

SEVEN-YEAR ITCH

by Vic Berecz

The term *Seven-Year Itch* picked up connotations of marital infidelity largely from Billy Wilder's 1955 film with that title which starred Tom Ewell and Marilyn Monroe and included the unforgettable scene shown here. But, over the years, our use of that expression has broadened to refer to the urge to move on from any situation ... of whatever duration and context. While I was feeling such an urge to move on regarding the topics of these essays, I happened upon some old writings that are in the form of brief blogs, though they were never posted on the Internet. They were written exactly seven years ago this month.



Following the dictates of one of my favorite mantras ... *Learn from History* ... I reread them and decided they are still meaningful and could use an audience. So, here they are, without a single word changed. Hopefully they will suffice for my readers over the next couple of very busy months in the life of this old coot and historian wannabe.

Sunday, August 1, 2004: FIRST IN FAMILY GOING TO COLLEGE. This morning on CBS's *Sunday Morning* Charles Osgood and company extolled the virtues of a young Hispanic woman who "was the first in her family to attend college." Her parents came to this country from Mexico to escape poverty. They did not speak English. They opened a small store in Los Angeles, worked hard, and succeeded. When their daughter spoke of going to college to become a teacher, they first opposed her. They hoped she would join the family business. Later they relented and the family is moving forward. One day that brave young woman will make a real difference in the world.

I have no gripe with that family ... more power to them. What I am concerned about is the media giving the impression that this is something new or unique. My wife Joan's parents came to the United States to escape the post-World War I economic catastrophe of Germany. They did not speak English. They opened a small butcher shop in Brooklyn, worked hard and succeeded. When Joan discussed her desire to go to college and become a nurse, her parents were initially opposed. Later they too relented, and Joan was also the first in her family to attend college. She graduated from Columbia University over 40 years ago. She made a difference in the world by pursuing excellence in her career as a Registered Nurse.

What's my point? Simply this -- I see in these two family stories nothing unique or unusual. Their lives are typical of the American experience. We should praise the system that permits such success stories, and has produced them over the decades and yes, centuries. The success stories are great ... but our continued common striving toward the American dream is a far more important story.

Monday, August 2, 2004: SUV'S OR ARE THEY STATION-WAGONS? This afternoon, I was at the gym, walking on the treadmill and looking out the window watching the goings and comings of the customers at the gas station out front. I see many *SUV's*. A few weeks ago, I took our little grandson to his first day at summer "camp." My four-door sedan was the only one in the lot ... every other vehicle was an SUV. Since that was on the "gold-coast" of Connecticut, apparently every 20-something soccer-mom wanna-be not only needed an SUV, but it had to be a big one. There was a lineup of top-of-the-line *Lexi* (is that the plural of *Lexus*?), *Lincolns* and *Caddies* -- and even one bright yellow *Hummer*. [I'll bet the purchase of most of them was 100% tax-deductible, because our Congress and President were stupid enough to pass a law *intended* to help poor family farmers, and which really helped wealthy yuppies. Were they *stupid* or *slick*? Well, that's another story, let's not get into it further today.] I really don't think those behemoths in that parking lot were SUV's, they're some kind of combination of trucks and APC's.

So, let's go back to the gym. As I watch the "SUV's" come and go, I notice that many of the smaller and mid-size ones look remarkably like that icon of ages past ... a station-wagon. It doesn't matter whether they display a *Toyota* logo, or a *Volkswagen* logo, or an American nameplate -- they look like and act like station-wagons. The transformation of many SUV's to station-wagons has happened over the last few years, led by the highly-praised *Subaru* vehicles. But, if you ask any of those Generation Xer's, or Generation Yer's, or whatever the next bunch is being called, they'd never admit to owning a station-wagon. They own an SUV and are proud of it. Station-wagons are a relic of ages past. Not even their parents owned them. Maybe their grandparents did, they don't remember. What a difference a name makes!

