, told me that older workers could not afford to retire, because America's 40-month-long Recession (which includes almost 18 months of official Recovery) had reduced their incomes, thrown them out of work or into threadbare underemployment, devalued their skills and experience, tanked their retirement savings and blown up their residential real estate.

And to further complicate matters, a third article said that older workers should expect to work longer before retiring, because they have longer life expectancies and their resources are inadequate to fund retirement.

As the Thanksgiving feast lay heavy, I wondered how we were supposed to keep working at jobs that are disappearing and retire earlier at the same time. Were I younger, perhaps I could multitask my way through this.

Older workers, it seems, are increasingly America's leftovers—the stuff that's tossed.

Leaving certain things over, of course, can be beneficial.

I, for example, have been meaning to say something hurtful to a guy who stiffed me for \$1,500, and I just haven't gotten around to it. No stew, just sue.

I think I'm too old for what my wife, Melissa, calls "nyanh-nyanhing," a venerated jurisprudential concept that traces back to English Common Law. It refers to heated discussions between parties in a dispute that solve nothing but occur anyway. Several law schools have asked Melissa to teach a seminar on the attorney's role in nyanh-nyanh management.

A lot of kids get left over. Our prisons are full of adults who were left over as children.

What happens to adults who get left over later in life? Where do they go?

Then there was the nicely dressed middle-aged man on the train that I might have left over but didn't.

Melissa and I rode Amtrak from New York to Charlottesville, Va., last Sunday after spending Thanksgiving with our daughter, Molly. We parked ourselves in the Quiet Car where posted signs prohibit loud talking and all cellphoning.

Somewhere in the rail yards of New Jersey, Melissa heard music coming from several rows behind us. She suggested that I enforce the rules. She thinks I am especially qualified to serve as the quiet-car's thug.

So I got up and found the miscreant with the offending high-end phone next to his ear. He was blind.

So what would you have done? Everyone around him had given him a pass. His music wasn't that loud after all.

I touched him lightly on the shoulder and whispered that cells were not allowed, and that I would help him find a seat in the adjacent car where he could continue to play his tunes. He said that he hadn't known about the prohibition and deactivated the phone with apologies to me.

And then I felt like a crumb for the next hour.

At Philadelphia, I watched him walk past me to get off the train, armed with necessity, a cane and courage.

And then I felt like a really major crumb for another hour.

Thanksgiving, of course, produces leftover food.

A West African student once confided to me that the oddest adjustment he'd made at the earnest Ohio college we both attended was to realize that seconds and even thirds were almost always available at meals and leftovers were always thrown out.

I've been hungry twice, for lack of money. During these short-lived spells, I thought about leftovers in college dining halls.

And, finally, I can report on one item I left over in New York.

On Black Friday, I once again escorted Melissa through the retail jewelry shops on Manhattan's Fifth Avenue. I was looking at emerald rings; she was looking for such a ring. Prepositional distinctions are important to writers of my standing.

Passing Cartier -- where I had turned down the Doris Duke collection of new-money baubles a year earlier -- I entered a competitor and was immediately uninterested in an emerald the size of a drumstick. Price tags on the merchandise would disturb the atmosphere of repressed panic, so none were affixed.

I asked the reluctant saleswoman for a look. Then I asked her for a loupe. I examined the stone and the setting for 15 minutes. I tsk-tsked and tut-tutted.

"What's the money on this one?" I asked in the way I'd price a one-eyed, lame horse that I didn't want.

"\$125,000."

"Well, the stone has some quality to it, but the setting's a little chintzy."

She coughed and cleared her throat. "Chintzy!" she squeaked.

"Is it pot metal—iron, zinc?"

"Sir. We don't traffic in monkey metal."

"Pewter, maybe?"

"It's hand-crafted platinum, sir."

"Well, I knew it was one of those Ps."

“Would you like us to fashion a custom setting for your wife?”

“What wife?”

“The one hiding behind the draperies near the restroom.”

“I’ll give it some thought, but I was really looking for something off the shelf.”

And with that, I followed Melissa out the door, leaving over to next year the matter of an emerald ring.

As we continued our shopping expedition, we engaged in some spirited nyanh-nyanhing, just to keep our skills sharp.

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