

JUST THINKING ARCHIVES

The following pieces by Greg Roberts have been published at <http://www.coffeyweb.com> and are archived here for reference purposes.

Greg Roberts is a student of life, a seeker of truth, and a believer in God's love for humanity. A college dropout, his only degree was conferred by the School of Hard Knocks. He finds humor is the best way to deal with frustration and writing is the medium that gives him a voice in the ongoing conversation of what it means to be fully human. Having taken the scenic route through life (he has been everything from a used car salesman to a Local Pastor in the United Methodist Church), his experiences provide a fertile soil for his array of topics. He welcomes your comments at gregroberts5000@yahoo.com.

CHANGING SEASONS

I was just thinking about the days getting shorter, the nights getting cooler, and the prospect of the inevitable. My grandson/son Xavier, who is thirteen, and I sit on a porch swing suspended between two trees waiting for the big yellow limousine (alias the school bus) to come haul him off to prison. We've been watching the sun come up over a line of trees beyond the pond. Then it dawns on me (pardon the pun) that the sun isn't really 'coming up' at all. The earth is not the center of the universe. Nor does the sun 'go down', but all the same, the number of daylight hours we experience here in the northern hemisphere decreases slightly each day after June 21st. Sunrise and sunset are truly misleading words, even though meteorologists use them in their forecasts on a daily basis.

The mist rising from the pond says that the water is releasing its stored heat into the chilly morning air. While the fish are probably appreciative of the lower temperature, I'm not. Soon the water will be too cold for the timid (that would be me) to swim. The dew-soaked grass feels uncomfortably cold on your bare feet should you choose to walk around the pond without footwear. Summer is waning. Yes, it's been a hot one. Yes, we've sweat through some hot nights. Cooler days are easier on the energy bill. But soon, you'll be digging out jackets and then coats. You know what's coming.

If you're one of the lucky ones who escape to warmer climes during the worst of winter, you probably don't fret over the seasonal changes. You may be one of those whose favorite time of year is fall, with its gorgeous colors and crisp air. When the temperature dips too low, you pack up the car or the camper and head south. People with jobs and obligations and limited financial resources don't have that option. They are at the mercy of the changing seasons. They (yes, I'm one of them) have to stay here in Ohio and tough out another winter as best they can. Hey, somebody has to stay and keep the home fires burning.

My mother is very fond of saying, "If you cannot change a situation then you must change your attitude." Quite obviously, neither you nor I can make summer last longer or delay the changing seasons. What we can do is change the way we think. Watching the sun appear and the rising mist are visual treats denied to those whose eyesight have failed or who lack the mobility to get outdoors. How about a little gratitude for the

gift of another day of life? And why allow your mind to wander too far ahead? Jesus said, "Don't worry about tomorrow. Tomorrow will have enough worries of its own." Today is all we really have. That statement probably doesn't mean that we shouldn't plan ahead. But planning and worrying are two distinct activities. One is productive; the other is counter-productive.

Best to enjoy what we've been given and be thankful for the certainty that every season gives way to another. Besides, everybody has their own favorite season. We can't assume that everybody loves summer or wants it to last longer. There are many people who never experience a real change in season, like those poor folks who live in Hawaii where the temperature is about the same day in and day out and the sun shines almost every day. Don't we feel sorry for them? Summer is waning. So is life. The roller coaster ride doesn't last very long. Carpe diem.

Our lives have their own seasons. One of my favorite films that captures this truth is "Same Time Next Year" starring Alan Alda. The viewer's peek at his yearly departure from marital fidelity with some beautiful woman (whose name I can't remember just now) reveals his changing agenda, concerns, and attitudes with the passing years. One year he is struggling with his relationship with his son. A short few years later he is mourning that young man's death in Vietnam. Some never get to experience life's changing seasons.

Last week I sat down with an old friend. And yes, I mean 'old' literally. She's fast approaching 103. Her friends have all passed on. Two of her three children have died. And she wonders, "Why am I still here?" Last year she suffered a stroke that impairs her speech, but not so much that she can't communicate. She falls easily. Her eyesight is failing. And she said this, not me: "Sometimes we live too long." She asked me to pray with her and I asked what we should pray for. I already knew the answer. She said, "Pray that I might have patience while I'm still here but that God will take me home soon." She's ready for the last season of this life to end.

Lest I sound morbid, I should point out that she has had a wonderful life, despite the heartaches. She and her husband eloped to Kentucky to get married when she was just a beautiful young teenager. Her preacher daddy and momma weren't too thrilled with her choice of men. Harley smoked! But they had a great marriage. They worked together to restore a log cabin into a warm and welcoming home. They weathered the seasons of life for over fifty years before he went on to see what's on the other side.

While acting as a greeter at the funeral home, I'll often ask old friends who come to visitation, "You been behaving yourself?" My favorite answer, one that I frequently comes with a smile, is, "It gets easier all the time." Changing seasons do have their advantages.

By Greg Roberts (published 9/29/2011)

WORDS AND MEANINGS

It's getting kind of late; I should go to bed. This will probably be very short. But I just can't stop thinking about the way we use or misuse words (and phrases), which, in the end, is all we have to communicate ideas to one another.

If you're a fan of HGTV, you may watch House Hunters. We do. And in every episode, they talk about how many bathrooms a house might have. Why do we call them bathrooms? Are we just too prudish to call them toilet rooms? The space in question may contain only a toilet, a sink and a shower stall. It's still a bathroom. It may contain only a toilet and a sink; now it's a half bath. Come on! Who bathes in the sink other than the homeless men in the restroom of the Greyhound Station? And while we're on this subject, why haven't bidets caught on in this country like they have in Europe and in other 'civilized' places? Toilet paper commercials permeate the airwaves but nobody I know has a bidet. Somebody please explain that to me, won't you?

Move on through the house and now we come to the formal living room. We have one of those in our house! Only because my wife insisted on it when we drew up the plans together. It is most appropriately misnamed. Nobody does any living there, formal or otherwise. We don't entertain, we don't gather, we don't do anything in the so-called 'living' room. All the living goes on in other areas of the house. Our living room is a carryover from an earlier time, when houses boasted of parlors. (Hey, I work in a house that has a parlor! It's called the funeral home.) Our living room contains a couch and matching chair that have seldom been crushed under the weight of anybody's derriere. In addition to the couch and chair there are two curio cabinets containing an accumulated treasure (not mine) of Precious Moments and other assorted trinkets, but nobody ever sees them because nobody used the so-called living room. It would be the first room you enter if you came in on the front sidewalk. Last winter the snow and ice fell off the roof onto the sidewalk and rendered it impassable. Not that it mattered. Nobody comes in through our front door, with the rare exception of a Jehovah's Witness. So why call it a living room? Why not call it the museum room? Many residences boast a living room AND a family room. That's more realistic isn't it? The family room is (in an ideal world) the place where the family gathers to enjoy one another's company. That's where the board games are played, the charades take place, and the Wii helps the whole family get a work out. Like I said, in an ideal world...

This misleading language doesn't stop in our residences. Companies used to have Personnel Departments. Not any more; now they have Human Resources. It may seem like a harmless change but personnel are *people* and *resources* are something you use up, like water and energy. Downsizing means that a certain group of people has been released to find greater opportunities, often through no fault of their own. Why not just say, "*We've laid off a bunch of people*"? Most people understand that business has cycles. They understand that profit and loss statements dictate the number of employees in a particular firm. What they don't often understand is why the people who have worked their asses off for the good of the company often get the ax while the ones who remain are often less than valuable assets.

Currently, our Congress (whom Mark Twain characterized as "**The best group of men money can buy**") passed legislation to cut spending by trillions of dollars. In reality, the bill doesn't do anything but *limit* future spending. It's not like we are going to suddenly start living within our national means. It just means we'll accumulate debt at a slower rate than we are currently doing. But the term, 'cut spending' is misleading, which is exactly what it was meant to be. Again, it's the misuse of language that concerns me.

The late George Carlin did a monologue on rights. You can see it on YouTube if you're so inclined. In that routine, George insists that there's no such thing as a 'right' and if there were, then every human being would have food and a roof over his head. No, he insists, you don't have rights; you have privileges. And you have those privileges because you were fortunate enough to be born in a country where the founding fathers put together a list of ten 'inalienable' rights, which we call The Bill of Rights. Read them. Then talk to a Native American about rights. Talk to the Japanese Americans who were forcibly removed from their homes and interred for months after the attack on Pearl Harbor, simply because their parents were born in the wrong country. Talk to anybody who is in a minority, be it racial or ethnic. Our so-called rights can be withdrawn or ignored by our

government. George is absolutely right on; we have privities, not rights. There's a huge difference.

Have you noticed that people now live together, bring children into the world, and maintain their freedom to leave their 'significant other'? That's a phrase that's come into vogue during my lifetime. An obituary will sometimes list a 'significant other' as opposed to a spouse. That, and "*we've been together for ___(you fill in the number) years*" sounds a lot nicer than "*We're shackled up.*" It would be politically incorrect for me to disparage this arrangement....so be it! Here's my opinion (yeah, I know everybody's got one) on the subject. You want to live together without getting married? Fine. But don't bring children into the world. Kids deserve to have a mother **and** a father. I'm raising two grandchildren who have never *seen* their fathers, let alone *known* them. They're good kids. They deserve better; every child does. Aid to dependent children (ADC) encouraged, and still encourages young women to have babies outside wedlock. We've adopted phrases like "unwed mothers" and "significant others" into our everyday language. What happened to words like "shame" and "responsibility"?

Okay, having just read that last paragraph, I see that there's a need for further explanation of my opinion. Here goes. Anybody can make a mistake. Carried away by passion, two people can conceive what they never intended to. And often, marriage is not the best course for these two people. ADC could then be employed as a safety net. But a second child conceived outside marriage? And a third and even more ADC? We (as a society) need to stop encouraging irresponsible sexual behavior.

I've had my say; I'm going to bed. You disagree? Email me:

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I'd love to hear YOUR opinion.

- By Greg Roberts (published 9/11/2011)

RE-READING THE GOOD STUFF

In John Irving's novel *The World According to Garp*, (published in 1976) the main character (yep, his name is T.S. Garp) is a writer of novels and his critics complain that all he can write about are his personal experiences, thinly disguised as fiction. People he has met, places he has been, situations he has endured all find their way into Garp's fictional novels. Is John Irving revealing his own struggles in writing through his fictional character, Garp? What **do** we have to write about, other than our own experiences? Well, some writers actually do transcend their own little worlds of reality.

I read "*Garp*" back in '76. I'm reading it again because I know I've forgotten most of it. Call it early Alzheimer's, the beginnings of dementia or whatever you like but many of the books I read long ago have sunk into a bog of sodden memories. So I'm re-reading them, especially the ones that awakened a love for science fiction and you know what? It's like reading them for the first time. Recently I took my family to The Book Loft in German Village, where we spent a couple of delightful hours and collectively spent a small fortune on books and CD's before enjoying a mid-afternoon meal at the famous Schmidt House Restaurant, home of the Bahama Mama. I tried to remember some of the books that struck me as awesome when I was a young man. So I came home with "*Garp*", Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. I convinced my thirteen-year-old grandson, Xavier, to buy Robert Heinlein's *Stranger In a Strange Land* and *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress*. He was reading at a college Freshman level since he was in the fifth grade and goes through a five-hundred page Harry Potter book in two days. He's ready for some meat.

Interestingly enough, I claim to love to read, but seldom take more than an hour at a time to indulge in that retreat from the reality of have-to-do stuff. Back in January and

February, when I was fairly immobilized as a broken leg and ankle healed, I read constantly. Ron kept my bedside table well supplied with a variety of material. (Now there's a friend for you.) My wife, on the other hand, claims to be a slow reader and therefore seldom indulges in reading novels, biographies, or anything longer in length than a few pages. Still, she reads a lot more of the junk that keeps appearing in our mailbox than I do. She reads the electric co-op's Country Living, the AARP Magazine, all the consumer tips that come with the utility bills, TV Guide, and the occasional newspaper. Oh, did I forget the County Shopper? She also reads something from the Bible.....every day. Please understand that I'm not criticizing. When something passes under your nose that looks even remotely interesting, you might want to investigate. When I worked at Greenfield Printing and Publishing in the pre-press department, I was constantly reading the negatives we assembled by hand on the light tables. Back then, we published some sixty to seventy magazines and night after night, there was always something to catch your eye. (No, we didn't print *Playboy*.)

Reading is taught in our public schools as one of the fundamental life skills. It seems a shame to me that so many people come out of school with a negative attitude toward the gift of symbolic communication. (That's reading.) Oh sure, you can now listen to books on CD's. Recently my cousin in Colorado gave me one of those; *Rainbow Six* by Tom Clancy. So I began the journey back to Ohio listening to a book. The first CD played fine. By then I was fascinated with the story of a multi-national elite team created to deal with terrorist situations. The second CD played fine for the first few minutes then started skipping. Soon it was unintelligible. So much for electronic progress. I pulled that CD out and invited Joe Bonamasa to fill the cab of the truck with good music. Thankfully, those CD's don't skip....yet. I guess I'll have to buy a copy of the book to see what happens next. But I digress. It's sad (at least, to me) that teachers, especially elementary school teachers, either don't know how to instill a love for learning or forget that it's their primary objective. Learning is solidly anchored in the ability and the desire to read. The child who loves to read will grow intellectually, socially, and psychologically. But somebody (a teacher?) must instill and nurture that love for reading.

Did you ever wonder about the connection between reading and creative writing? If we, like Garp, can only write about our real life experiences, we will soon run out of material, unless you're a county judge or Jerry Springer. The folks who write travel books (such as *In a Sunburned Land*) are the exceptions. Most of us just don't have the time or resources to be world travelers. So where do we get our grist for the writing mill? We get it from a couple of sources, one of which is a fertile imagination. Steven Spielberg is a classic example. But did you ever wonder where he gets his amazing ideas? It wouldn't surprise me to find that Steven is an avid reader, one who finds ample material for his own creations in the stories other people write.

The people who speak most knowledgeably about what constitutes *meaningful* writing (college professors of literature, publishers, acknowledged writers) will insist that for a piece of writing to be meaningful it has to work on more than one level and speak in some manner to the human condition. Maybe that's what has kept me from even attempting THE GREAT AMERICAN NOVEL. What I write is whimsical, often lacking in both content and style. But you....you're reading this, aren't you? I'm so grateful for people like you, people who still like to read. Thanks for taking the time. I wonder...who was it somewhere along the way who nurtured your love of reading? Who opened your eyes to the bigger world beyond what you could actually see and touch? I wish I could answer that one myself. I owe somebody a debt of thanks.

- By Greg Roberts (published 8/30/2011)

THE TRIP FROM HELL!

I was just thinking....about some of the more memorable trips when I was employed by

The Mason Company. As sales engineers (fancy title for a guy with absolutely no engineering background) we attended national trade shows several times each year in cities all over the country. These events attracted incredible numbers of vendors and potential customers. Anybody who sold anything related to the pet industry would bring their wares and set up displays on the trade show floor in hopes of gaining new business. As the premier and senior manufacturer of custom kennels, The Mason Company always made an appearance. And while there was plenty of hard work setting up and tearing down the displays, there was also a lot of fun involved. Meeting new people, staying in nice hotels, eating well in good restaurants...all these contributed to the allure of the trade show. However, there were occasional drawbacks.