Anyway, I'd like to make one final comment, being myself a relic of ages past. Our \$4100 brand-new '66 *Mercury Colony Park* wagon is still the best and most reliable car we've ever owned. And, I could fold the backseat down, fill the rear with 4'x8' sheets of plywood laying flat, and still close the tailgate. Try that in one of your SUV's of today (or even most pickups). Maybe we haven't quite come full circle yet.

Wednesday, August 4, 2004: I FEEL VALIDATED. Yesterday, I spent most of a rainy day working on a new webpage for my *Hungarian Family History Tutorial*. Researching family history has been the centerpiece of my life's work for almost a decade now. Last night, David Letterman interviewed former President Bill Clinton. When asked how he felt about all the effort involved in producing his new autobiographical book, Clinton made a remarkable reply. He said that everyone lucky enough to reach the age of 50, and has children, should sit down and write about their lives and their family history ... so those children can *know their roots*. It's nice to be validated, especially by a person you greatly admire.

Friday, August 6, 2004: ANOTHER CODE TO BREAK. I spent a lazy afternoon reading Darrell Bock's *Breaking the DaVinci Code*. It proved to be a very thought-provoking book. Before I read Dan Brown's *The DaVinci Code* a few months ago, I was repeatedly warned to remember that it was a novel. To a certain extent I did that, but a great part of the pleasure of reading fiction is to get lost in the "what if's" associated with it. I enjoyed Brown's book very much.

Bock tells us though that *The DaVinci Code* “is not merely a piece of fiction.” The implication from beginning to end is that Dan Brown had a hidden agenda to destroy the beliefs of traditional Christianity. He goes so far as to say that, “In breaking *The DaVinci Code* we have discovered there is much more going on here than creation of an entertaining novel -- there is a revision of what Christianity was and is.”

I must note here that Bock makes a very strong case that much of the yarn spun by Dan Brown is outright fiction, with virtually no evidence that the key aspects of the story ever happened. This is particularly the case with Bock's principal focus, the relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene. Of course, *The DaVinci Code* is never touted as non-fiction, so what's the big deal? I wondered as I read whether it really takes a book to establish that a novel is fictional.

But, as I went on in Bock's short book, I increasingly got the feeling that there was an undercurrent that doesn't fit my sense of “mainstream Christianity” or of the “Protestant tradition.” Bock's prejudices become apparent, often just beneath the surface, and occasionally quite explicitly. For instance, he wrote, “He [Jesus] just did not make women an exclusive cause as the term *feminist* implies.” I finished the book feeling that Bock had a hidden agenda of his own. Did he set out to convince us that women have no right to serve in leadership roles (ie. pastoral roles) in the Christian church? It sure seems that is the recurring theme of his arguments. And if that's the case, I say, “Right On! Rita, and Liz, and Joan. There is a pastoral role for you in our Church” ... and the Roman Catholic Church and Bock's “Non-Denominational Evangelical” form of Protestantism are the losers for not making good use of their God-given resources.

Saturday, August 7, 2004: GENERATIONAL CHANGE. I'm sitting here beside the pool on another beautiful Piedmont summer day. It's early evening and I have my notepad and a glass of *Tanqueray*-on-the-rocks. The rapidly setting sun is shedding its warm light on my past and future. We spent the day with our daughter and her new husband. I have often said “like father, like daughter.” But, today I focused on differences.

In her professional life she pursues a career similar to mine -- but, how much it has changed in the ten years since my retirement. It makes me feel old. In her private life, she is so different. She has definitely adopted what can only be described as a *YUPPIE* lifestyle. But, rather than commenting on the lifestyles of the next generation, I am pondering the realities that influence the changes (or lack thereof) between generations. Yes, I too am very different from my parents, but in some ways very much the same.

Today, I was reading *Rule of Four* -- a story of black and white, rich and poor, studying and mingling at Princeton. Those four young men seemed to “fit in” because of their basic mindset toward education. I noted that I could not have fit in or even survived that environment. It was fortunate, in retrospect, that I stayed away from eastern establishment schools and opted for a small, mid-western, church-related school. The change would have been just too dramatic for me to handle, given the legacy provided by my parents.

