

Voices In My Head: Dysfunctional Compulsion

By P.J. O'Leary

If you'll pardon a little (additional) self- indulgence in this month's column, I'd like to share with you something that I wrote back in the early 90's when Leslie and I lived in a little town in Maine. I think you'll see that small towns everywhere in America share some common characteristics, and I'm guessing you'll also find that I've always been haunted by those "Voices In My Head."

Andy was working the register that morning at Tri-Town fuels. The men were leaning against the counter that held the double-burner coffee machine, occupying the spaces which through years of loitering they had established as their own. Leon and Mitchell, the two whose years of leaning had made the greatest physical impressions on the worn counter-edge, and who, not coincidentally, are recognized as statesmen of the Tri-Town inner circle, were there that day. I've lived in Arundel for four years, and almost every working morning, I've stopped for coffee, exchanging only the simplest of pleasantries with the members of the tribe. This morning, I had time to spare, so I decided to listen in for awhile. I couldn't actually lean, because all the good spots were taken, but I was able to prop my elbow somewhat comfortably against the Little Debbie display rack. Leon was just wrapping up a story about having to rent a backhoe to finish an excavation job on a 32x48 foundation. He apparently had stripped a Findley sprocket or something like that. Mitchell, whose occupation I have never determined but whose avocation is drinking Tri-Town coffee, shuddered at the thought of a stripped Findley sprocket and consoled Leon as best he could. He tried to lighten the mood by engaging the group in a landfill storage conversation when a report came over the scanner regarding a two-car accident on Route 111 near Alfred. The banter ceased, as it always does when a police report is broadcast.

Andy said it, but I kinda' wish he hadn't. He wrinkled his big round face, exposing teeth which always remind me when my dental appointments are overdue, and said, "Geez, they have more accidents at that intersection than you can shake a stick at."

"Provided you're the sort of person who is inclined to shake sticks at things," I said.

Andy lost the wrinkle, shut his mouth, and bugged his eyes. This alternate facial contortion was the one he always used when he felt he had been given a verbal bite in the butt.

I hadn't really intended to take a poke at Andy's observation, but it happened. The blank stares around the room convinced me that according to the Tri-Town rules of procedure, I now had the floor. I'd like to say that I took a breath and mentally outlined a story line, but that's not true. I had actually devised this monologue on my daily Turnpike trips from Arundel to Portland. You see, I don't have a radio.

"I was, at one time, a practicing stick shaker, though I am now in recovery. I hope my candor doesn't disturb you, but I am among hundreds in Maine, and thousands nationally who harbor a penchant for shaking sticks at things. Everyone, I suppose, has at one time in his life shaken a stick. This addiction, however, is insidious in its selective nature. While some may shake a stick, toss it aside, and never pick it up again, there are those of us for whom it becomes a compulsion. I have vivid memories of the first time I shook a stick at something. I remember the feeling of power, the euphoria that overtook me.

"More than you can shake a stick at.' That's what you said, isn't it, Andy? Allow me to put that notion to rest. There is nothing which one cannot, given time and incentive, shake a stick at. Therein lies the obsession; the challenge to shake your stick at a rate which will better your numerical adversary, whatever it may be. I was well on my way, before I was sidelined by a severe wrist strain, to shaking my stick at every religious yard ornament in the Biddeford, Saco, and Old Orchard Beach region. A monumental task, I'm sure you would agree.

It was soon after this shaking binge that I sought help. I noticed an ad in the Casco Bay Weekly which read 'Stick Problems? Call 744-ROOT.' It turned out to be a psychologist who had done his thesis on arboreal dysfunctions. I was certain I would call him, but as I clutched

my stick, a shiny, bark-free piece of birch which I had come to know as my reason for shaking, I hesitated. We stick shakers are another of the closet minorities, I thought, unfortunate victims of the stigma with which an unenlightened society would almost certainly saddle us. I fought back my reservations and decided to consult the doctor.

I sensed immediately that the doctor's background was purely clinical. He asked just what a stick was, in my mind, and at what point it becomes a limb. I humored him, explaining that a stick can be held in one hand, and can be shaken freely. A limb, however, requires two hands and creates an enormous swath which even the most driven of stick shakers would find intimidating. This simple exchange revealed to me that he was not the expert he claimed to be, and that his counsel would not provide the easy answer I had been hoping for.

I just went cold-turkey. I'll spare you the graphic description of the burning of the birch, the moment when my hands trembled uncontrollably and my mind went numb. I'll forgo the grueling details of the agonizing months of coping with a stick-free lifestyle. I can't say that I don't still have the urge to pick up a stick, but I haven't so far, knock on wood."

I figured I had been talking for awhile, so I was surprised to see that Andy's expression was exactly as it had been when I began. I was now late for work, so I excused myself and drove off.

I still stop at Tri-Town most every morning for coffee, but the banter doesn't seem the same. Everybody is still in the same places, but when I'm in there, anyway, nobody seems to have much to say.

The Great Ethanol Hoax: Part I

By Miles Wickstrom

The federal government, followed soon after by the State of Oregon, mandated the use of ethanol in gasoline in 2007, ostensibly for the purpose of reducing America's dependence on imported petroleum. With more than two years' worth of history under our belts, three facts have become abundantly clear: ethanol production and distribution has 1) benefited a handful of enormous corporations, 2) cost the consumer an arm and a leg, and 3) is unlikely to reduce oil imports by more than 1% per year.

The benefits of ethanol have been wildly exaggerated from the very beginning, and many pronouncements from the experts don't pass the giggle test. In 2007, the U.S. Department of Energy claimed that "...6 billion gallons of ethanol were produced in the United States last year. That effort means 500 million fewer barrels of oil from the Middle East." Simultaneously, an industry group called the Renewable Fuels Association stated, "In 2006, the production of ethanol in the U.S. reduced oil imports by 170 million barrels..." One thing is certain: we could not have reduced our oil imports by 170 million barrels and 500 million barrels during the same time period.