While still working full time as a sales engineer, I was also filling the role of a part-time local pastor for the Sinking Spring United Methodist Church. Lacking the formal seminary training of an ordained elder (a real pastor) in the Church, I was required to further my education by attending seminary classes on weekends and writing papers in my spare time. Meshing the obligations of the two jobs proved to be quite a challenge. Diane and I smile (now) when we think about the Trip from Hell.

This particular weekend an ordained elder from Oxford, Ohio was teaching eight or nine of us local pastors. We met in the Piketon United Methodist Church from four till nine on Friday afternoon and evening, spent the night in a local motel, and sat listening to Reverend Jim Sergeant again from eight till four the next day. (And you thought an hour sitting in the pew was just plenty.) As soon as the class ended, I rushed out the front door to my waiting car, driven by Diane, dumped my suitcase and briefcase in the trunk and off we went to Cincinnati so I could catch a plane to San Antonio.

Maybe I should mention something about that car. I'm a sucker for old cars and trucks. This was a 1966 Ford Fairlane (and this took place in 1996), bright yellow, lots of chrome trim, perfect upholstery...a real trophy, I saw it some months earlier in the front yard of a car salesman (which should have been my first warning to just keep on going) and stopped to look it over. He priced it and I bought it. Up to this point we had not had the first problem with it. Up to this point.

Knowing I had a plane to catch, we cruised down the Appalachian Highway at 65 mph all the way to Eastgate. While sitting at the red light, steam began to rise from the hood, just a little at first, then a huge cloud. Naturally, we were in the center lane, which made it very difficult to pull off to the right, but we got there. And as luck would have it, there was a Pep Boys auto store and repair shop on that very corner. One of the employees came out, looked under the hood, and announced that we needed a new water pump. After a few keystrokes on his computer, he assured me he could have one by the same time tomorrow. Diane and I exchanged looks of despair. I had to make it to the airport before my flight departed and time was running out. She had to get back home to Leesburg. We explained our predicament to the clerk but he shrugged and said it was the best he could do. Nobody in the area, he assured us, stocked parts for cars that old. A fellow who had been standing nearby came over and said, "Excuse me sir, I heard you talking to your wife and if you need to get to the airport, I'd be happy to take you." I was amazed at that offer. Was God watching over me? I asked Diane if she could call a tow truck and ride back home with the car and she assured me she could. "Go! You need to get moving or you'll miss that flight." I transferred my belongings to the back seat of the angel of mercy and away we went. "Gosh" I thought, "This guy drives even faster than I do." I struck up a conversation. "I really appreciate this. I know you must have other things to do late on Saturday." "Nah" he replied. "I just got out of prison." I turned toward the passenger window so he couldn't see the alarm on my face. Just then he turned on a road clearly marked "Airport personnel only" that led around the outermost parts of the airport grounds, the really secluded parts. I could just see the headline in the Cincinnati Enquirer on Sunday's paper: "Stupid businessman found dead in cattails at airport." "This is the shortest way to the terminal," he said. "Sure it is", I thought. "This is my last ride. Diane will be filing for my life insurance The Mason Company will be running a want ad for a

sales engineer smarter than the last one.”

But to my surprise (and huge relief) we soon pulled up in front of the terminal. I expressed my sincere gratitude; my hope that life would treat him well gave him a twenty-dollar bill. He thanked me, wished me a safe trip, and drove off. I took off for the boarding gate, doing my best imitation of O.J. Simpson running through the airport. Trouble is, I went to the wrong gate. My boarding pass said one thing; the departure board said another. Now, sweating and panicky, I backtracked to a gate I had passed moments ago that had already been boarding.

Have you ever run through an airport with a suitcase dragging behind you, threatening to pull your arm out of the socket and a briefcase banging your knee with every stride? I hope you never have to. I got to the correct gate and presented my ticket. The attendant frowned at me and said, “We just completed boarding. I’ll see if they can still get you on.” They did, but you could tell nobody was very happy about it. You could just tell by their looks that they wanted to ask why you couldn’t be on time like everybody else. Yeah, why indeed?

When we arrived in San Antonio, there was a shuttle bus from the hotel waiting for us. We quickly filled it up and settled back for the half-hour drive. With relief that the travel aspect of the trip was behind me, I approached the check-in counter. The clerk was very nice but the news was not. It seems a large party of guests had decided they wanted to stay another day in beautiful San Antonio. There were no rooms available. “But I have a reservation” I protested. So did about fifty other people, but to no avail. We were told that we could have the rooms we were promised on Sunday afternoon but the hotel had made other arrangements for us that night. “Don’t worry, we’ll take good care of you.”

We were herded back onto the shuttle bus and off we went to our temporary quarters. Looking out the window, I noticed that the neighborhood we were entering was hardly the sort you’d see in a travel brochure. We pulled into the parking lot of an establishment that made Motel Six look like a Best Western. By the time we all got checked in it was nearly ten and nobody really felt like venturing out, especially when we found signs in our rooms warning us to make certain that we locked the doors and fastened the security chains. We got some nourishment from the few vending machines and hunkered down in our rooms. Continuous sirens interrupted my sleep every hour on the hour.

Sunday morning the shuttle bus took us to the trade center, where other well-rested, well-fed vendors were lounging beside their displays in anticipation of a wonderful day. I located the three Mason Company crates on the shipping dock and found a two-wheel cart to move them to our assigned booths on the show floor. No sooner had I opened the crates and began to unload the numerous pieces than a guy with a badge and an attitude approached me and informed me that I could not assemble my display. Only union personnel could perform mechanical tasks. I attempted to assure him that I would only be using a socket wrench and a screwdriver, hardly what you’d call skilled labor. He shook his head. “Nope, you’ve gotta pay a union guy or you can’t set up.”

Steaming like the engine of my disabled car, I gave in and asked him to send someone over. Now remember that I had no breakfast. Diane will tell you that I get grumpy when I get hungry.

Forty-five minutes later, a candidate for the village idiot award shuffled over and began to pull pieces out of the crates and toss them around on the floor. “Hey” I admonished him, “Be careful. This display has to look great.” “Yeah, right” he muttered. “It’s just a dumb dog cage.” That was all I needed to hear. While Einstein looked on, drawing Sunday union wages, I assembled the display myself, pushed the crates back to the shipping dock, and walked to the hotel I was supposed to have spent the night in. I knew I couldn’t get into a room till mid-afternoon, but they did have a restaurant where I could get something to eat. Food always makes me feel better.

San Antonio is a great place to visit. I saw the Alamo, the Spanish market (where I bought

a cotton horse blanket) and had two beautiful evenings on The Riverwalk. The traffic on the show floor was good too, and I picked up some great sales leads. However, when it was time to disassemble the display, I had to pay another union goon who couldn't have cared less about our equipment. Once the shipping labels were attached to the crates, I made my way back to the hotel, checked out, and took the shuttle to the airport. Wouldn't you know it? The flight was delayed because of weather between San Antonio and home. But we finally got off the ground and Diane was there to pick me up in Cincinnati, but not in our Ford Fairlane. It was still waiting for a new water pump.

Looking back after fifteen years, I still consider it the Trip from Hell, but somehow, I'm able to smile now. Barbara Streisand sang, "Could it be that it was all so simple then or has time rewritten every line?" Time does indeed do wonders but each of us has some memories that time will never erase...or change. I wonder what became of my 'angel of mercy' who went out of his way to get me to the airport. I wonder where my old Ford is today. And I wonder where I would be today if only...ah well. Yesterday is history, the future is a mystery and today is a gift from God. That's why we call it "the present."

- By Greg Roberts (published 8/15/2011)

SORROWS AND BLESSINGS

I was just thinking about how much of life is a mixed bag of sorrows...and blessings. Strangely enough, this line of thought began to emerge while I was waiting in line to get my old truck on the scales at the local quarry to see how much the gravel for the driveway weighed. I looked off to my left and there on the bank beside the scale house was a profusion of honeysuckle vines climbing the hillside. Everybody loves the smell of honeysuckle, don't they? But upon closer observation, there was an equal amount of that dreaded three-leaved plant that nobody wants anything to do with. I'm referring to poison ivy.

Measles make you bumpy; Mumps will make you lumpy

Chicken pox will make you jump and twitch

A common cold will fool ya; whoopin' cough will cool ya

But poison ivy, Lord, will make you itch! (The Coasters)

Some people are so susceptible that they'll swear they can get the dreaded stuff just by looking at it! But I digress.

If you have raised children, or if you're in that process, you know what a mixed bag of blessings and tribulations that can be. Ron and Dianna have recently become grandparents...hurray for them! They can cuddle, coo, rock and sing (classic rock, of course) to that little boy all day long and then get in their car and drive home to a house of peace and quiet. Meanwhile, Wade and Susan are learning the true meaning of servant hood. Babies can be quite demanding. You learn quite a lot in the first few months, like never to hold the baby's face over your own unless you want a second-hand meal. Oh yeah, there's all that fun and more. But the softness of their skin, the innocence, the look of awe on their faces as they learn about the world around them...those are all priceless.

Then they grow up while you grow old. Some years ago there was a hilarious email making the circuit about a little boy's journey through childhood. I can't remember all of it but the part that sticks in my mind is when Dad took him hunting for the first time and Mom is helping him to recall that day. *"Remember how excited he was to go hunting with you? Remember how sorry he was when he shot you in the leg and how sorry he was that you weren't a deer?"* I wonder if *your* parents weren't occasionally sorry that they didn't use a condom! I'll bet mine were. While I never intentionally went out of my way to make their lives miserable, I'm pretty sure there were times when the aggravation I

caused them far outweighed any pride I may have brought. I painfully recall the afternoon I called Mom at work and told her I had been trying to be helpful by defrosting the refrigerator freezer. But the darned ice wouldn't melt fast enough to suit me so I took an ice pick and began to stab it. Man, that gas comes out fast! We got a new refrigerator the next day and I tried to stay out of sight for a while. Like I said, life's a mixed bag.

We currently have a mutt-dog, Marty, whom we rescued from the Highland County Dog Pound a couple of years ago. Marty is my faithful companion when I take walks in the woods and meadows. He also chews the arms off our lawn chairs, digs cavernous holes in the yard trying to catch moles, and taunts the neighbor's dogs penned up dogs, which cannot get out of their prison to dispatch him. He is clean; you never, ever find his excrement on our property. The neighbors may not look on his toilet habits with as much admiration. Marty is the epitome of the mixed bag. Adoring, rambunctious, faithful but exasperating; that's our dog.

Out of the same soil grow poison ivy and honeysuckle. Friends, we are also 'soil'. From dust were you made and dust you shall be. But in the meanwhile, what grows from the soil that goes by your name? What beauty do you and I bring forth? What is it about us (you and me) that brings smiles to the faces of others? On the other side of the ledger, what makes people want to avoid us like we were contagious? What poison do we broadcast? If I had to guess... no, I won't do that. I'll tell you about me but you have to be the one to discern the truth about yourself. I don't purposely do things to make other people angry. Mostly, it's the things I SAY that cause others sorrow. My big mouth, my sharp tongue, and my spontaneous outbursts reveal the truth that some of this soil is selfish, opinionated, and careless. Those who know me best will nod in agreement; there's plenty of room for improvement. Intertwined with the negative traits are compassion for those who suffer, a hunger to make people smile or even laugh, and a resolve never to be a burden on anybody. I have worked at something all my life and hope to earn my daily bread right up till the moment this soil goes back to the earth. I have a certificate promising a free visit to Dr. Kevorkian when the time comes. But since he up and died, I don't know how I'm going to redeem it. You're smiling right now, aren't you?

Blessings and curses, knowledge and disappointments, growth and discomfort. All of these I found in seminary. The hardest work I've ever done is to scrutinize what I was sold from childhood as undiluted truth and to discover the inherent 'spin' of the first century writers. But freedom from the baggage of 'what everybody knows is true' brings with it the possibility of discovery. Maybe there's more to the faith than what's been peddled for two millennia. If George Barna, the guru of Christian surveys, is correct, there are an awful lot of people out there who are very much like Bono, of U2 fame: *"I still haven't found what I'm looking for."* I can quite honestly report that to step out of the approved boundaries of orthodoxy in search of something more can be a pretty scary experience. You can never go back; your conscience won't let you. Once you know something isn't true you can never again pretend that it is. Again, it's a mixed bag of anxiety and exhilaration, kind of like sex for the first time, if you'll forgive the analogy.

Living in Highland County has its own sweetness and poison. We listen to the news most evenings at eleven. Seems like in the cities there are murders, robberies, rapes, and fatal accidents just about every day. Here in Highland County we don't worry much about such things. Oh sure, they happen...but rarely, compared to a city like Cincinnati. Don't tell anyone, but you'll find my car keys in the ignition just about every night. I figure if anybody wants it bad enough to go to jail, they think a lot more of the old rust heap than I do. Besides, they make 'em every day in Detroit... or used to. Highland County is quiet, and living on a county road is like Heaven on earth after living on the hamburger row in Wapakoneta for eight years. Most folks leave you alone, except for the Jehovah's Witness and the college kids selling those textbooks that you'd buy without hesitation if you cared anything at all about your own children's educational development. Neighbors are friendly enough, but not invasive. Yes, Highland County has a lot going for it.

On the other hand, many people tend to be a bit 'provincial'. Folks who dare to think differently about anything from religion to politics to sexual orientation might well be described as having 'no common sense' or worse. War is still a very acceptable means to an end, especially when your country is always in the right. Poor people are just lazy or they wouldn't be poor but there's no reason to help folks in other countries when there's so much need right here at home. WLW radio is the principal source of untainted, honest news reporting. You get my drift?

Jobs, especially what you'd call 'good' jobs, are hard to come by and even harder to hold in Highland County. It's pretty amazing how many people commute to places like Columbus, Circleville, and Cincinnati (anyplace that begins with the letter "C") to earn a decent living, while continuing to call Highland County "home". If it weren't for the certainty of human mortality, my boss wouldn't even have a secure job. In today's economy, even a crummy job is hard to find.

I'd love to talk more about poison and sweetness. I even gave a brief thought of going into the agony and the ecstasy of married life...but only briefly. Yes, it's summertime and I could live in a tent behind the pond for a few weeks, but when winter comes, would she let me back in the house? You have to look ahead. Besides, they don't call her Saint Diane for nothing.

- By Greg Roberts (published 7/31/2011)

REFLECTIONS

The new black Lexus pulls alongside but only briefly as it passes quickly by. The windows are tinted and thereby obscure so much as a peek into the car's cabin. All the outsider can see is the reflection of his own automobile as the Lexus cruises on past in the high speed lane and disappears over a ridge ahead.

Soon a loud noise attracts your attention and you see in the side view mirror an approaching motorcycle. It's a beauty. The tank sports a custom paint job and there's plenty of shiny chrome. The driver is covered from head to foot in black leather and his face is hidden behind a dark visor. Like the Lexus, he is beside you only momentarily before opening the throttle and roaring ahead.