So, what was that legacy? First, a *working-class* outlook on the world. This was exemplified by a key factor in the toilet-training of young males in the 1940s. Working-class folks like us washed their hands *before* they took a leak ... elitists washed their hands *afterwards*. The lines were clearly drawn. The second point relates to your *parents' expectations* for you. My folks (especially my father) deemed me not “handy” enough to earn a living with “real work” ...

therefore, the only alternative for me was to get an education. It was not education for the sake of learning. No, the concept they instilled in me was that education served only one purpose ... to get a job. That leads directly to the third key aspect of my upbringing: I was constantly implored to *minimize risk*. This mandate took many forms, some of which I will comment on at another time, but a key principle here was work for a big company, and make sure you “don’t stand out from the crowd.” That way, your job should be secure.

Obviously, these ideas were conceived in the midst of the *Great Depression* and incubated during World War II. Sure, I eventually departed from strict adherence to these tenets, but looking back it’s surprising how much what you are taught in your youth influences your life. I am a little different from my parents, and that permitted my kids to be a little different from me. [And, they also had the influence of my wife and in-laws to help mold them.] As I study our family’s history over six or more generations, it’s interesting to try to identify the factors that led to generational change, and to the opposite of that ... what we sometimes call “familial traits.” That’s one of the more meaningful results of pursuing genealogy as a hobby.

Sunday, August 8, 2004: PARENTS PRESENT. We’re visiting at our kids’ place. There’s another couple about their age visiting also, with their three young children. We’re all together around the pool. The two middle-generation couples are talking about a recent wedding. Woman #1 mentions that, at the rehearsal dinner, “[The groom] was talking about how persuasive [his fiancé] was. He said that she even convinced a friend to build a new deck on to her house.” Man #2 says, “Yeah, she convinced him on her back.” Woman #2 says, “Let’s watch our words, there are *parents* present.”

Wednesday, August 11, 2004: ARROGANCE. Regarding the upcoming election, I’m still one of the few “truly undecided” that the news people keep talking about -- not that it makes much difference in my case. Let’s just say that the state I vote in is *not* a “swing state.” Anyway, today for the first time I heard something out of the mouth of a candidate that made real sense, in a break-thru sort of way. Democratic Senator John Kerry said, “Arrogance is never a virtue.” So true. Yet, when I listen to the Republican candidates (especially our Vice President) I perceive an awful lot of arrogance. No decision yet, it just puts one more checkmark up on the scoreboard.

Friday, August 13, 2004: A NEW GENERATION OF COMPUTER USERS. The grandsons came over to visit today. The older one -- just over 2 -- immediately wanted to get on *his* computer. A couple of months ago I set up an old computer and installed *Jump Start Toddlers* for him. I tried to teach him to use the mouse but failed miserably. He just couldn’t get the hang of pointing with the cursor, then holding the mouse still and clicking. For an hour or so, I did the mousing and he enjoyed the music and games. Finally, I got bored ... told him to play by himself ... and went off to *my* computer to check the e-mail. About an hour later, I started paying attention because the various tunes and singing seemed to be coming with great regularity from his computer. I looked over my shoulder and saw that he had taught himself to be a *two-fisted mouser* -- using one hand to position the cursor and the other to click. Since that day, the computer is one of his favorite activities when he visits.

I've been working with computers for almost 50 years now. I saw the kids of the 70s coming out of college with skills I didn't have after ten years of professional programming. I saw my daughter graduate from college in the 80s with computing skills and business acumen I probably never attained. And now I see a two-year old grandson teaching himself to use a computer.

It's a strange new world. Kids are smarter. They aren't afraid of technology. And, the quality of some software has become so very user friendly. Now if only we could get *Microsoft* on to that bandwagon!