We've all heard the claim that every gallon of ethanol made in America represents one less gallon of Middle Eastern oil that we'll need to import. That's nonsense, since more than half our imported oil comes from Canada. Middle Eastern oil only accounts for about 12% of our imports-- a fairly small slice of the pie.

The claim of a one-to-one relationship would be true if we were comparing apples against apples, but oil and ethanol are two very different animals. According to petroleum industry data, a gallon of unleaded regular produces 114,100 BTUs of energy, whereas a gallon of ethanol produces 76,000 BTUs. This is why the mileage in our cars has dropped in the last few years. A gallon of today's blended fuel contains 110,200 BTUs, not 114,100. Here's your physics lesson for the day: if you want to propel the same amount of mass (your vehicle) at the same amount of speed (55 m.p.h. or thereabouts), you will have to stick your foot into it just a little bit harder to get the same result as real gas. The harder you press the gas pedal, the worse your mileage. Duh!

Here, then, is the first conversion equation (yes, there is a second conversion factor that must also be considered). Since ethanol contains 33% fewer BTUs by volume, a gallon of gas is roughly equal to 1.33 gallons of ethanol. So if we want to replace 100,000,000 barrels of foreign oil (Middle Eastern or otherwise) with ethanol, we would have to produce 133,000,000 barrels to reach equivalency.

The second conversion factor has to do with production efficiencies. One of the hard and fast rules about energy is that it takes energy to make energy. If we want to convert one form of energy into another-- wind into electricity, solar into hot water, or oil into gasoline-- we must put some amount of energy in to produce some amount of energy out. In the petroleum industry, the acronym EROEI stands for Energy Recovered On Energy Invested. It is similar to the business term ROI (Return On Investment), except it speaks in oil language instead of dollar language. It is relatively easy to sink a well in Saudi Arabia, pump oil to the surface, move it to a refinery, and convert it into gasoline. Again, according to the petroleum industry, the EROEI in Saudi Arabia is 5:1. Simply stated, for every 5 barrels of oil removed from the ground, the energy equivalent of one barrel must be spent to convert the other 4 barrels into gasoline, resulting in an efficiency rating of 80%.

Converting corn (or any cellulosic material for that matter) into ethanol is much more energy intensive. A farmer must drive around his/her field in a diesel-powered tractor towing a disc to break up the soil into big clumps. Later, s/he drives around a second time with a harrow to break the large clumps into small clumps. Then s/he drives around a third time with a seed drill to plant the corn and perhaps a fourth or even fifth time to fertilize and/or spray for weeds. Then s/he has to hook up a heavy-duty electric water pump to irrigate the field every 5 to 7 days for the next few months. Then s/he drives around once again to harvest the crop and ship it off in diesel-powered trucks to the natural gas-powered ethanol plant where.... Well, you get the picture.

Anyway, when the dust settles, the EROEI for ethanol is 1.3:1 -- a net of 0.3 barrels of ethanol for every 1.3 barrels produced, or an efficiency rating of 23%. If you've been following the local news, ethanol plants-- including the new one in Clatskanie-- are going bankrupt faster than a Detroit auto maker. This is nothing short of astounding when you consider that Uncle Sam... er, I mean, the American taxpayer... subsidizes those plants to the tune of \$.51 a gallon. If ethanol were a viable alternative to petroleum, it could compete on the open market. The above numbers should be a pretty obvious clue as to why the industry has not been successful.

Next month, we will explore the myths promoted by ethanol backers and unmask those who have the most to gain from this losing proposition.

On The Shelves: What's Happening At Vernonia Library

By Nancy Burch

Library Launches Summer Reading Program

"Be Creative @ Your Library" this summer at the Vernonia Public Library and explore the worlds of music, dance, art, books, and more. The 2009 Summer Reading Program is open to young people, preschool through 13 years old, with programs, prize drawings, story hours, and more. Families are invited to join the Read-to-Me portion of the program. The program begins June 30th and ends August 8th with the Jamboree Parade. Registration for the Summer Reading Program begins on June 1, 2009. For more information, call the library at 503-429-1818.

- Tuesdays, 10-11:30 AM at the Vernonia Public Library will be stories and projects
- Thursday, July 9th: Professional Storyteller Laura McCormack at the Vernonia Public Library, 6:00 PM (anyone is welcome to attend)
- Saturday, July 11th: Movie Night! Horton Hears a Who (new) will be shown at 4:00 PM at the Vernonia Public Library
- Thursday, July 16th: Tie Dye Event in front of Vernonia Public Library (bring a white t-shirt or other item to be dyed-- parent supervision appreciated) 6:00 PM
- Saturday, July 18th: Movie Night! Madagascar 2 will be shown at 4:00 PM at the Vernonia Public Library
- Thursday, July 23rd: Performance by Jessica Davis of the Vernonia Dance Center at the Vernonia Community Church, 6:00 PM (anyone is welcome to attend)
- Saturday, July 25th: Movie Night! Kung Fu Panda will be shown at 4:00 PM at the Vernonia Public Library
- Thursday, July 30th: Professional magician Bob Eaton will be performing at the Vernonia Public Library 6:00 PM (all are welcome to attend)
- Saturday, August 1st: Movie Night! Zathura will be shown at 4:00 PM at the Vernonia Public Library
- Saturday, August 8th: Jamboree Parade!

In addition: Mature Movie Night will be Thursday, June 18 at 7:00 PM with "Six Days Seven Nights" being shown.

Book Discussion will be June 22 at 5:30 PM with book being "All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten."

All Library Programs are FREE! Everyone is welcome!