As you approach Lexington you notice a tall building to your left, a new glass and steel marvel of engineering. However, you cannot see a single soul inside, not so much as a desk because every glass panel is constructed of high impact dark glass. You pass by wondering who works there and what they do, but you'll never know because the reflective glass is designed to keep your curiosity at bay.

Once you get past the city the landscape changes. The low rolling hills grow into rock-ribbed mountains, deeply violated by the freeway that cuts through their hearts. Off to your right a large lake appears, the surface reflecting the sunlight so brightly that you are grateful for your sunglasses. In mere seconds you are past it and can only wonder about its size, its depth and what lies beneath the surface.

Such is the nature of reflections. They conceal whatever lies on the other side. However, there is a different aspect of reflection than that of merely images bouncing off of shiny objects. I wonder how much of our thinking reflects the influence of others on our lives and how much of our personality is but a reflection of those who have molded us over the course of our lives. Instead of fleeting glimpses bouncing off a darkened surface, like the windows of the car, the motorcycle or the building, our lives reflect the intrusions of other people's wills, the importation of other's values, and the intrusion of shame or praise. In the beginning we are shaped in our mother's wombs by factors like nutrition and stress. Once we are born, we continue to be shaped, but not so much by physical factors as by experiences.

Some of those experiences are devoid of human influence. A bee sting, getting lost in the department store or nearly drowning is highly formative. The fears we carry into adulthood often reflect early childhood experiences. These are the foundations of lifelong fears. We weren't born with these fears; we learned them. It seems to me perfectly correct to say our fears are reflective of our childhood experiences.

However, the bulk of the experiences that shape us are directly correlated to human interaction. Moreover, the lasting influence of these experiences reflects the impact they had when they occurred. Sadly, many of these experiences have been sublimated and we are not even aware of the experiences that shaped our personalities. The man or woman who molests children sexually often reflects his or her own early molestation but cannot recall the events that shaped his affinity for children. Nonetheless, his desire is a reflection of somebody's intrusion into his life. Buried deep beneath the layers of self-protection lay the seeds of his own abnormality.

Some people proudly pronounce themselves workaholics. I've been labeled that myself. While on a mission trip to Mississippi in 2005 to help clean up after Hurricane Katrina, I would continue working when everybody else was ready to call it quits for the day. When I was pastoring a church, I would perform duties that were not expected of me. I mopped and buffed floors. I set up the tables for funeral dinners. I mowed the church yard and picked up trash daily. If there was anything to carry in or out, I jumped at the chance. Quite honestly, I spoiled my parishioners. They came to expect more of their pastor than they should have. And they labeled me a workaholic. I don't consider it praise.

In my case, my proclivity for staying busy stems from both a desire to win parental approval and low self-esteem. This inability to relax for more than a few moments is a manifestation of my hunger for other people's respect. How did I get this way? I'm not a trained psychologist but I suspect that this compulsion is a reflection of early childhood hunger for affection. Maybe I'm off base with that assessment, but there's no denying that the middle child is often the neglected child.

My father was a racist. His disdain for Blacks was imbedded in me before I left home and joined the Navy. There, I was billeted with Blacks, Filipinos and Latinos. I learned to work and play with those people, but all these years later I still have to resist the urge to cave in to negative generalizations. His views regarding race have been largely overshadowed by experience and reason, but sometimes my attitudes still reflect that early childhood training.

In recent years, I have given more attention to theology—thinking about God. The calcified indoctrination that has prohibited free thinking is hard to chip away. The fear of rejection by my peers and my family competes with a hunger to find a truer assessment of the human-divine relationship. My thinking processes are limited. My efforts to explore new territory are restricted by cultural embodiments that cannot be discarded because they cannot be identified as such. It is indeed the rare person who can think outside the box because most of us cannot even identify those boundaries that constrain us. Even when we attempt creative thinking we are reflecting the thoughts of others. Does anyone truly ever have an original thought?

When you look into the mirror who do you see? What do you see? The physical reflection looking back at you changes day to day and year to year. That is the evidence of physical aging. What about the unseen person behind those eyes? Is change taking place? Is there more of God reflected than in the past? Does the unseen person behind the eyes mirror a divine intervention or merely another human being attempting to make it through the day? Reflect on that and let me know what you discover, won't you?

By Greg Roberts (published 7/8/2011)

A TRANSIENT'S JOURNEY

Playing the role of greeter at funeral visitations opens the door (pun intended) to meeting lots of people you've never had the privilege of knowing. For an extrovert like myself, it's an opportunity to strike up a conversation. Now some people just aren't extroverts. I've watched other greeters greet people they didn't know at the door, then sneak over and look at their names after they signed the guest book. I just flat out ask them. *"I'm Greg and I'm sorry but I don't know your name."* So far nobody has answered, *"None of your business!"*

If conversation should ensue, I might ask if they're a native of Highland County. *"Oh yes, I was born in (Lynchburg/Leesburg/Greenfield/Hillsboro/Fayetteville – take your pick) and I've always been in this area. And you? Are you a native of Highland County?"* That's where I get nervous because when I answer 'no' the next question is inevitably, *"Oh, where are you from?"* Nobody wants to hear my life history but how do I answer that question without going into some detail? Let me tell you, the reader, about my journey and then you can tell me where I'm from.

I was born in Portsmouth a long, long time ago, the second of three children. When I was seven my Mom and Dad divorced and Mom moved to Greenfield with us kids. Mom worked as a secretary at American Pad and Textile. We were there one year and while there she met Dick. They married the next year and we moved to Richwood, because he had a good job at Whirlpool in Marion, a short distance away. One year later we moved to Washington Court House, where I attended grades six through nine, and between my freshman and sophomore years they bought a house in the country so I finished high school at Miami Trace. So I ask you, *"Where am I from?"* During my four years in the Navy I lived in Pensacola, New York City, and spent one marvelous year in Australia. Since coming home from the Navy I've lived in Washington C. H., Bloomingburg, Ada, Highland, a farm outside Leesburg, Sinking Spring, Wapakoneta, and (presently) just out of New Market. So truthfully, I don't know where I'm from! And to borrow a lyric from John Denver, *"I don't know where I'm going; I'm not sure where I've been."* (*Sweet Surrender*)

There are pluses and minuses to both scenarios-being a lifelong resident and being a transient. I notice that the lifelong folks who come to the funeral home are able to say things such as, *"We went through school together from the first grade clear through graduation."* They truly do have lifelong friends. Transients like myself, conversely, have been forced to learn how to make friends in new situations. Military brats become exceptionally adept at adjusting to new surroundings as their parents move from one duty station to another. The lifelong resident knows the history of his or her school, city, and county. These folks can tell you about events that happened thirty or forty years ago in great detail. They know who sent teams to the state tournaments and who won championships. They remember athletes who excelled and went on to play in major colleges. They can tell you about businesses long gone, and what the judges who sit on the benches today were like back in high school. We transients only know the history of our comparatively brief time in the area. Typically, the transients don't know the sordid sides of people nearly as well as the long time residents. And maybe that's a blessing. Knowing that somebody is less than perfect is probably not to anyone's advantage. Quite honestly, I don't want to know who had an affair or who is currently engaged in an illicit relationship. The lifelong resident, whose family names you'll recognize soon enough, knows who did who and when and you know what? They never forget.

Ironically, the person who has lived in a small community for twenty or thirty years but wasn't born there may find that there are some folks who **still** think of them as outsiders. I guess the thinking goes something like this: if you weren't born here you'll never be one of us. Join Rotary, be active in a church, work for the good of the community, vote in every election and don't spit on the sidewalk but it makes no difference; you're still an outsider and always will be. The further back you can trace your family in the county or community the more you 'belong'.

Your ancestry is the key to acceptance. Speaking as a transient, I can tell you that attitudes that keep reminding the newcomer that he or she doesn't really 'belong' do little to promote the growth or vitality of a community. If you visit the North Carolina home of one of America's greatest authors, Carl Sandburg, you'll find a video that plays with the push of a button. In that video the famous radio announcer Edward R. Murrow asks Carl Sandburg, "*What's the ugliest word in the English language?*" After a moment's thought, Sandburg replies, "*The ugliest word in the English language is....exclusive.*" The 'exclusive' society of the been-here-forever crowd sometimes comes across as arrogance to the relative newcomer. Maybe it's a good thing for transients like me to get snubbed once in awhile. It may help us to identify with people of a different race or ethnic background. I can only imagine what kind of rejection they get in small communities.

I mentioned living in Ada. Diane and I were both students there for a couple of years. College towns, while often small, are different in this respect. They're built *around* the transient community. Not only does a new class of freshmen arrive every fall, but the faculty comes and goes as well. Upward mobility leads professors and administrators to ever-more-challenging stations. The true natives of Ada neither scorn nor resent that sea of ever-changing faces. Oh sure, they get frustrated with the antics of college kids. They fume when parties last all night or they go outside to get the morning paper only to find the evidence of such parties on their driveways. But they know which side their bread is buttered on. Take away the college, with its revenues and energy and the town will wither and die. So even if there's a Delta House on campus, the natives will tolerate the temporary antics of a few for the continued well-being of the many.

In northwest Ohio you'll find many barns where the date of the structure is displayed as a pattern in the slate roofs. Sadly, as agriculture changes and barns are less and less important, many of those structures are sagging and won't be with us much longer. But the fact that the date was considered worth the extra effort when the roof was installed testifies to the hunger for a sense of stability, of belonging. It's not unusual to hear somebody say, "*This farm has been in my family for five generations.*" I guess roots are pretty important to those folks. Comedian Richard Pryor puts it in perspective for outsiders like me. "*Some white lady told me her people came over on the Mayflower. So I told her all my people came over on boats too but we don't make no big deal about it.*"

Today, as I write this, I'm amused that in last night's mayoral election, the folks who braved the rain to make their ways to the polls voted overwhelmingly for an outsider. Not only is Drew Hastings an outsider but also this is his first foray into the political arena. Maybe there are more transients in Hillsboro than life-long residents. Or maybe people are just so desperate for things to get better that they're willing to give an outsider the opportunity to show what he can do. Whatever the reasons for his victory in the primary, he still has to win in November to prove that Hillsboro's electorate will hand the reins of leadership over to someone who can't trace his family history in the county for generations. As an aside, why shouldn't a comedian make a good mayor? In a country that will elect actors as governors and even presidents, why not indeed!

If you're a lifelong resident, I do hope that you've at least traveled. And no, I'm not talking about a trip to Cincinnati or Columbus. Hopefully, you've lived somewhere else for at least a few months or years. People who have never left the safety of the county in which they were born tend to be pretty provincial in their thinking. Unless you've experienced the somewhat unsettling feeling that comes from being outside your natural habitat, you will never know how it feels for the transient or the newcomer in your community. People need to feel welcome, to be accepted, and to be valued for the potential they bring with them. The last thing they need is to be snubbed or looked down upon simply because they weren't born 'here'.

If you're a transient (like myself) I hope you have come to realize that we are the ones

who bring the fresh breeze of possibility with us, wherever we go. While we may never be able to sing Bruce Springsteen's song "My Hometown", we still 'belong' wherever we happen to live. Grow where you're planted. Bear fruit. Work for good. That was the message God sent to the Israelites in exile through the prophets. Forgive those who think they're superior because of their ancestry. And always remember this: the future is a lot more important than the past. Transients who either immigrated to this country or moved westward in search of their dreams built America. Let those who never felt the need to see beyond the hill remain where they feel most secure. The Promised Land is for those who yearn for more than the safety of their comfort zones.

- By Greg Roberts (published 6/14/2011)

...ABOUT PRAYER

I was just thinking about prayer.

Gladys was an elderly lady struggling to get by on a meager Social Security check. However, with the rising costs of everything from heat to groceries to pharmaceuticals, she found her check simply couldn't cover all of her monthly expenses. She didn't know where to turn, so she turned to prayer. She wrote the following letter:

Dear God,

It says in the Bible that when we need help we should turn to you. I don't have the \$500.00 to pay my rent this month. I am not careless with my resources; there simply isn't enough to go around. I'm counting on you to help me through this time of need. Thank you God.

Gladys

She addressed the envelope to "God" and mailed it. Now the folks in the post office didn't know what to do with a letter addressed to God. So they did what they do with all those letters addressed to Santa Claus. They gave it to the postmaster, who opened it and read it. He was so touched that he shared it with all the employees, who were similarly sympathetic. They decided to take up a collection and send it anonymously to Gladys. By the end of the week they had \$475.00, which they put in an envelope with no return address and mailed it to her. The following week another letter addressed to God came through the post office. Eagerly, the postmaster tore it open and read the following:

Dear God,

Thank you for hearing and answering my prayer. I got your gift yesterday in the mail. However, there was only \$475.00 in the envelope. I guess those thieving bastards at the post office stole the rest of it! But thanks.

Gladys

Gladys didn't realize that God had used the innate compassion of people to answer her prayer. Sadly, she thought the postal workers were demons rather than angels of mercy. But then, how could she have known?

There was once a man who went on a diet with a firm determination to lose twenty pounds. (Been there, done that, failed.) The problem was, he had to drive past a bakery every morning on his way to work. Three weeks into his diet, he was doing admirably but one morning his craving for a cream filled doughnut was overwhelming. So he prayed, "God, if you want me to have a doughnut this morning, then let there be a parking space directly in front of the bakery. Otherwise, I'll not stop." And wouldn't

you know it? There **was** a parking space right in front of the bakery....after he circled the block three times.

Prayers answered tend to deepen the faith of the one who prays. Prayers unanswered tend to have the opposite effect, especially on those who are less familiar with what the Bible has to teach us about prayer. Sometimes the answer is "yes" and sometimes it's "no" and sometimes it's the hardest answer of all: "Wait." As a pastor, people have asked me to pray for them....as though I had a hotline to God. I know from long experience that my prayers have no more efficacy (Wow! What a word. Webster defines it as "the power or capacity to achieve a desired effect.") than anybody else's. I wish I could say that when I pray good things always happen. It just isn't so. There have been a few times when I've been truly gratified by the way a particular prayer was answered. There have been more times when I felt like praying was very much like trying to stick a hypodermic needle into a tombstone. (Thank you, Fred Craddock, for that imagery.)

I wonder about you, the reader. Do you have a prayer life? Is it consistent and orderly or more crisis-oriented? Please understand that I'm not passing judgment. I'm not what you would call a "prayer warrior." Quite honestly, I'm embarrassed to think about the times people have asked me to pray for this or that and I have completely forgotten to follow through. That said, I am certainly not in a position to criticize anybody else's prayer life....or lack thereof. I suspect that many people pray when they don't know what else to do. But you know what amuses me? More than one lifelong church member has begged of me, "*Please Pastor, don't ever ask me to pray out loud.*" I guess the number one fear of most Americans (public speaking) is exacerbated by the prospect of offering a public prayer, even if it's in the confines of the church building and the people hearing it are supposedly brother and sisters in Christ. People labor under the misconception that God wants flowery speech (preferably in the King James version) when they go to him in prayer. Would it make praying in public easier if we had the opportunity to prepare our prayer in the form of a manuscript ahead of time instead of a spontaneous offering?