Monday, August 16, 2004: WHAT TO DO? NOTHING. It was a bad weekend in Florida. Fortunately, we were 1500 miles away. *Charlie* did a real job on the town where we have a home. I'm President of our Condo Association. Over the weekend I got a dozen phone calls, and at least fifty e-mails from other owners in our building ... what's the situation? how much damage? when can we check out our place? what are you doing to protect our investment? ... and on and on.

I know that we have a structurally sound building, and that we paid a lot of money to put a real good roof on it after the "No-Name Storm" of 2001 did a job on it. I know that our management company put our "Hurricane Plan" into effect before the storm, and that there was no one in the building during the storm. I know from news reports that our little island became a part of the Gulf of Mexico for about an hour on Friday afternoon ... i.e. it was completely under water. I know that the island is now being protected by the Sheriff's Department and the National Guard. I know that nobody will get back on to the island until utilities -- electricity, water, sewers -- are restored.

What am I doing about the situation in Florida? I'm enjoying a visit with my grandsons. Am I worried? Emphatically NO! What's the point of *losing sleep* over something that you can do nothing about. You can't change history, and today *Charlie* is history.

Tuesday, August 17, 2004: DEBTORS AS VULNERABLE CITIZENS. I read today that: *People with a large amount of debt, "are the most vulnerable of our citizens ... They fall prey to every kind of scheme you can think of."* Duh! Is the debt cause or effect? Think about it, we've got a society that encourages indebtedness. Interest rates are amazingly low. Everyone, including known bad credit risks, is offered more credit than anybody should rightfully take on. *Investors* eschew businesses that have too much cash, depressing those stocks. We are told over and over again that the only measure of a man is how many toys he has accumulated before he dies. Now, I expect we will hear that debtors are yet another disadvantaged class that the government should help out!

Why do many *not* very bright people take on too much debt? Because they hear from our politicians *that's the American way* and they're greedy. Why do many *very bright* people take on too much debt? Because they want to prove to the world how smart they are, and they're greedy. Who are the instigators of indebtedness? Businesses concerned only with the next quarterly statement. Politicians who want to jump-start the economy before the next election. And, oh yes, the scam artists who always have managed to find the easiest ticket to a few quick bucks. In short, the greedy seekers of quick rewards.

Who pays for all those bad debts? The rest of us -- through higher prices. So, don't fall for it. Debt is for the birds! And debtors -- virtually all of whom did it to themselves -- don't deserve an easy ticket out. We need to toughen up our bankruptcy laws, not make them more lax. These folks aren't a disadvantaged class, they are a self-serving group who tried to "work the system" and failed. Let them earn their keep *the old-fashioned way* -- through work!

Wednesday, August 18, 2004: PAY FOR PUBLIC OFFICIALS. We were visiting friends today in a mid-sized Connecticut town. I looked at the local paper. There were four featured articles on the front page, three of which prominently discussed the pay of public officials. One discussed the extension of the contract of the local Superintendent of Schools whose salary was \$176,000 annually. The second discussed the retirement benefits of the recently fired Assistant Director of Public Works whose salary was \$104K. And finally, there was an article telling us about former Governor John Rowland (who was recently run out of office for taking "gifts from friends") who did the unpardonable ... he made \$26K of capital gains on a stock transaction while he was in office. By the way, it noted his salary as Governor of the wealthiest state in the nation was \$78,000.

So tell me, in such a screwed-up world, who would want an elected job that involves real responsibility and doesn't pay a decent salary? About two decades ago, I spent two years working in the Washington, DC area on a temporary assignment. My employer paid our expenses for an apartment there for my wife and I. (Yes, we paid taxes on those expense receipts.) At the time my salary was about what a Congressman was making. But, they didn't have someone to pick up the cost of a second home in the DC area. We flat-out could not have afforded those additional expenses, added to college tuitions, etc, at that time of our lives. Yet, during those years there was a great outcry from the American public about a lousy 3% increase in Congressional salaries.

