

Keeping Donkeys off the Edge

By Maurice Carter in The Covington News – February 10, 2013

Last week was bad – or so it seemed then. Work days were jam-packed with stressful moments, evenings were too short, nights were sleepless, and I could never catch my balance or my breath. Even finding time to write a column was a chore.

By Friday night, I was shouting to anyone within earshot: “I’m a donkey on the edge!” (Shrek fans will hear those words in Eddie Murphy’s voice as Donkey.) When not channeling the overeager burro, I’m equally prone to relieve stress invoking the Lloyd Bridges character in *Airplane* who “picked a bad week to stop sniffing glue!”

That was then. So far, things are much better this week. Even the rain can’t dampen spirits, as things just click along.

What changed? Not a heck of a lot as far as I can tell. On the job front, the home front, socially, and everywhere else, life is basically the same. What’s different is my reaction.

Last week, I couldn’t see a positive outcome on the horizon for much of anything. This week, I just feel everything I’m pursuing is destined to come to pass. The circumstances have changed little. But, it all just seems more right this week.

And, that got me thinking not just about week to week changes, but about our times in general. I have friends and acquaintances who live every day in the kind of experience I had last week.

It’s a popular question: are things better or worse than they were a year ago, a decade ago, a generation ago, etc? Most people make one of two choices. Either we see the human journey as one of endless, unstoppable forward progress, or we believe somehow the trajectory has shifted downward into an ever steepening decline where today is never as good as yesterday.

I see another answer. Reflecting on good weeks and bad, there’s a rhythm to life – a dance in which the best and the worst come and go and intermingle. People die in our lives even as newborns enter the world. I’m not on a path to better or worse, I’m just pirouetting through the natural phases of human existence. When I feel good, I see more good and feel even better. When I feel bad, I see more bad, and feel even worse.

But, some people are no longer in rhythm. They experience only the bad, which makes them feel worse; then they see more bad, and the trajectory truly is downward.

I don’t know if this is a growing phenomenon, or something that’s always been. But, I feel bad for them. And, the echo chamber of our 21st century world is doing them no favors.

Whether through email, Facebook, or our preferred 24-hour news channel, we immerse in a world where homogenized messages beat out the same relentless themes. If you've surrounded yourself with Pollyannas, you've developed an idealized fantasy world no reality can live up to. If you're tuned to the doomsdayers, everything is another sign of the apocalypse.

If you're connected at all to the internet, someone has passed along a quote from Will Rogers, Mark Twain, or some other satirist lampooning our society. "I don't make jokes, I just watch the government and report the facts" is a popular quip from Rogers. Twain is quoted saying "Suppose you were an idiot, and suppose you were a member of Congress; but I repeat myself." Will Rogers died 78 years ago. Nearly 103 years have passed since Twain's last breath. Their barbs resonate today because some human frailties have existed since the beginning of time.

Sure, we have great challenges before us: debt, climate change, and a dysfunctional political system among them. But we lack the perspective to understand these problems are not unique to our times. We can obsess on these, or we can revel in our technological advances. But, the truth is all life – be it a week on the calendar or a generation lived – consists of steps forward and back. It is a dance.

Speaking of perspective, a video is circulating online: "First World Problems Read by Third World People," produced by the non-profit Water Is Life. In the film, Haitians are filmed in the most destitute settings reciting common complaints we hear from our friends – or possibly even utter ourselves.

"I hate it when I tell them no pickles, and they still give me pickles," says one likely hungry boy standing in front of a crumbling cinder block home.

Perspective, indeed... I'm bringing my donkey in off the edge.

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