While thinking about Gladys's letter-prayer the other day, I decided to articulate a prayer in the form of a letter. I doubt if God would mind me sharing it with you.

Dear God,

Since my prayer life hasn't been all that consistent (and maybe that has something to do with your lack of response) I decided to send you this letter-prayer.

How are you? Now that I've typed out the question it looks silly in print. How are you indeed! Are you sad you ever created humanity? Or do you still find joy in all you've ever created? Do you ache to witness how selfishness and greed infect everything from personal relationships to governments and yes, even your Church? Do you still have hope for us or are you just watching the earthly drama play out to a disastrous grand finale? There are some people I know looking forward to just that. I sincerely wish you'd have a word with them. The Bible says you feel what we humans feel; pride, anger, joy and sadness. We think that as creatures made in your image it's perfectly natural to project backward onto you the emotions that govern so much of our daily lives. I wonder about that God. But then, I wonder about a lot of things. I wonder if you have a sense of humor. I sure hope so.

Me? I'm fine. At least that's what I tell people when they ask. It's just the expected answer. But you know the truth, don't you? I'm not really fine, not even close. But then, who is? We all conceal our private fears, our secret sins, and our regrets. All that baggage gets pretty heavy at times. Some of us turn to you when there's nobody else we can talk to. Fear of rejection restrains us from exposing our true selves, even to our closest friends. They keep it all bottled up inside and just learn how to live with the

pain. Praying to you is a great relief valve...even if you don't always answer.

God, there are lots of people like Gladys, people who struggle just to survive. Sometimes I feel pretty guilty about all the ways you've blessed me. Many millions of people in the world would consider me wealthy beyond their wildest dreams. And to think, of all the places I could have been born, I was born in the richest country on earth! We pray the Lord's Prayer and say, "Give us this day our daily bread" but in reality, you give us far more than we need. Too many of us have been super-sized by your abundance. But those television appeals on behalf of hungry children still break my heart and I can't help but wonder, why you don't intervene on behalf of those who need you the most. Thinking back to that old movie, *O God*, I recall what George Burns (who played your part) told John Denver when he asked the same question. "That's why I created you." Humanity has created the problems; I suppose it's only fair that we are expected to solve them too.

Before I close, let me say thanks. Thanks for the people you put in our lives. Thanks for the age we live in where people who choose to communicate with one another almost effortlessly. Thanks for not nuking the whole greedy lot of us. Thank you for people who pray for others and for people who do their best to meet the needs of the Gladys' in the world. And yes, thanks for the "spiritual growth opportunities," the trials and hardships of life that stretch us and help us to reach our full potential.

By the way, Lord, the Super Lotto jackpot is way up there. And I do have a ticket. Just thought I'd mention it. Greg

- By Greg Roberts (published 5/30/2011)

THE WEATHER AND THE BLUES

I was just thinking about how sensitive some of us are to weather. Karen Carpenter hit it right on the head: **rainy days and Mondays always get me down**. I'm only speaking for myself but maybe you can identify too. And since this is a rainy Monday, the latest in a long series of rainy days, it seemed like a perfect time to pour out my laments. But first an observation.

I once called these little ramblings "essays." I'd email Ron and write; "I've got another essay for you." But I've come to realize they're not essays at all. Essays, according to Webster, are short literary compositions on a single subject, often presenting the author's views. As such, they are meant to be informative, possibly even persuasive. These few paragraphs I put together meet none of those criteria. Instead, they reveal more feelings than intellect, emotions than information. So instead of calling them essays, the better description might be *reflection papers*. So I'll reflect and you can either read on... Or simply choose one of the more interesting links that Ron has crafted into his excellent website.

No doubt you're familiar with the work of Norman Rosenthal at the National Institute of Health. He's the one who gets the credit for identifying Seasonal Affective Disorder, or SAD in 1984. Studies revealed that a small portion of the population experience symptoms of listlessness and depression during not only the winter months but also (get this) the summer months! I found this hard to believe. A string of warm sunny days, regardless of the time of year, makes me a happy camper. Conversely, when the sun doesn't shine, when skies are gray, when precipitation falls day after dreary day I tend to exhibit those symptoms he describes. And I come from a family with a history of depression anyway.

When Sonny gets blue, her eyes get gray and cloudy, then the rain begins to fall. Pitter patter, pitter patter, love has gone so what can matter? Thank you, Johnny Mathis. Beautiful voice and a beautiful song. You may not suffer from SAD but everybody gets the blues now and then. What happens when you get the blues? Does

the world seem a cold inhospitable place? Do your failures (assuming you're able to confess them) pile up in front of you? Does your future seem bleak and your present situation uncomfortable? Do you feel like love has gone and left only memories of happier days? The blues can drain the color out of life and leave you staring at a world that resembles the days of black and white TV. So how do we cope?

I start with taking positive action. While I'd like to board a plane bound for some faraway land noted for its abundance of sunshine, warmth, and beautiful women who are attracted to gray headed old men, my finances and current obligations prohibit that escape. So I attempt to bolster my financial status. And how do I do this? I buy a lottery ticket. That's right; the only time I buy a lottery ticket is when I'm feeling blue. I figure a few million bucks might open some doors to better days. Saturday night I matched one of the six numbers. That's better than usual for my ticket. But from the time I buy the ticket until the time I check the results of the drawing, I have a hope (however slim) of winning. If you can buy hope for a buck, go for it! Years ago, when I worked at Greenfield Printing on second shift, we'd all chip in a couple of bucks for the lottery. We'd send Tracy Payne out to buy the tickets because Tracy seemed to have better luck than the rest of us. Then we'd sit around the picnic table on our lunch break and take turns telling what we'd do with our share of the money if we won. It was worth the price of admission just to hear other people's dreams.

According to Dr. Rosenthal's research (and subsequent studies) many people who suffer from SAD have a hard time getting out of bed. When the day ahead of you offers nothing to get excited about the easiest thing in the world is to roll over and go back to sleep. But some of us don't have that option. Some of us have jobs to go to and bills to pay and obligations that demand that we not only *get up*, but get *cleaned* up and go to our respective places of employment. As a semi-retired person, there are only a few days of the week when I'm actually required to show up at the workplace early in the morning. But here's a shocker for any young readers. There comes a time in life when you may *want* to roll over and go back to sleep, you may *have the opportunity* to do just that, and your body won't cooperate! Try as you will, you simply cannot go back to sleep. Once you *wake* up you may as well *get* up because all you're going to do from that moment on is tear up the bedclothes with futile tossing and turning. I've talked to lots of people my age and older and most of them confirm that it's an age thing. Add it to the list.

The very best thing you or I can do to combat the blues is to turn our eyes outward. We don't have to look very far to see somebody whose life situation is a lot less attractive than our own. That's not to say that we should take comfort in knowing how good we've got it, sunshine or not. Recently I read that Sioux Falls University in Iowa has a graduation ritual that reminds the graduates that there's more to life than making money. As they cross the stage they get their sheepskin and a handshake from the university president. That's where the ritual ends at most universities, unless you count smiling for Mom and Dad's photo op a part of the ritual. Then, as these graduates make their way across the stage, the chaplain hands them a small towel. The towel is meant to remind them that their lives are meant to be lived in service to humanity. The symbol of the towel comes from the Bible story where Jesus washed the feet of his disciples and told them that if he, their teacher, came to serve others, then certainly that was the task of his followers as well.

When my brown-eyes-turned-blue get turned outward they see plenty of small but significant ways to brighten up the world. Okay, I'm not Bill Gates. I can't give the world fresh water. But I can choose to smile at the cashier and I can be courteous to the waitress. I can show up at work with a smile on my face and a song in my heart, even if I have to work at it. We don't have to let our emotional states rule us. If depression gets too hard to overcome, we should go to our doctors and get help. Sometimes it's not the weather; sometimes it's a chemical imbalance that causes the pain of depression.

It's a rainy Monday. It's darned cold for the middle of May. But I woke up this morning and I'm able to get out of bed and I have options. I am blessed. My mission, should I choose to accept it, is to be a blessing to someone else today. Today may be all I have.

By Greg Roberts (published 5/17/2011)

GOOD FRIDAY

I was just thinking....about Good Friday.

In Wapakoneta, Good Friday is always celebrated with an ecumenical worship service held in one of the participating churches. For eight years I was either sitting in the congregation or helping up front. Traditionally, Good Friday is a time for sober reflection, a gift we seldom give ourselves. We tend toward constant busy-ness, rushing from one important task to the next until we drop, exhausted, into our recliners or onto our couches. There we dull our already deadened senses with mindless television or perhaps the latest best selling novel. Eventually our eyelids sag with fatigue and we shuffle off to bed, knowing that tomorrow (and we assume we'll all be here tomorrow) will be yet another day of unrelenting demands. Who has time for quiet reflection?

This Good Friday morning I'm sitting in my car looking out through a rain-speckled windshield at Rocky Fork Lake. Literally and figuratively I'm in the driver's seat. I have called, "Time out!" It's early and other than a couple of fishermen in a passing boat, I have the whole realm to myself. Surprisingly, there are only a few waterfowl on the beach this morning, two geese, one seagull, and three of those birds that disappear under the water only to surface somewhere else. The last time I was here there must have been twenty honking geese questioning my right to infringe on their territory. But today, there is quiet. Just to my right, about fifty swallows are sharing a very small and very bare tree. Every branch sags under the weight of numerous tiny birds. As if at a given signal, they all take flight, swooping and circling in a wide arc, and then reassemble on that same tree. I wonder who gives the commands to fly and then hurry back in the game of musical branches. A solitary blue heron flies close by on slow, majestic wings. The patter of the rain on the roof is somehow as satisfying as if sunshine bathed the day. Perhaps learning to appreciate a rainy day is made easier sitting at ease in the dry comfort of a metal cave.

I'm struck by the thought that most of us spend hour upon hour in the confines of our homes but so little time in the broad realm of nature. Painted pictures of outdoor scenes decorate the walls and hallways of our home. None of them can compare with the view through the windshield this morning. Beauty, we are told, is in the eye of the beholder. Some would say the lake is a muddy brown; to me it's the color of coffee with cream. One might lament that many of the trees on the distant shoreline are yet bare. But look at how the many subtle shades of green are accentuated by the occasional redbud. The hard, cold winter is behind us at last. The cool damp air we breathe today will soon bear the sweet perfume of new mown hay. The soft patter of rain on the car roof reminds me that it's been a long time since I lay in the mow listening to a summer rain on the barn roof.

Henry David Thoreau wrote that in his mind he had possessed every farm in a ten-mile radius. He would sit on a hill and survey a piece of ground, mentally laying out where the farmhouse should sit, where the orchard should be planted, and which way the barn should face. However, he was content to restrict his vast holdings to the confines of his mind. He never bought a farm, never put his hand to the plow, and never forked manure from the barn stalls. His peers considered him lazy. He accepted that judgment but today we remember him, not his peers. He warned his readers that there was little difference between owning a farm and being in jail. I would add that to be enslaved by credit cards and mortgages is no less a form of slavery than being chained to a galley oar.

Scripture comes to mind: "Look at the birds of the air. They neither sow nor reap but your

Heavenly Father takes care of them.” Or words to that effect. True, they are forever at risk of going hungry....but do they? Or does God provide for them? How many of us would trade our 401K's and Social Security for the freedom of a bird?

The rain is letting up and visibility is improved. In the distance stand the mist-shrouded hills of southern Highland County. No doubt the myriad streams that course down through those hills are bank-full and fast this morning, considering the heavy rain. Soon the quiet creeks will emerge into swollen, menacing torrents. There's carelessness in nature.

Good Friday. That's a funny name, isn't it, for the day when human nature at its ugliest collided with the grace and forgiveness of God? Jesus woke up that fateful Friday morning knowing it would be his last day on earth. When we read about the suffering and humiliation he endured at the hands of people filled with jealousy and hate, we marvel that he could pray from the cross, "Father forgive them." But it's been good today, at least for me. This time spent in quiet reflection and unfettered leisure is balm for the mind wearied by the oft-frantic pace of a life full of obligations. (By the way, if you think retirement automatically leads to a life of ease you might want to reconsider.)

I have a hope for you the reader. I hope that you have not found the trail of my thoughts so difficult as to discourage you from following. I further hope that you will give yourself the gift of quiet time apart from human, electronic or mechanical interruptions. Despite man's shameful misuse, the physical world is still a source of wondrous beauty and an antidote to the walking-dead existence that many mistakenly think is real life. Good Friday can be (like Sabbath) any day you choose to retreat into the quiet of a world apart. If you're fortunate, you will find God waiting for you there.

- By Greg Roberts (published 5/5/2011)

JUST THINKING...ABOUT CARS

I was just thinking...about cars. Like most Americans, I've grown up with a love for automobiles. Recently, at a Men's Fellowship breakfast, I suggested that, as a kind of icebreaker, we go around the table and tell what our first automobile was. One fellow said he had a 1969 Dodge Barracuda; another had a '57 Chevy two-door hardtop, and one gentleman said, "I'm embarrassed to tell you mine was a Model T Ford." Another guy, of approximately the same age said, "I can't remember." He was immediately redressed with this remark: "Oh, come on now Ed. You can tell us the horse's name; we won't laugh."

Mine was a '56 Plymouth Belvedere two-door coupe with a 318 cubic inch engine and a four-barrel carburetor. Red and black with a 60/40 split front seat...the kind that let your girl sit next to you without having to straddle that split between the seats. It had all the extras: AM radio, heater, power steering and power brakes. Here's the funny thing; I didn't choose that car. My father did. He was taking me to work and picking me up after work every day that summer between my junior and senior year. I had to be there at 7:30 a.m. and since we were ditching fields with clay tiles, we would often work till after 6:00 p.m. Maybe Dad just got tired of coming after me when he had settled down on the couch to watch Gunsmoke. One evening, instead of going straight home, we turned down Fayette Street to Ralph Hickman's Chrysler dealership. I wondered why but didn't ask. Dad bought all his cars from Ralph. When he pulled onto the lot he looked at me and asked, "See anything you like?" My heart began to pound. I sensed that I was going to get my first car. I looked over the array of shiny steel and chrome with hungry eyes. Dad got out of the car and said, "Come take a look at this one." (He had obviously been doing some scouting beforehand.) It was love at first sight. He went inside and got the key. A salesman climbed in on the passenger side and we went for a test drive. When we got back, I dutifully followed Dad into the office. The salesman told me the car was priced at \$185.00. I nearly leaped for joy! I had that much already from my summer job. The very next evening Dad dropped me off after

work and the deal was sealed. I got my ten-day tag (seems as though the people at the title office didn't need thirty days back then) two sets of keys, a Ralph Hickman license plate holder and was on my way....the proud owner of his first car, paid in full, cash money.

As an ignorant teenager, I literally beat the hell out of that car. It had a pushbutton transmission and I found that you could put it into reverse, let it drift backward and then punch the "low" button and tromp on the gas you could really smoke those tires! It didn't do the transmission any good though. Later, because I failed to keep an eye on the oil level, I threw an engine rod. My beautiful car went to the junkyard just before I left for the Navy.