If you want quality people to represent you in government -- whether locally, state-wide, or nationally -- how about paying them at least what a corporate middle-manager makes. The alternative is to continually elect and reelect a bunch of pompous multi-millionaires, a few of whom -- if we're lucky -- may have a reasonable understanding of the needs of their constituents.

Friday, August 20, 2004: FLATTER TAXES. Had an interesting discussion today with friends who are regular listeners of a "conservative" talk-show host. We discussed "price gouging" during the Hurricane Charlie emergency in Florida versus free enterprise -- but, that's a topic for another day -- and then moved on to the concept of a national sales tax. They recently heard an interesting proposal ... set the national sales tax at whatever level it needs to be to bring in required revenue -- probably 25-30%. For argument's sake, let's say 25%. It would be a tax on everything. But, everybody would get a refund of 25% times the basic cost of decent living -- say 25% of the first \$30K of income. That way nobody would be taxed on the minimum it takes to keep living with some modicum of dignity ... but, after that all would be taxed equally, based on their consumption.

I think this is a very interesting approach to simplifying the tax structure and eliminating loopholes. There are two concerns, though, that come immediately to mind when proposing the elimination of the existing graduated income tax with numerous deductions. The tax law, and deductions, are used as a mechanism to encourage certain activities and discourage others. For

instance, do we really want to eliminate deductions that encourage home ownership? Isn't individual home ownership a keystone of the *American Way of Life*? The fairness of graduated taxes is an even more controversial subject. One's position on graduated taxes is more likely to be directly proportional to the impact a given tax formula has on their personal situation. But, since the numbers of people at the low-end of the graduated tax scale will always exceed those at the high-end, are we ever likely to have an electorate that will support a flatter tax, to the detriment of their own pocket-books?

There is also a flip-side that needs to be considered. Does a national sales tax -- a tax essentially on consumption -- create its own peculiar problems? Will such a tax lead to severely reduced consumption of all but essentials? If so, what will be the impact on our manufacturing and service industries? Could such a change ruin an already not particularly robust economy? Difficult questions. No easy answer.

Sunday, August 22, 2004: PRICE GOUGING. From the Florida Division of Consumer Services website:

- In the wake of natural disaster, essentials -- such as food, ice, generators, lanterns, lumber, etc. -- may be in short supply. Charging exorbitant or excessive prices for these and other necessities following a disaster is not only unethical, it's illegal.
- Under Sections 501.160 and 501.205 Florida Statutes, it is illegal to charge unconscionable prices for goods or services following a declared state of emergency.
- Individuals or businesses found guilty of price-gouging could face fines up to \$1,000 per violation.

Even following the natural disaster that was *Charlie*, so-called "conservatives" are ranting that this law is an affront to the *Free Enterprise System* and infringes on the freedom of those who were prudent, smart, or wealthy-enough to locally "corner-the-market" on some essential supplies. They own all that water, or gasoline, or whatever and if people don't want to pay their jacked-up "going" price -- tough, they can go without. It's their own damn fault!

I am a person who believes that open markets and free enterprise are, in general, the best long-term mechanisms for creating a prosperous economy and a nation of which all its citizens can be proud. But note that caveat -- I said *in general*. There are exceptions, and where you draw the line between the approach advocated by *liberal pinko commies* and *right-wing crazies* must necessarily be a subjective issue -- and face facts, that line must be drawn, for rational human beings cannot accept either extreme.

Clearly the nature of the threat we are facing is a key determinant of where to draw such lines. If during World War II, instead of rationing and price controls, our government gave hoarders the "freedom" to hold back war materials for sale to the highest bidder, would we now perhaps be ruled by nazis? Yes, there are shades of gray here -- and the State of Florida has placed three subjective aspects into its law. When do you declare a *state of emergency*? What are *necessities*? And, what are *unconscionable prices*? This is why we need to elect prudent, thoughtful, self-effacing and honest people to lead our local, state, and national governments. For they are the ones we task to answer these questions on a case-by-case basis.

