

The Style Invitational

Week CLIX: Cheap Tricks



BY BOB STAAKE FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Next time you have your sewer line snaked, save the clog. It makes an excellent toupee.

Put four slices of hard salami on buttered bread, refrigerate overnight. Next day, remove the salami and enjoy a “smell only” sandwich. Repeat for five more days. On the seventh day, the salami is yours!

This Week’s Contest was suggested by Brendan O’Byrne of Regina, Saskatchewan. Come up with extreme cost-conserving measures for these difficult economic times, as in the bread example above, which won a Florida newspaper contest. The more miserly the better. First-prize winner gets a promotional sample of Kosher Pet Food (“Approved by Top Breeders, Not to Mention the Almighty”). It is endorsed by the Chicago Rabbinical Council. First runner-up wins the tacky but estimable Style Invitational Loser Pen. Other runners-up win the coveted Style Invitational Loser T-shirt. Honorable mentions get the mildly sought-after Style Invitational bumper sticker. Send your entries via fax to 202-334-4312, or by e-mail to losers@washpost.com.

U.S. mail entries are no longer accepted. Deadline is Monday, Feb. 17. All entries must include the week number of the contest and your name, postal address and telephone number. E-mail entries must include the week number in the subject field. Contests will be judged on the basis of humor and originality. All entries become the property of The Washington Post.

Entries may be edited for taste or content. Results will be published in four weeks. No purchase required for entry. Employees of The Washington Post, and their immediate relatives, are not eligible for prizes. Pseudonymous entries will be disqualified. The revised title for next week’s contest is by Seth Brown of Williamstown, Mass.

Report from Week CLV, in which we asked you to come up with creative new questions about life. We thought this would be hard, and were surprised and delighted to find ourselves inundated with entries—more than 5,000, total. Alas, what we naively thought might be a spasm of creativity turned out to be a spasm of soulless larceny. Why do people build their houses outdoors? How do they stick the Teflon to the pan? When the snow melts, where does the white go? Why is there Braille on drive-up ATMs? How can anything be new *and* improved? Note to those Steal Invitationalists: If your entry contained more than one such chestnut, we roasted the entire list on an open fire.

◆ Fifth Runner-Up: **Why can’t you pick your friend’s nose?** (Michael Levy, Silver Spring)

◆ Fourth Runner-Up: **If the Chinese revere old age so much, why is it that if you’re past your sixties you won’t find your birthday on those Chinese restaurant place mats?** (J.F. Martin, Naples, Fla.)

◆ Third Runner-Up: **If time travel is impossible, how did I know this would win third runner-up?** (Chuck Smith, Woodbridge)

◆ Second Runner-Up: **Why is an older woman younger than an old woman?** (Gail Gottlieb, Takoma Park)

◆ First Runner-Up: **Why is there a picture of a baby on the package of toilet paper, when a baby is the only person who doesn’t use it?** (Debbie Johnson, Montgomery Village)

◆ And the winner of the second bubblegum-wad-looking purse: **Why should I question authority?** (John T. Durkin, Ardmore, Pa.)

◆ Honorable Mentions: **If you multiply two even numbers you get an even number, and if you multiply an odd and an even, you get an even number. The only way to get an odd number is to multiply two odds. So why aren’t there more even than odd numbers?** (Jeanne Mussig, Herndon)

Why is it that foreigners in the movies can master complex sentences in English but revert to their native language for the simplest words, as in: “Si, señor, I can help you escape from the corrupt police. Just pay me \$500, por favor.” (Teri Chism, Winchester)

If toast always falls with the butter side down, if you don’t butter it, will it spin wildly and land on its edge? And if you butter both sides, will it explode? (Seth Brown, Williamstown, Mass.)

Why don’t they call it a teethbrush? (Michael Landauer, Bethesda)

Why does anyone ever say “Needless to say”? (Michael Patterson, Alexandria)

Why doesn’t “umlaut” have one? (John Karwoski, Pottstown, Pa.)

Where do you write a reminder to yourself that you need more Post-it notes? (Michael Clem, McLean)

Before they made sliced bread, what was the best thing? (Mariann Simms, Wetumpka, Ala.)

Why is it that sex is used to sell everything except beds and mattresses? (Elizabeth Andros Gaston, Ligonier, Pa.)

Did the guy who invented patents have to get a patent? (Mariann Simms, Wetumpka, Ala.)

What happens to rice cakes when they pass their expiration date? (Brigid Cleary Davis, Camp Springs)

Shouldn’t Chap Stick be called Anti-Chap Stick? (Adina S. Wadsworth, Washington)

How do you punish masochists? (Adina S. Wadsworth, Washington)

What is is? (W.J. Clinton, New York) (Brad Suter, Charlottesville; Mark Lynner, Sterling)

What would a toilet look like if our knees bent in the other direction? (Gordon Labow, Glenelg)

Why were the Three Musketeers always fighting with swords? Did they lose their muskets? (Mark Lynner, Sterling)

If the Flash can run faster than light, why does he keep his costume folded up inside his signet ring, instead of just running home and changing? (Doug Palmer’s 13-year-old daughter, Annapolis)

Why is “phonetic” spelled with a p? (Tom Fonner, Montclair)

Who coined the phrase “to coin a phrase”? (Brendan J. O’Byrne, Regina, Saskatchewan)

Why did they name Ramses condoms after the pharaoh who fathered 100 children? (Brendan J. O’Byrne, Regina, Saskatchewan)

If we have a pair of pants and a pair of scissors, why don’t we have a pair of bras? (Kyle Whitney, Vienna)

What if a mime really were trapped in a glass box? Wouldn’t that be great? (Anne Skove, Dendron, Va.)