Four years later I was back in Ohio and back in the market for a car. My Uncle Joe invited me to come up to Columbus and go shopping with him. I thought we'd be going around in his car to the various dealerships. WRONG! He stuffed the newspaper with all the car ads into his leather jacket and we climbed on his motorcycle to go hunting for my next muscle machine. I had another V-8 in mind; Uncle Joe had other plans. Over the noise of the wind he shouted back to me that since I had limited income I needed something that was economical. It was true, I wasn't making much money as a filing clerk for Continental Oil, later renamed Agrico. But I wasn't prepared for what he had in mind. He downshifted the motorcycle twice and pulled into a Volkswagen Dealership. What?! I hadn't even considered something that small or that ugly. Those pregnant roller skates were not designed to attract pretty young girls. Uncle Joe knew what he was doing. He led me and the salesman up and down the lot, first the front row, then the second, kicking tires, asking questions, shaking his head, and walking to the next one. After an hour, the exasperated salesman said, "Look, we just got one in on trade and haven't even run it through our shop yet. If you and the kid want it 'as is', I'll let you have it for \$800.00". He proceeded to lead us behind the building. There sat a robin egg blue 1964 Volkswagen beetle with a six-volt electrical system, a four-speed manual transmission, and a rear-mounted air cooled engine. It was spotless...no dings, no dents, clean inside too. Uncle Joe took me aside and said, "Greg, this is the car for you. And the price is right. But it's your money." I looked at it again, looked at him to see if he was kidding me, and then sighed, "Okay, if you think so." I paid cash on the barrel head for my second car too. Later I found out that a six volt system gives you headlights that are about as bright as a couple of candles behind water glasses and a thirty-four horsepower rear-mounted air cooled engine will just about get you up to the legal speed limit...given a flat road and plenty of time.

Now at this time, my mother worked as a medical secretary for Doctors Gebhart and Heiny. I hadn't been home from the Navy but a couple of months (this was 1969) when I went to see her at work one day and noticed they had hired a new nurse with long dark hair and beautiful hazel eyes. Wow! It didn't take me long to arrange for Mom to have her out to the house for supper some evening. (I, the charming sailor just home from the Navy, would just happen to be there.) She wheeled into the driveway in a brand new Dodge Charger with a 383 cubic inch high performance engine, a floor mounted automatic transmission, AM/FM stereo, power everything. Can't picture it? Think back to the Duke boys. Try to imagine how I felt when she parked that beautiful beast next to my humble Volkswagen. Later, I told her how much I admired her car and that's when she broke my heart. She told me she had traded a Plymouth Roadrunner for it. I nearly cried. The Roadrunner was the car of my dreams and I never ever got as much as a ride in one. But Diane and I hit it off, despite our wide differences in transportation modes.

One snowy Saturday afternoon we were hurrying to Wilmington in my Volkswagen so that she could make a payment on her Charger before the bank closed. There must have been eight inches of snow on the road. The bug began to veer left of center. I swear I tried everything short of prayer....turned the wheel, hit the brakes, the gas, pulled the emergency brake...but it just kept going left until we slid down into the ditch

where it rolled over onto its top. We were left hanging by our seatbelts like a couple of bats. I asked if she was okay and she assured me she was. Me too. Only the next day did we discover we were sore and bruised all over. Did you ever try to argue with a highway patrolman that you weren't going too fast for road conditions when your car is upside down in the ditch? Don't bother. At any rate, I got a ticket to add insult to injury. My VW was crushed and subsequently sold for next to nothing. That left us with two apartments and one car. Now comes the romantic part.

The next week, she picked me up from my workplace (Yeoman Radio & TV) at lunchtime and we went to Frisch's Big Boy. Between the time the cokes arrived and the food, I made the following observation: "Diane, we're paying for two apartments. You have to come and get me in the morning and take me home in the evening. We'd save a lot of money if we just got married." Pretty romantic, huh? Here's the amazing part: she accepted my lame proposal!

It wasn't but a couple of months later that I began my training at Andrew Columbus Barber College. The trip to Columbus and back every day in that Dodge Charger was eating us up financially. We drove it down to Midwest Volkswagen in Chillicothe and traded it for a brand new 1970 Volkswagen beetle. She owed twice as much on the Charger as the cost of the beetle. But we traded. Since I was in school every weekday, Diane had to make the actual switch herself, which meant driving from Chillicothe to Washington C.H. in a car with a four-speed manual transmission, something she had never done before. She made it! (That's my girl!) Not only did it get good gas mileage from the start, but we soon found it was great for drift-busting! It did have a couple of quirks though. The heater cables would get stuck and the heater would stay on all summer. Or they'd get frozen so that you couldn't get any heat in the winter. The synchronization rings would periodically go out of the transmission, making it hard to shift without sounding like you were grinding meat. But we drove that car for years and came to love it despite its quirks.

There have been a lot of cars in our driveway through the years. I'd be willing to bet that you could tell some pretty entertaining stories about some of the cars you've owned. (Feel free to email me; I'd love to hear them.) But friends, does it strike you as strange that a country that can put a man on the moon, send land rovers to Mars, and successfully maintain an international space station can't come up with a better means of propulsion than an internal combustion engine that has been in use for over a hundred years? As much as I'd like to have a Plymouth Roadrunner with a fuel-injected V-8 engine, I'd be even more delighted with something that didn't leave such a carbon imprint, didn't rely on fossil fuel and didn't diminish the future well-being of my grandchildren. Maybe it's time for our love of the American automobile as we've known it all our lives to come to an end. Maybe the cost of owning and operating these vehicles is more than we...and future generations...can bear. Maybe. I'm just thinking.....

- By Greg Roberts (published 4/20/2011)

PRIME THE PUMP? OMG!

LINGO THROUGH THE YEARS

"You've got to prime the pump." Huh? If you want water, you've got to prime the pump first."

People my age know exactly what that means. Okay, most of them know. While we may not have grown up on a farm nor had a pump on the kitchen counter, we know that for a pump to work you must first pour water into the reservoir to form a seal which in turn creates air pressure, allowing the pumping action to draw water upward. Clear?

Ask a class of teenagers what “priming the pump” means and you’ll get blank stares. (My dear wife just read this paragraph and began singing “*Desert Pete*,” a song made popular by the Serendipity Singers way back when. Lyrics are as follows: *Drink all the water you can hold, wash your hands and your feet, but leave the jar here full for others. Thank you kindly, Desert Pete.* Proof positive; we are old people.) Unfortunately, priming the pump nowadays probably means bribing someone.

We live in a world where old expressions are rapidly disappearing. When was the last time you heard somebody say, “*Strike while the iron is hot*” or “*She was madder than a wet hen*”? While “*hold your horses*” may yet surface in everyday correspondence occasionally, we seldom hear “*cash on the barrelhead*” in a world where credit and delayed payment are the norm. Incidentally, the barrel in question was probably filled with whiskey and if you wanted a taste you’d darn well better show your coin first. These quaint colloquialisms are reminiscent of an age where virtually everybody knew something about livestock, general stores and the appliances of life before the technological era began.

Recently, I was chagrined to get an email that was chock full of jokes about iPhone’s autocorrect function. It wasn’t the jokes that made me blush (although they were definitely jarring): it was the fact that I had to email the sender and ask what the abbreviations meant. You see, I don’t text. So LOL and LMAO meant nothing to me. I barely knew what BFF meant. OMG is so overused on television shows that it was pretty easy to figure out. And because I’ve seen *Sleepless In Seattle* several times I know what H & G and MFEO mean. (Hello and goodbye; made for each other.) Do I even want to know what an MLF is?

Here’s the thing: I don’t text, I don’t Twitter, I’m not on Facebook and I don’t have a blog (whatever that is) so I’m hopelessly out of touch. But, on the other hand, when I watch *Jeopardy*, I’m gratified to know things that younger people don’t. Just tonight I watched all three contestants stare blankly when asked the question, “*What group had only one hit with their song Incense and Peppermint?*” (Ask Ron; he can tell you in a heartbeat. So could I but I’d rather you go searching.) I also know that you can’t make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear and that you’ve gotta make hay while the sun shines. I know stuff. I just don’t know the stuff that younger people know.

Somebody who really dislikes old people will probably be thinking, “*Yes, Old Guy, and the stuff you know is less relevant all the time. In ten years there won’t be anybody left who knows about pitcher pumps and curling irons you heated on the wood stove.*” To that person I would say, “*You’re probably correct. So go ahead. Smirk. But the technology you find so endearing today will be outdated before the next class graduates from high school. Good luck in keeping up.*”

In my defense, I will boast that not only do I know many of the origins of quaint colloquialisms; I can still spell most words without consulting Spellcheck. (But I do love that little feature!) Many of the people I went to school with can still add two columns in their heads, and can tell you the present, past, and past perfect tense of a verb. They don’t say “seen” when the correct verb is “saw” and they know the difference between uninterested and disinterested. Yes, we did learn (and retain) some knowledge in high school. We just didn’t have much technology. An Underwood typewriter was the closest I came to a technological piece of equipment. In college I took a multi-media course for elementary education teachers and got my hands on a video camera for the first time. Wow! Now I see kids videotaping things with their cell phones everyday. I took three pictures with my cell phone last week and was feeling pretty proud of myself... but when I attempted to show them to the boss at the funeral home I couldn’t retrieve them. Luckily, a young college student was present that evening who (without condescending) patiently showed me how to recall the photos.

Please don’t think I am bashing technology. I’m typing on a PC which is sorely missed when it goes to the Computer Hospital. One of the first things I do in the morning is

wander down to the office with a hot cup of coffee and check email. Even if there's nothing else, the good folks at The Upper Room send me a daily devotional. I use Google and MapQuest and check Craig's List. I'd probably go into severe withdrawal if the computer police confiscated all our computers. I just can't keep up with all that other "stuff". Quite honestly, I am clueless when those commercials for techie toys air. There should be free classes with every new technological toy. I have a simple TracPhone. It came with a thick instruction book (in five languages) with print so small even young people with good eyes have trouble reading it. Got a problem? No problem! Call the toll-free number. You'll find Peggy is moonlighting from the credit card redemption center.

How about it? Is there anybody out there reading this who would be willing to lead a class on "How to use a Blackberry"? Is there some Good Samaritan who would like to take the time to explain Tweeting? Do I have to remove my hearing aid to use a Bluetooth? I might invest in one of those things but I hate to buy a pig in a poke.... if you know what I mean.

- By Greg Roberts (published 4/12/2011)

POOR OLD LAZARUS

His sisters stood with tear-stained faces, one on either side of their brother, watching helplessly as he breathed his last. He stopped breathing; they looked at one another as if to ask, "*Is he gone?*" But no, with a tremendous effort he drew another breath. It seemed as though time stood still before he exhaled. (People who are dying seem to like to keep the family and medical staff in suspense.) Finally, he exhaled. This time, he didn't take another breath. His suffering was over. Or so everyone thought.

The attending physician had done all he could. The miracle worker (a close friend of Lazarus) they had summoned earlier had not shown up. There was nothing left to do but prepare the body for burial and arrange the funeral. The older sister went outside and announced that their beloved brother was dead. The mourners immediately began their wailing and chanting. They knew their role and were prepared to play it well. (Me? I'm saving money to pay for mourners at my funeral. Otherwise I may get all dressed up and nobody will notice.)

Four days later, Jesus and his disciples made a leisurely trip to Capernaum. The word spread quickly, "*The Rabbi is coming.*" The younger sister immediately went out to meet him and although she fell at his feet, her words were less than humble. "*If you had been here, my brother would not have died.*" These are the words recorded for us in the Gospel of John. I have to wonder though; is that all she said? I imagine a more lively and prolonged dialogue.

Jesus: Mary, how good to see you.

Mary: I'm so glad you're here Jesus. I just wish you could have gotten here before my brother died. I'm sure he would have liked to see you before his suffering ended.

Jesus: I heard he was very ill but I had my reason for staying away.

Mary: Reason? You had a reason? You mean you could have gotten here before he died and just chose to ignore him? Some friend! Thanks a lot... for nothing!

Jesus: Mary, you don't understand yet but you will. Where have you laid him?

Mary: Where do you think? He's in the stinking tomb. You want to go catch a whiff?

Jesus: Show me.

Maybe you know the rest of the story. It's in the eleventh chapter. Jesus went to the tomb where they had laid Lazarus and there did something nobody expected. Jesus wept. Over

the centuries, theologians have offered a variety of ideas about why Jesus wept. Some have said it was because he loved his friend so much, but hey, if you know you're about to raise him from the dead, why weep? Someone suggested that Jesus' tears were tears of sadness for all those present, who did not yet believe with any degree of certainty that there could be such a thing as a resurrection. They were about to find out. Jesus called Lazarus from the tomb and out he came!

If Lazarus told people anything about his post-death experience it didn't get recorded. Or if it got recorded, it's been lost. Don't you think all the people who knew him well asked him, *"What's it like to be dead? Did you see Heaven? Did a bright light draw you upward? Did you meet God face to face? Or did you experience anything at all?"* Here we have a human being who came back from the dead and he didn't leave us one word about what it was like to be dead. What a disappointment!

I have sometimes wondered if Jesus wept because we humans are so scared of death that we forget how to live. If I allow my imagination to paint the scene, Jesus brings Lazarus out of the tomb then turns to the crowd and says, *"See? It's no big deal...just like going to sleep at night and waking up in the morning. Why get your shorts (or panties) all in a knot over something God has under control?"* And boy, do we need to hear those words. Death is a taboo subject in many families. As a pastor, I often attempted to get people to discuss their final wishes with their families and to get a living will in place. My efforts met a lot of resistance. Some even accused me of meddling. But I thought talking about life and death issues fell within the realm of somebody who was supposed to be a spiritual advisor. If we can't talk openly about death, how can we talk about anything beyond death's door?

Refusal to think about death takes many forms; some people won't buy life insurance, some won't pre-plan final arrangements, some won't even allow their children to ask, *"Mom, do you and Dad have a will?"* I must admit that it sometimes amuses me to see how adamant some folks can be when it comes to facing death. Remember the last words in The World According to Garp? *"In Garp's world, we're all terminal cases."* Once we accept that fact and deal with it like mature adults, we can truly begin to live above the fear of death.

Dying is so inconvenient, not just for the person leaving this world, but for the survivors as well. So many projects are left unfinished. So many survivors' lives are turned topsy-turvy. In fifteen years of pastoring, not one person ever had the decency to give me a two weeks notice that they were going to die. I always had to make last-minute adjustments to my schedule. Just before we left Wapakoneta to come back to Highland County an elderly lady approached me in McDonald's and said, *"Pastor Greg, when I die I want you to lead my service."* I was so flattered! I got out my day planner and asked, *"Okay Betty, what day will this be on?"* I wish you could have seen her jaw drop! But honestly, I do take death (especially my own) seriously. I just hate the thought of Diane having to raise these two grandchildren without me there to point out everything I think she's doing wrong. And if she should die first, I'll probably never forgive her for saddling me with all this responsibility! But die we shall. Somebody's gonna go first and somebody's gonna have to pick up the pieces. We both want to make sure that the one picking up the pieces has every possible advantage, from knowing where the will is, to knowing what kind of last rites the other desires. She, for instance, wants her cremated ashes spread on the waters at the Marblehead Lighthouse. I already checked with the Ohio EPA and it's okay. They don't consider that water pollution.