But, I don't think this is simply a political/economic issue. It is also a moral/religious issue. And, I'm not talking my religion or your religion. I'm talking about that bit of moral/religious common ground that permeates all of humanity -- *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*. If our government and legal system condones "screwing" people just because they have become vulnerable as a result of a natural catastrophe, where do we draw the line? Do we condone robbery or even murder simply because the victim is weaker than the perpetrator? I sure hope to God our society has progressed beyond that level.

Tuesday, August 24, 2004: THE PLACE. *The Place* we had dinner last night was unique, and worth writing about, even if this sounds a little like an ad. Yes, that's the name of it -- *The Place* and it's in a small town up on the coast of Connecticut called Guilford.

The Place is an outdoor restaurant -- so it's strictly summer only -- where the tables are those big old wire spools and the seats are tree stumps. Though situated on US 1 (the 300-year-old Boston Post Road), it is practically surrounded by trees and woods. We all had the *house* specialties: roasted clams, roasted lobster, roasted corn. The food was served on the roasting tray or on paper plates. The *fixin's* were non-existent. Beverages were strictly BYOB -- most everyone arriving with a cooler full of beer. The food was GREAT ... the ambience UNIQUE and *The Place* is certainly "family friendly."

So, if you're ever in that neck-of-the-woods, stop for dinner at *The Place* and "Put Your Rump to the Stump" as their T-shirts so eloquently proclaim. Enjoy!

Wednesday, August 25, 2004: BUY AMERICAN? We're thinking of buying a new car. I've always felt that -- all else equal -- I would try to *Buy American*. In a lot of things, that has become downright impossible. But, with a big ticket item like a car, I've been pretty good about it. Once in the last 50 years I bought a Ford product built in Germany. All the others were *Big 3* assembled in a Detroit suburb.

As usual we're looking for a mid-priced, roomy four-door sedan. I'm just not ready to spend \$40K, \$60K, or \$80K on a car! Our priorities are decent mileage because we travel a lot, room for a long day's drive with four somewhat over-sized adults, and luggage space for same. There aren't many choices given those criteria. But, I noticed a new one this time around -- the Kia Amanti. After being very pleasantly surprised by the car, I started thinking about my historic *Buy American* stance. Kia Amanti: Korean company, built in Korea ... definitely foreign. Buick LeSabre: American company, built in the US ... definitely American. Toyota Avalon: Japanese company, built in Kentucky. Chrysler 300: German company masquerading as an American Big-3, built in Canada. Volvo S80: American company (Ford), built in Sweden ... and the list goes on like that in other car categories as well. Maybe the *Buy American* mantra has become meaningless. Is that Toyota more American than that Chrysler? Do I have a choice other than the Buick? Maybe my *Buy American* approach to automobiles has finally ended.

Well, I know a lot of self-proclaimed conservatives and many staunch union members who would be questioning my patriotism for saying that. It's funny what strange bedfellows money creates. But, the older I get, the more I really believe that *free trade is a key element of free enterprise*. We Americans are ingenious in finding new ways to make a buck when the old ways

play themselves out. We've done it successfully for over two centuries, and I can't imagine why we won't keep on doing it. Still, somehow I'm not sure I'm ready for a Korean car.

Sunday, August 29, 2004: TITLE IX. During the last two weeks in Athens, an important political point was proven. Make laws for the long-term good of all the people, and then be patient enough to let them work. Yes, I'm talking about 1972's *Title IX* which mandated equality of opportunity for women in education -- including *Women's Team Sports*. And, boy did we see those girl's bring home the gold -- soccer, basketball, softball, etc. *Pun intended!*

Think about it. It's a logical law. Yet, it's been severely criticized over the decades. To many it's a joke. But, it *has* worked -- for our daughter almost a quarter century ago, and for millions of others since. With the end of the Athens Olympics today, no one can deny the success of Title IX. Maybe even the *Fort Myers News-Press* sports editor, who told us he won't print women's basketball scores because "who cares about girl's sports," will begin to print UConn scores. Or is it that he just doesn't like Yankees.

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