Poor Old Lazarus. Dead and buried, all the troubles of this world behind him. All eternity before him. And then Jesus came and pulled him right back into this world of pain and sorrow, beauty and ecstasy. Back into life among those who loved him. Back into the everyday trials and triumphs that line our earthly journeys. But I'll bet you Lazarus never again worried about death or dying. And I hope you and I can learn to live like him. When we cast off the chains of fear then, and only then, are we truly free

By Greg Roberts (published 4/3/2011)

BARBERS I HAVE KNOWN

"Hey Charlie, here comes Buttons. You ready for him?" The elderly man in bib overalls coming across the Washington Square parking lot is headed straight for the barber shop. Short and slight of build he is just another old man, the kind we pass by every day and never give a second look. But this old guy is on a mission and it has nothing to do with getting a haircut. He's out to get your buttons. *"Get that old fart in here. I'm ready for him today."* Or so Charlie says. We'll see.

In the back corner of the shop, beyond the four barber chairs the battlefield is ready. The checkerboard rests upon a small table about thirty inches high. On one side is a folding chair, on the other one of the padded customer waiting chairs, pulled away from its rightful place along the wall. Charley leans over the back bar and combs his hair in the mirror as Randy opens the door to the shop. In walks the adversary, smiling, confident, hoping we aren't too busy so that he can rack up another victory. Charley turns and smiles at him. *"Good morning Buttons. You ready for a game?"* Old Buttons smiles back and replies, *"If you've got time, sure."* The die is cast; the drama begins to unfold. The contestants head for the checker board. Charlie's jaw is thrust out and his eyes narrowed; he's thinking, *"I'm going to beat you today, old man."* Old Buttons walks to the back and asks, *"Which seat you want today?"* Charley takes the folding chair, which is only fitting. The reigning champ *should* get the better seat.

The shop is empty at this time of day. People are at their jobs. The barber shop won't get busy till about 4:30 and then it will stay busy right up till closing time at 7:00. Skip and Randy and I gather around to watch. Each player carefully considers his next move. Charley is good. He can beat the rest of us every time. But the old man is cagey. Charley attempts to set up a double jump, only to fall into a trap. The old man has suckered him into his own double jump. Clump, clump, goes the checker. Then he cackles with delight, *"Hee hee, I got your buttons!"* Charlie frowns but says nothing. Ignoring his loss, he attempts to get a man into the king row. He sacrifices one to open a hole in his opponent's defense. Just as it appears he will get the upper hand, the old guy moves one of his checkers at the far side of the board into position where Charlie can jump him. (You have to take your jumps in checkers.) No sooner does he put his red checker down than the old guy cackles and pounces with another double jump. Clump, clump goes the checker. And again the old guy cackles, *"I got your buttons!"* Charlie gets up and walks to the front of the shop, his jaw working from side to side like an Oster clipper. He knows that while the game may go on, he is beat.....again. After a moment to compose himself, he goes back to the board and plays the game out. When his last checker falls into his opponent's hands, the old guy cackles again, *"I got all your buttons!"* We bystanders just shake our heads. Old Buttons is still the undefeated. He just never loses!

A lone customer wanders in. Charlie jumps up and heads for his barber chair. *"How you doin' today?"* he asks as the customer sits down in the chair. He is glad to escape any further gloating. He has hair to cut....and pride to salvage. Old Buttons asks if anybody else wants to play. No thanks. We've all suffered our shares of humiliation in the past. We know better than to even attempt to beat him. Checkers is *his* game. Crestfallen, he waits patiently as Charlie cuts the patron's hair, hoping that when he is finished he will come back to the battlefield for another shot at the champ. But no, customers start to filter in. Skip gets one, then Randy, then me. And then another one for Charlie. No more checkers today. The old guy gets up and smilingly says, *"Well, I'll see you boys soon."* As he walks across the parking lot, Charlie growls, *"I can beat that guy. I'll get him tomorrow."* Sure you will Charlie. Old Buttons is the hands down, all time checker champ of Washington Court House.

Supertime rolls around. We take turns going out. Randy goes up the street and comes

back with a two-piece chicken snack. Some people leave a little skin or gristle. Not Randy. When he gets finished with those bones they look like they could go in a museum! Nor is there a crumb left in the box. But hey, he's a growing boy. He needs all the nourishment he can get. Randy weights 250 if he weighs an ounce. Next to him, Skip looks like a mere child.

Skip isn't going out for supper. He's having a liquid supper. Charlie suspects he's drinking but can't catch him at it. Charlie has scoured that back room where the neck strips and cleaning supplies are kept but can't find any prohibited beverages. That's because Skip hides his beer in the toilet tank. I don't know how he gets rid of the cans, but every time he goes to the restroom he comes back a little bit happier! But on Saturday mornings, Skip can amaze you. Saturday is kid's day. They come in droves. Sometimes their mothers sit in the waiting chairs and watch as their little darlings squirm, try to shake the cut hair off the cloth, duck their heads and make it very difficult for the barber to give them anything resembling a decent haircut. We have a TV set high up in the corner and we turn it to cartoons, hoping this will help keep them still. Here's the amazing part; Skip's eyes are riveted on the television set....while he keeps right on cutting hair! And his haircuts always look great! I never did figure that one out.

Charlie loves to regale his customers with stories. The one I like best is when he starts describing his big old house. *"Our bathroom is cold and drafty. It's huge! I don't know why they made it so darned big. It feels like you're taking a crap in the Coliseum! Between the twin girls and my wife, I have to take a number just to get in there to shave."* Sometimes he stops cutting hair to stand in front of the customer, comb in his left hand, and clippers in the right, to emphasize a point in his story. *"I had the right horse the other night at Wheeling, but you know what happened? Coming down the stretch a wheel fell off the darned cart!"* Everybody in the shop laughs, even Randy and Skip and me. We've heard this one a hundred times but that doesn't matter. You can just envision that poor sulky driver when the wheel fell off with the finish in sight.

I've always loved barber shops. Maybe that's why I went to barber school and tried it for a couple of years. What I didn't love was my Dad trying to save a few bucks by buying a set of hand clippers. Those things pull more hair than they cut! My brother and I cried so much that Dad gave up and resigned himself to having to pay for haircuts. When I was a young teenager, Dad would take me to town (we lived out on a county road) and let me out of the car with three dollars for a haircut. That was the going rate at the good shops. However, I found a cut rate barber back in the alley that cut hair for half that price. I'd get a five minute (maximum) haircut there and then take the money I'd saved to The Palace Pool Hall. (I later got kicked out of The Palace for life, but that's another story.)

Barbers are nearly always remarkable characters. They have to be knowledgeable about sports, know how to avoid talking politics, and some have a vast repertoire of jokes, some actually fit for mixed company. You want to know if a business is coming to town before it's announced in the paper? Go to the barber shop. You can learn things there long before they become grist for the Daily Snooze.

One of my favorite barbers died just a couple of years ago. Jack Drehrer was truly one of a kind. You've no doubt heard that old expression, *"When they made you they broke the mold."* Well, I'm pretty sure that when they made Jack they not only broke the mold but beat the hell out of the mold maker too. I will never forget the time when he cut my hair, then spun me around to look at his handiwork in the mirror. He asked, *"What do you think?"* I exclaimed, *"Who is that good looking man?"* Jack said, *"That's me fool! You're the one with the new haircut."* On another occasion I was in a waiting chair. Jack was cutting hair when this really pretty girl came walking down the street. He casually walked to the front full-width window and watched her till she was clear out of sight. The guy in the chair and I just looked at each other and shook our heads. That was Jack. Later, he was instrumental in helping me get a job at Greenfield Printing, where he worked second shift. It was Jack who went to Wilson Moon and put in a good word for me. Say what you

will, Jack was good to me.

So was Charlie Morrison, that lanky hillbilly from Tennessee. I rented a chair off of him for eighteen months, just long enough to get my apprentice time in. Then I went back to Columbus and took my master's test, which I passed. That entitled me to open my own shop, but I never did. A short time later, I left the barbering profession and headed off to college at the ripe old age of twenty-five. But my memories of the barber shop are good ones and the jokes I learned there have remained in the memory banks when other, much more important data, has long since evaporated. Funny isn't it? Most of what I learned in college is either obsolete or forgotten but the jokes are still part of my repertoire. Maybe that's because humor is essential to survival.

Of course, things have changed over the years. Lots of men now go to beauty salons to have their locks clipped. And the barber shops don't smell like cigarettes anymore. Thankfully, some of today's old-time barbers still dish out humor along with their haircuts. Just the other day I watched a barber splash a little smell-pretty on a young fellow's neck after the haircut. The young guy asked, "*What is that stuff?*" And the barber replied without missing a beat, "*Turkey pee.*" Haircuts cost a lot more than they used to. Smiles are still free.

- By Greg Roberts (published 3/26/2011)

A FRIEND

Have you got any friends? Maybe that seems like a silly question: "*Everybody has friends.*" Or do they? My Aunt Linda enlightened me when I was just a teenager. I was telling her about all my friends at Miami Trace High School and she listened patiently, then said, "*I have many acquaintances; I can count my friends on one hand.*" Thankfully, that bit of wisdom has stuck where so much other good advice has gone by the wayside. So I'll rephrase the question: how many friends do YOU have?

Maybe a definition would help us determine the answer. I define a friend as someone who knows all your faults and still loves you; someone who will cover your back, but tell you to your face when you're wrong. Friends don't give up on you when you're going through hard times or abandon you when you're being persecuted. If you want to know what real emotional pain is, have a friend (or someone you *thought* was your friend) betray you. Jesus found that out. Friends suffer with you when tragedy strikes and celebrate with you when life hands you a plum. A friend enjoys your company, or at least tolerates it when you're being a butt-head. True friendship cannot be terminated by the miles that separate you, nor the passage of time. Does this help answer the question?

One of the saddest experiences we go through on this journey called life is the loss of a true friend. We tend to forget that life is tenuous. We get a bit careless, don't call as often as we should, and think maybe we'll find the time to visit when our busy schedules aren't quite so full. Then comes that call, the one we just never thought we'd get, the one that rocks us with the truth that we've been so self-centered and so dominated by the tyranny of the urgent that we've neglected to tend to our friendships. Of course, when a friend dies, it's also a wake-up call that some day, we too, shall go the way of all flesh. Between now and that day of reckoning, we might want to take a look at our priorities and see if they're in order. As a pastor, I've had my share of deathbed experiences. Never once have I heard a dying person lament, "*I wish I'd spent more time at the office.*"

I once had a very dear friend. He stood about five foot, six inches tall and weighed about a hundred twenty pounds, right after a big meal. He was already pretty well up in years when we met but life never robbed him of his smile or his sense of humor. Ted

Winters lived across the street from Diane and me. He and Dorothy had been in the same house for thirty years. Before we moved in the summer of '75, Ted-bear (or just Bear), as he was known to his friends, heard that we were coming to the big city of Highland. We had never met, but he knew and admired Diane's mother, Ruth Hoskins, who owned the house we would be renting. We expected to find a waist-high weed patch when we backed our U-Haul up to the front porch in July of that year. Instead, we found a well-cared for lawn. Ted took care of it all spring and summer till we got there and then offered me the use of his mower till I got one of my own.

Ted-bear spent most of his adult life making a living with a dump truck. His wife Dorothy was a health nurse for Highland County. Every day from early spring till late fall, he would haul gravel, asphalt, topsoil or whatever else the quarry asked of him. I can still see him pulling the old truck up onto the gentle grade beside his house where he parked it each evening and then raising the bed to shake out any loose debris that has escaped its fate earlier at a jobsite. After supper, he'd come out on the front porch and sit on the swing. That was the cue I waited for. He was such a good conversationalist, so full of wisdom, and such a joy to be around that I looked forward to joining him on that swing as though it were a couch in the White House.

He was a gracious host. *"How about a cup of coffee, young fella?"* He'd go to the kitchen while I held down the swing and heat up hot water on the stove. We always drank instant coffee, but in his company it tasted great. Sometimes Dorothy would come out and join us, sitting in a metal yard chair and letting me have the honored seat next to Ted.

He smoked a pipe and caused me many anxious moments watching him light it. He'd be telling a story as he gently tamped about a spoonful of tobacco into the bowl. Then he'd tear a match from the book and light it. As often as not, he'd go on telling his story, seemingly oblivious to the lit match burning down closer and closer to his fingers. The suspense was unbearable. Just when it seemed inevitable that the flame would burn him, he'd move the match over the bowl, suck in a couple of breaths, and blow out the match in the nick of time. He had the timing down to perfection but the procedure never failed to make me a nervous wreck.

Ted loaned me so many tools that I became embarrassed to ask. I told him as much and he just looked at me quizzically, and asked, *"Now young fella, if I've got a tool you need, why should you go out and buy one? As long as you keep bringing them back, I'm more than happy to let you use them."* That was his nature. He would do anything for you.

In July of 1977 I extended a thirty-three foot ladder to its full length and leaned it up against the back of our big old two-story house. My intention was to paint the overhang. Just as I got to the top and dipped my brush in the bucket for that first stroke, the feet of the ladder took off across the yard---I think I painted a vertical stripe on the way down. You know what they say, it's not the fall that hurts you; it's the sudden landing. I knew I was hurt and the dog licking the paint off my face didn't help my disposition. I staggered across the street and knocked on Ted's door. His shocked face at my appearance, covered in paint and cradling my left arm was quickly replaced by concern. I asked him to come over and stay with me while I showered, just in case I passed out. Then he loaded me into his old station wagon and rushed me up to Fayette Memorial Hospital. He stayed until my wife got there. I don't know who I would have turned to if not for him.

Some years later, Ted and Dorothy bought a Blair home and moved out of Highland to a couple of acres just east of town where he and I had shared a garden together. I helped him with the move as much as I could, and will never forget the day he held out what looked like two stick pretzels. With a wry smile he said, *"According to the claim, if we plant these we'll be able to have a picnic under them in three years."* Neither of us believed it, but as he was getting up in years, he decided he needed trees that would

grow fast...very fast, if he was to get any enjoyment from them. Surprisingly, the nursery's claim was accurate. Those 'pretzel sticks' grew quicker than a corn stalk planted in a manure pile. In three years, they were nearly fifteen feet tall. Even more surprisingly, they are still standing today, in front of the house that he and Dorothy enjoyed until Ted died.

He died unexpectedly. He had a heart attack. I never got to say goodbye. I didn't get to tell him how much he meant to me. I didn't get to hold his hand. Someone, I can't remember who it was, came to my desk at The Mason Co. and said, "*Greg, Ted Winters just died.*" I felt a great loss and a deep sorrow for Dorothy. I still feel that loss today. Good friends are so hard to come by.

You got any friends? Treasure them. Make sure they know how much you care about them. Above all, be a friend. A friend is one of life's greatest gifts.

- By Greg Roberts (published 3/13/2011)

ORDINARY VS. EXTRAORDINARY

We moved recently....for the third time in ten years. Please don't share this with the fire marshal, but if we ever move again I'm setting fire to the house as soon as all living beings are safely outside. I hate moving. My wife and the two grandchildren we're raising are 'keepers'. No, that doesn't mean they're too good to toss. It means they never, ever throw anything away. Lyric is eight years old and probably has every crayon from every restaurant we ever ate at. She is forever bringing home her place mats and the Happy Meal boxes, as though they were much too valuable to discard. Xavier, now thirteen, has boxes and boxes of toys he will never play with again, not to mention the fifty-three video games, and his eighty-four DVD's. Diane has all her school grade cards....all of them... most of our daughter's school papers, *all* of Lyric and Xavier's school papers, every income tax return we ever filed, and enough Christmas decorations for a small village. Among the boxes too numerous to count there are three marked 'photographs'. Two contain albums of photos. The other is filled to the top with loose pictures stacked in smaller boxes. Somehow, we just never found the time to put them into albums. I sat down recently and began to look through some of those photos. Surprisingly, they're not all from extraordinary days. In fact, some of them were taken on days that were very ordinary indeed.

Let me acquaint you with some that you might find interesting. There's a picture of Joe and Dan Ridgeway, father and son working side by side, installing an overhead door in our new garage on Jamison Road. Nothing spectacular about that, except this snapshot reminds me that Dan is still working every day as a contractor while his Dad, a gentle man with a great sense of humor is now confined to a nursing home with Alzheimer's. Life isn't fair. Dan did all the finish carpentry in the house we now live in. Like his father, he takes pride in his work and is a joy to be around.

Here's one of Diane holding three-year old Xavier on the Jet Express to Put-In-Bay. Just look at the smiles on their faces and the way the wind is blowing their hair. Actually, there are many pictures from the North Shore...Perry's Monument, Marblehead Lighthouse, Gibraltar Island, Crystal Cave. We have been going to Lake Erie at least once a year for as long as I can remember and loving every minute of our time there. Well, almost every minute. As a pastor, I had to spend many long, hot days in Hoover Auditorium at Lakeside listening to people who were supposedly God-led act like common politicians as they fought to get their way in the Church. The Annual Conference was not something I looked forward to, but I'll bet you could tell that, couldn't you? If you've never vacationed at Lake Erie, I suggest you find out for yourself how delightful a freshwater vacation can be.

Oh, and there's eighty-eight year old Ruthie Tong smiling in front of the White Star Restaurant in Peebles. Ruthie was one of the first people who really made me feel

welcome at Sinking Spring United Methodist Church when I agreed to fill in there for a few weeks. Little did I suspect that a few weeks would turn into seven years. Ruthie and her husband Wig (yep, Wig), were some of the most generous, loving people we ever had the pleasure to be around. Although we were middle-aged, it's safe to say they adopted us. After Wig died, we sort of adopted her. She shared our love of going out to eat. Thankfully, the White Star is still in business and their homemade chicken and noodles is as good today as it was way back then.

None of these pictures were taken on extraordinary days. Oh, they were special days all right, but what made them special was our *awareness* that we were blessed. The picture of Joe and Dan reminds us that we were able to build a garage. Many people never get to own a home, let alone one with a two-car garage. The ferry boat and Lake Erie pictures were taken because we were on vacations....a word foreign to many millions across the world. Ruthie in front of the restaurant reminds us that we've been blessed with enough 'disposable income' to eat in numerous restaurants for most of our adult lives. We've never been in the upper middle class, economically, but we've always had more than we deserved.

The difference, it seems to me, between an ordinary day and an extraordinary day is simply our awareness of our blessings. I asked Diane what the difference was between the two is and she didn't hesitate before answering, "*Attitude.*" As I write this, the rain is pouring down and I've got a lousy cold. I've also got four cold medications, a box of facial tissue, and a hot cup of coffee to help me get through it. The roof isn't leaking and it's warm inside. I've got friends who care....something you can't buy. Today isn't ordinary; it's extraordinary. As Tom Hanks said in the movie *Castaway*, "*Who knows what the tide may bring in?*" Every day is a new beginning. Waking up in the morning is very much like being resurrected from the dead. "*It's a new day, it's a new world, it's a new life.....and I'm feeling good.*" (Lyrics compliments of Joe Bonamassa.) Today is going to be extraordinary because I choose it to be.

- By Greg Roberts (published 3/3/2011)

IS SO! IS NOT!

I was just thinking about a conversation I've overheard far too many times.

"Is so!"

"Is not!"

"Is so!"

"Is not!"

"Is so!"

"Is not!"

Scintillating dialogue, isn't it? Surely this has to be two little boys arguing, but alas, it isn't. Woody Hayes is the greatest coach of all time? How I wish that were the issue. It would then be plausible to settle that argument with statistics; games won during the regular season, margins of victory, post season bowl games won and lost, maybe even how many players went on to the pros. A comparison of statistics could satisfy all but the most strident fans. But no, the argument in question does not lend itself to statistical analysis, nor to any other easy means of settlement. No amount of logic or scientific evidence will deter the passionate belief of some Biblical literalists that the earth is only several thousand years old. "*Is so!*"

Perhaps you have no strong feelings either way on this ongoing and oft-heated debate. Maybe you're one of those people who don't get mixed up in religious arguments. I can understand anybody's reluctance to be involved in an argument you can't win. My dear old Dad used to tell me, "*Son, never argue with an idiot. Bystanders can't tell the difference.*" Besides, I've since learned that they will beat you down with years of experience. But the sad thing about people who insist that the Bible be interpreted literally is that they often leave no room for dissenting opinions. If you don't believe as they do, you are either a heretic or a heathen or maybe both. "*If you don't believe the Bible then God will send you to Hell!*" This is the inflexible attitude that hinders the meaningful and civil exchange of ideas, not only in the field of religious beliefs, but in the political arena and yes, even in our personal relationships.

On the other side of the argument is the scientist that has no use for the Bible, and often as not, no use for the Church. "*Is not!*" He may or may not believe in intelligent design, but if you're going to insist that the earth is only six thousand years old, then he is determined to prove you wrong. He (or she) may ridicule your faith in a God who created everything that is, and condemn you as an anti-intellectual for clinging to childhood beliefs in the face of overwhelming scientific evidence. Never mind that most of the bones in those dinosaur skeletons in the museum are composed of man-made materials. Science says the earth is billions of years old. "*Only a moron would believe anything else.*"

I suppose if it were two six-year old boys standing on the curb arguing it would be comical. When the combatants are grown people it's not comical; it's tragic. Without the willingness to allow someone else an opinion different from our own, we claim a superiority that simply doesn't exist. When both sides claim to have cornered the market on eternal truth, they open the door to hostility. Depending on the issue, that hostility may be as mild as verbal abuse or as lethal as genocide. Nobody has a lock on eternal truth. Not Christians, not Muslims, not Jews and certainly not scientists, who by the very nature of their vocation must admit that what we *don't* know far outweighs what we DO know. Many things that once were universally accepted as 'true' have been disproved and replaced with new "truth". Shouldn't we keep our minds open so that we can grow? Sadly, people who are religiously or politically dogmatic will not participate in conversation that may in some way challenge their cherished beliefs. People who have decided there is no God or that God does not intervene in human affairs will never be able to admit that they've witnessed a miracle, which is simply the suspension of the scientific laws we are still discovering.

If all of this seems like rambling, I apologize. Here's what prompted me to begin writing this short essay: it's the lack of civility, the rise of arrogance, and the demise of mutual respect for people who dare to think differently. Within the religious community, there are forces that deny participants the right to think for themselves. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Movement that eventually gave birth to a new denomination (something he never wanted!) gave us a formula for seeking truth that one of his successors named The Wesleyan Quadrilateral. Now Wesley never called it that, but it does have a nice ring to it. Here are the four precepts that Wesley prescribed for ascertaining truth; Scripture, reason, tradition, and experience. All four are to be consulted if a seeker is sincerely attempting to find 'the heart of the matter'. (Thank you Don Henley, for that title.) Don't

throw your Bible away but don't be afraid to hold it up to the light of experience, to reason, and to tradition. God gave us a brain; we should never be afraid to use it. Seek out people who think differently. Listen patiently to what others are thinking. Let your guard down; nobody is attacking you. You can listen to a dozen different opinions and still come away believing what you did at the onset. But listen with an open mind. Be willing to grow. There are after all, only two options for every living organism: grow or die. We are, by definition, humans 'being' in the process of life. Part of the joy of living is in growing into the full potential of which we are capable.

So now, I'll preach. (Hey, it's in my blood.) I implore all of us to suspend our political affections. Suspend your denomination (or non-denominational) affiliations. Question everything. (After all, they lied to you about the Tooth Fairy, Santa Claus, and WMD, didn't they?) Push aside your fears and *listen* to what others have to share. (If you are preparing a rebuttal while somebody is speaking, you are *not* listening.) Avoid arguments that simply cannot be resolved. Allow dissident opinions; they don't threaten your belief system. Treat every person with the respect they deserve as a child of God. Clarify your goals. Are you trying to shape others into your own image? We really don't have the right to do that. That person who insists "*Is so!*" and the one who insists "*Is not!*" are both shaped in the image of God. We should recognize that face and we should celebrate it too.

- By Greg Roberts (published 2/25/2011)

HANDS LIKE LEATHER...

Driving south on U.S. Rt. 68 through Fleming County, Kentucky you have to marvel at the field fencing. Mere inches beneath the grass, layer upon layer of slate lies in waiting to frustrate the auger and the post driver. Those straight rows of wood and steel posts were planted at the cost of untold blisters, broken shear pins and curses that belie the devout religion of those stalwart farmers.

As I drive along, my mind wanders back to the early '80s, when we got a horse for our seven-year-old daughter. We needed to fence most of our three acres for a pasture. Lacking the knowledge for such an undertaking, I asked around for a reputable fence builder. The response was unanimous. "Get Mr. Coleman if you can. He's the best." I called him on a Saturday; he said he'd come look the job over on Monday. He didn't work on the Sabbath, he informed me, not for anyone.

Monday evening he pulled into our driveway in a twenty-year-old Jeep, pulling a homemade single-axle trailer that contained all the tools of his livelihood. He unfolded his large frame from behind the steering wheel and introduced himself. "Howdy. I'm Coleman." He extended his right hand and I was immediately struck by the size, the calluses, and the strength. It was difficult to guess his age, but there was youthfulness in his eyes and voice. As we walked down the brush-covered hillside together, I noted that his steps were not fast but deliberate.

He stepped off the proposed perimeter of the pasture, never writing down a thing, but when we finished, he rattled off the list of what I was to purchase and have delivered. "Six end posts, six seconds, 40 pounds of number nine wire, ninety steel posts, a roll of

barbed wire and six rolls of cattle fencing. Better buy the Red Brand; it'll last you a lot longer. No need to buy braces. You've got some good yellow locusts here I can cut unless you got some objection to cutting trees." I assured him I didn't, and promised to have the materials on hand by Thursday morning. We walked back up the hill in silence. As he climbed into his Jeep he said, "I get two dollars a rod, payment on completion of the job."

I had no idea if that was the going rate, a bargain price, or highway robbery. "Great" I said, "how long will it take?"

"You'll be ready for that horse by this time next week, if'n the weather holds."

With that he closed the door and backed the trailer down the driveway and onto the road. I stood in awe wondering, "Why can't I back a trailer like that?"

When Ed Lerch's Farm Supplies delivery truck arrived Wednesday afternoon I hurried down the hillside to help unload the fencing. I should have stayed in the house. Steel posts come in bundles of ten and each post weighs----what? Ten pounds? At any rate, the bundles were awkward and heavy. The wooden end posts, nine feet long, weighed far more than I could manage. The rolls of fencing -- forget it! The deliveryman continued to unload the flatbed truck as I attempted to lift one item after another, without success. I know he was thinking, "What a wimp!" It was one of those moments when I would have been so grateful for my wife to come outside and yell, "You've got a phone call." No such salvation came. When the last roll of fence was unloaded, I thanked him sheepishly and trudged back up the hillside, thoroughly humiliated.

When I got home from work Thursday afternoon, I was amazed at Mr. Coleman's progress. He had cut all the brush from the proposed fence line, as well as the yellow locust trees he needed for braces. He had set all the end posts and seconds, digging each hole three feet deep with only a set of posthole diggers and a spud bar. He had cut notches in the posts where the braces would be fitted into place and he had done it all in one day.

By Friday evening, the steel posts were all driven in a perfectly straight line and the rolls of fencing were unrolled on the ground so the wire could "relax". Mr. Coleman was putting the last wooden brace in when I got home. His strong, leathery fingers pushed the stubborn No. 9 wire wherever he wanted it to go. Maybe you've attempted to work with No. 9. It's as unyielding as a born-again Baptist and meaner than an angry drunk. Mr. Coleman imposed his will on that wire, twisting here, weaving there, until the brace was securely in place.

On Saturday morning I gave one fleeting thought to helping him but then I remembered my embarrassment at trying to unload the fencing so I decided the best way I could help was to stay out of his way. Periodically, I would sneak a peek from an upstairs bedroom window to see how he was coming along. By noon he had all the wire fencing stood up and loosely secured. By late afternoon he had stretched it and stapled it to the end posts. When I saw him loading his tools in the utility trailer, I hurried outside to congratulate him on his progress. He was soaked with perspiration but he pulled off his straw hat, smiled a thank you as he wiped his brow and reminded me that he didn't work on the Sabbath, not for anyone. "I'll be back Monday to finish the job, if'n the weather holds." After he left, I walked the fence line, feeling the tautness of the wire and marveling that one man could

do so much in such a short time.

While I was at my labor-less job on Monday, Mr. Coleman finished securing the fence to the steel posts and stretched the single strand of barbed wire six inches above the top. If you're pasturing horses, you have to have the barbed wire or the horses will lean their necks across the fencing and mash it down. Mr. Coleman taught me that too.

Monday afternoon, he waited patiently for me to get home. We walked the length of the fence together and then we climbed back up the hill to where his battered old Jeep sat. I wrote out a check for the amount he requested and handed it over with a heartfelt "thank you." I never in my life felt better about paying someone for a job well done. We shook hands and he backed that trailer out again, without so much as a look over his shoulder, waved and headed for home. I remember thinking, "No wonder so many people recommend him."

Later I learned that Mr. Coleman had migrated from Kentucky to southern Ohio as a young man. He came looking for work, something he could do with his hands. Formal education had escaped him; he could neither read nor write---but man, oh man, could that guy build fence!

Each week, every residence in the county received a free newspaper called The County Shopper. It was a treat Mr. Coleman eagerly awaited. His wife would read it to him, page by page -- the stories, the classified ads, even the advertisements. For a man who couldn't read, he was remarkably well informed. He also had a good supply of common sense. He saved his hard-earned money and they lived within their means.

I now look back on our brief time together and realize that the world needs more men like Mr. Coleman. We don't need clever, smiling politicians who know they cannot deliver on their empty promises. We need people who do what they say they will do. We don't need more people with soft hands and softer ethics. We need people who are unafraid of honest-to-God hard work, who will still give whatever it takes to get the job done. That old gentleman in his bib overalls, high top work shoes and sweat-stained straw hat had more class than most of the designer suit-wearing movers and shakers that populate the places of trust and authority in our country today. Energy and integrity flowed through his work like water from a cut spring sapling. He epitomized the best from an era that we desperately need to recapture.

I'm driving south on U.S. 68, admiring the countryside and remembering with respect a soft-spoken Kentucky man with hands like leather and a work ethic as strong as a well-built fence.

- By Greg Roberts (published 2/15/2011)

DINOSAUR

Hank Williams, Jr. once sang a song entitled "Dinosaur." I still have it on a record. (Remember records? Those big vinyl discs with the hole in the center?) That song still rings in the half-empty chambers that once were my memory banks. Be thankful you can't hear me singing it right now. The gist of the song is that Hank's beloved used-to-be country bar has been converted into a disco. (Please tell me you're old enough to

remember disco!) Because of that change, he is not only heartbroken but a stranger in a place he used to call home. He confesses that he is a dinosaur, who should have died out a long time before. You know what? I can relate to that.

Recently a group of well-meaning friends went together and bought me a Kindle, one of those electronic devices that...well, of course, you know what it is. No need to explain. My dear wife had wanted to buy me one for Christmas and I told her in no uncertain terms to save our money for something more useful, like maybe a cordless drill or a circular saw. Thankfully, she listened to me...this time. But my friends didn't consult me. They just felt that as I lay around recuperating from a broken leg (another story for another time) I really needed a Kindle so I could read books to pass the time. Their hearts were in the right place. They just forgot that the guy with the broken leg also harbors a distrust of anything electronic that is more complicated than a CD player. I opened the box and stared at the gleaming silver device with a mixture of gratitude (after all, these folks did think enough of me to chip in and buy the gadget) and contempt.

Just today, the talking heads on FOX and CNN happily announced that e-Books had outsold paper books in 2010. The Kindle and its close relatives are rapidly making "real" books obsolete. The days of finding used paperbacks three for a dollar in the Goodwill store are surely numbered. One has to wonder if our public libraries are destined to the same fate as the school buildings we attended as children. Mere empty lots now.

After a week of wrestling with conflicting ideas about what should be done, I put the Kindle in its shipping box and returned it to Amazon.com. They assured me that the sender would never know I had returned it AND I got a nice credit for future purchases. Another trait of dinosaurs is often (but not always) an overdeveloped conscience. I simply could not deceive my friends into thinking I was enjoying the Kindle. I called them and told them what I had done and asked forgiveness. Maybe it's hard for techies to understand; I *like* turning pages and using a matchbook cover for a bookmark. I *like* the feel of a book in my pocket. I *like* seeing them on my bookshelf and on my bedside table. While I'm not a collector of stamps, coins, guns or antique toys, I do enjoy looking at my collection of books and reflecting on when I first read Catcher In the Rye, or To Kill a Mockingbird, or Slaughterhouse Five. They're like old friends who bring back special moments. Can the Kindle reader reach out and fondly touch a worn copy of The Autumn of the Middle Ages?

But the Kindle is merely the tip of the iceberg. I am a dinosaur in many other ways. I lament that some words no longer have a place in the culture. I distinctly remember when shame was understood to be the proper response for misconduct. I'll take some flack for this but I'll say it anyway. I am appalled at the ease with which our culture uses the phrase "single mom". Okay, anybody can make a mistake. But a single mom with four kids? Unless her husband ran out on her or was killed, there's something wrong with this picture. Oh, you say she never **had** a husband? This dinosaur wonders why both the sperm donors and the single mom don't feel the least bit of shame for populating the world without first accepting the responsibility of marriage. This dinosaur still believes that children thrive best in a home with a Mom and Dad who can be counted on for the long haul.

Lest you are thinking, "*Probably a right-wing conservative Republican*" I should point out

that some dinosaurs defy easy classification. Some of us still cling to that beautiful eulogy Teddy Kennedy gave at Bobby's funeral. "*Some men see things as they are and ask 'why'? Others dream what never was and ask 'why not'?*" Some of us still long for the world Dr. Martin Luther King spoke of when he said, "*I have a dream that someday my little children will be judged by the content of their character instead of the color of their skin.*" No, we don't want the "good old days" of racial segregation and survival of the fittest. Some dinosaurs may even cling to the notion of ZPG (for the uninformed, that stands for Zero Population Growth) as the very best and most fundamental environmental tool. I do.

I'm a dinosaur. I think children should be taught respect. But when adults show so little respect for one another, where are the role models? The fact that Jerry Springer's Too Wild for Television is on the perennial best selling DVD list says something about the times we live in, don't you agree? Oh yeah, television. That's the doorway we open to allow every kind of dysfunctional, immoral, mind-numbing behavior to enter our homes. Television is the babysitter that replaces a very busy Mom and the substitute for reading good books. This old dinosaur honestly believes that kids were better off when they rode their bicycles, engaged in pick-up baseball games, and spent their hours in the sunshine instead of in some dark room exercising their thumbs and playing video games for hours on end. So what? Who cares what a dinosaur believes? They're on the way out.

Hank sings, "*Have pity on a dinosaur.*" I don't want pity. I know I'm the one out of step. I resisted a cell-phone until my employer insisted I carry one so that he could redirect my movements on a moment's notice. I don't want a Blackberry or a Bluetooth or an iPad. I still love writing my journal entries out longhand in a spiral notebook. (Incidentally, ladies keep diaries; men keep journals.) Please don't think I'm trying to influence others to adopt my attitude toward "progress". If you're comfortable with the electronic age, well friend, more power to you. I hope that next Christmas you get every gadget you hope for. Me? I'd settle for a package of tidy whities, some notebooks (the paper variety) and a package of new roller ball ink pens. But then, I'm a dinosaur who still thinks *kindle* is something you do to start a fire in the woodstove.

- By Greg Roberts (published 2/6/2011)

THREE-TIERED

While listening to my pastor's sermon recently I was reminded that in Jesus' day, many people believed in a three-tiered universe with the earth and the surrounding sky composing the middle layer, Heaven somewhere "out there" among the stars, and Hell deep in the center of the earth. I say "many" because this cherished model of how the universe was structured was anything but universally embraced. We read in the Bible about that sect of Jews known as the Sadducees, who said, in effect, that when you die it's game over, end-of-story, nada beyond. (Incidentally, if you have trouble remembering the difference between the Pharisees and Sadducees, here's some help: The Pharisees' motto was, "*If you'd try your utmost you might be as fair as me.*" The Sadducees didn't believe in any sort of afterlife and that's what made them sad, you see.) The Sadducees challenged Jesus' teaching about an afterlife with this trap: Levirate Law stated that if a man died without leaving male heirs, his brother should marry the widow and have sons through her. The example the Sadducees threw at

Jesus was that a man married, but died leaving no heirs. So his brother married the woman but he too died, leaving no heirs. Eventually, all seven brothers married this same woman and then died. She died too, but not before outlasting all of them. (Kind of makes a person wonder how she wore out so many men, but we'll skip that.) Their question was, "*Whose wife will she be in the Resurrection?*"

Now friends, over the years I've heard a lot of comments after preaching on this passage of Scripture. I've looked out over the congregations and seen raised eyebrows and defiantly crossed arms. More than one divorced person has pulled me aside before leaving the church and said to me, "*If I have to spend eternity with my ex, then forget it! Just send me to the other place 'cause it would be about the same.*" Do you suppose we get to choose who we want to hang out with in Heaven? Or are we stuck with people we've been trying to avoid in this life?

But back to the three-tiered universe. While many still believe that Heaven is "out there somewhere" it's pretty difficult to find anybody who still believes that Hell is located at the center of the earth. I'd be remiss not to tell you that I also have retired preacher friends who will tell you, "*I know exactly where Hell is. I was appointed there for two years.*" Quite honestly, I find more and more people who don't believe in Heaven, Hell or anything else that they learned in Sunday school. (Skepticism indeed runs rampant today. But that's a topic for another time.) Science has pretty much dismantled the notion of a three-tiered universe except for those who can trace their family tree back to the ostrich.

You know what else is often three-tiered? Wedding cakes. Did you ever wonder if the three tiers stand for the three persons of the Christian Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) or for the three stages of marriage? Those, by the way, are initial anticipation, sad disillusionment, and eternal boredom.....just kidding. (You might want to supply your own three stages but be very careful if your words can be traced back to you!) Whether the wedding cake is flat, three-tiered, or even higher there is a disturbing trend that we've probably all witnessed at wedding receptions. The bride and groom ceremonially cut the wedding cake and then..... when did newly-married couples begin aggressively shoving wedding cake up each other's noses? Is this a barometric indicator of their married lives together? You can understand the groom's Aunt Ethel and the bride's Uncle Paul falling down on the dance floor after they've been to the punch bowl a few times. That's just loss of equilibrium. But smearing cake all over the face of the person you just married....that's a lack of civility! They attack and embarrass one another with a handful of cake in front of all their families and friends and then retire to the honeymoon suite where they have high hopes of finding our fondest wishes fulfilled. Makes perfect sense, doesn't it?

Okay, one more three tiered observation and I'll quit. Did you ever wonder why a toilet seat comes with a lid? No, I don't think it was provided so that the newlywed would have a more comfortable place to sit and cry. Think about it: you come into the bathroom and the lid is down on the toilet. If you are a gentleman you lift both the lid *and* the toilet seat, out of consideration for the fairer sex. We don't really need to explain why we do that...do we? When we are ready to leave, we lower both the toilet seat *and* the lid. Doesn't that seem reasonable? Oddly enough, there are a number of women who disagree. They want the seat *down* and the lid *up* every time they answer

nature's call to dehydrate. Now you can see why they expect men to lift the toilet seat. But where is it written that the three-tiered throne has to be ready for them to perch when they enter the bathroom? Some men forget to put the seat down before they leave. Woe to them! If their female consorts forget to check and sit down on that cold porcelain, the man who dared to leave the seat up will hear about it! (I've seen politicians offer more grace to their opponents.) I've also heard women complain that if both the lid **and** the seat are down, they have to lift the lid, a task they find unsanitary. Well, excuse me! It's okay for men to have to lift both lid and seat, and then put them back in place but you don't want to soil your little hand by touching that nasty old lid? Hey, that's why we have soap and water in the restroom. The engineer's rule applies here; form follows function. Both lid and seat should remain down when not in use. You, the user, determine what needs to happen next and when you are finished, the lid and the seat should again be closed. And please, male or female, *please* wash your hands before going through that door and back into the company of the unsuspecting.

- By Greg Roberts (published 1/30/2011)

LEGACY

What is (or will be) your legacy? Did your life make a difference? What will people remember about you (if anything, if indeed you are remembered at all) after you 'go the way of all flesh'?

For many, their obituary in a newspaper is the closest thing to a legacy that is ever put into print. The purpose of visitation and funeral dinners is to allow friends and relatives to share stories, relive past moments spent with the deceased, and possibly even speak a few words of praise, but seldom are these condensed into a record and given to the printed page. For most, a legacy is only kept alive in the hearts and minds of their survivors. If you want your legacy preserved in print, you'd best get busy writing your autobiography.

I just finished reading The Machine, a chronological account of the 1975 season of the Cincinnati Reds baseball team, written by Joe Posnanski. That team not only achieved greatness in its day but also left a sports legacy that will endure for many years. But teams are composed of individuals. What about their personal legacies? Are those men merely the components of a remarkable team or do their individual lives attest to the same kind of greatness that one might expect from legends? The beauty of Posnanski's book is the poignantly personal insights into the lives of the men who were '*The Big Red Machine*'. Each wrestled with his own demons, fears, and personality flaws. Perhaps the most glaring example of the contrast between the team's legacy and the individual's legacy is illustrated by Pete Rose. As a baseball player, he was unequalled. But off the field, his life reflects little to admire. His daughter said, "*He was the worst father in the world.*" He has been banned from the sport he cherished for gambling. He lied to the public for twenty years about that. He was unfaithful to his wife. How would you write his personal legacy?

I only used that team and one individual to bring us back to the truth that each of us

leaves a legacy, however monumental or insignificant we may perceive it to be. In his Gettysburg Address, President Abraham Lincoln made this statement: *The world will little note nor long remember what we say here but it can never forget what they did here*. What they, the soldiers of the Union and Confederate armies, did was to slaughter one another in the most horrific battle of the American Civil War. But they marched into the withering fire of cannon and rifle for their causes and they died for them. They died by the thousands on hot, blood-soaked fields. We honor them for their sacrifices. We may not know the name of one man who fought and died there, but we honor their collective willingness to give their lives for something they believed in. Is there anything we are so passionate about that we are willing to die for its preservation?

Today I look back over my own life of sixty-three years and wonder if I have accomplished anything worthy of the oxygen, food and natural resources I've consumed. I can list my family (which in my case is the children my wife and I have adopted) as part of my legacy. But their successes and failures are not truly mine to claim, although I may have had some influence in their formative years.

I can honestly say I've always worked to support myself and my family. But has my 'work' made the world a better place? Would anyone step forward and say, *"My life has been enriched because Greg Roberts printed magazines at Greenfield Printing*. Or because he sold dog kennels, read gas meters, cut hair, or sold life insurance?

For fifteen years I preached Jesus Christ in United Methodist churches. Preachers always hope that the words they spoke somehow helped people, enriched their lives, and made a difference. But the only people who can testify to the effectiveness of those sermons are the people who heard (and responded) to them, not the preachers themselves. If you attempt to measure your success as a preacher by the number of converts or the attendance in worship you are merely utilizing statistics to quantify that which can only be measured by others. The true measure of effective preaching is neither in conversions nor attendance, but in changed lives, lives changed for the better.

I strongly suggest that each of us write his own eulogy. Those who survive us may or may not agree with what we write. They may chuckle or smirk. They may shake their heads in disagreement. If you can withstand the glaring light of honest self-scrutiny, you might talk about your goals, your achievements, your failures, and yes, those dreams that never came true. What you write will reveal how much of what you want people to know about who you really are and what really matters to you.

While tombstones will probably go out of style in the next hundred years as cremations become more and more prevalent, it is still a worthwhile exercise to give some consideration to what *you* might like to have engraved on *your* stone. Epitaphs are often attempts to condense legacies. *"He loved his wife"* or *"He loved the Lord"* can become theme statements. What do you wish to be remembered for? Write it down because the chances are pretty good that nobody else will.

Eulogies, epitaphs, even autobiographies, are feeble attempts to explain a human life. In the final analysis, a legacy is determined by what others think, not what we wish them to think. We create our legacies by the way we treat others in our daily

transactions. We must always remain aware that we are mortal beings who have been given the privilege of life. Others may write them, but we are the ones who create our own legacies day by day.

- By Greg Roberts (published 1/23/2011)