Where do they send Siberian criminals? (Barry Goldsmith, New York)

If Darth Vader is Luke and Leia’s father and he built C3PO, then why in Episode V didn’t he know . . . oh, never mind. (Robert Carlisle, Arlington)

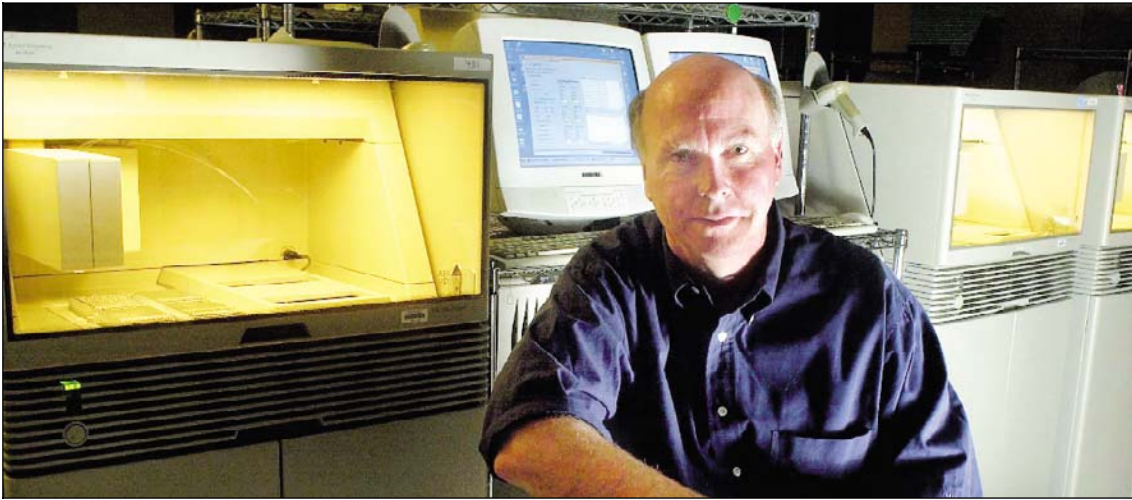
Shouldn’t “brevity” be a one-syllable word? (Bill Morris, Washington)

What do you use to get out club soda stains? (Andrew Prodromou, Mountain View, Calif.)

Why is the winning Style Invitational entry never as funny as the Honorable Mentions? (Chris Kaufman, Glenn Dale)

Next Week: Celebri-ties

Richard Thompson is away. Richard’s Poor Almanac will resume when he returns.



FILE PHOTO/BY TIM SHAFFER—REUTERS

Genome-mapper J. Craig Venter: Trying to determine how few genes are needed to sustain life.

‘Going for Perfection’

CREATION, From F1

evolutionary future. He spins tales of artificial chromosomes that will enhance life for one generation, then be replaced—or upgraded like software—for the next. He waxes on about germinal choice technology that could possibly give us longer life spans, sexier characteristics, smarter babies and other heritable traits such as greater height, greener eyes and perfect pitch—as well as enhanced aspects of personality and temperament.

In a phone interview, Stock says, “We are forced to adapt ourselves to the designed environment we are creating around us. This is really a transition for our species.”

To hear some scientists talk, though, this is not so much about the Evolution of the Species as it is about the Evolution of the Self.

“Going for perfection was something I always thought you should do,” the godfather of modern genetics, James D. Watson, told the Toronto Globe and Mail. “Who wants an ugly baby?”

Bye-bye baldness? Vamoose Viagra? Is it the dawn of disease-free teens, sexually zestful old folks and century-plus life spans for all? Not-so-distant futurists speak offhandedly of transitional humans (or transhumans) and posthumans, of the polyamorous orgy of microbiology, nanotechnology and information technology.

Not so fast, say some scientists and theologians. Just because you *can* create new life doesn’t mean you *should* create new life.

“The system we belong to,” says George Fisher, a geologist at Johns Hopkins, “has emerged from a long, slow process of evolution in which the rate of innovation—the emergence of new varieties of all organisms in response to mutations and sexual recombination—has been roughly comparable to the rate of selection, that is, the gradual disappearance of less competitive varieties.”

Evolutionary theory, Fisher says, holds that “if the rate of innovation greatly exceeds the rate of selection, an otherwise stable system can change drastically and unpredictably.”

For several million years, Fisher says, humans were pretty much concerned with staying warm, scrounging for food and avoiding molten lava. “For the first 2 or 4 million years we were barely hanging on the edge. Somewhere in the last 500 years we’ve crossed a barrier, and going along in the old sense is no longer the issue.”

The question, according to Fisher and others, is both simple and complex: Do we continue to focus on ourselves—our genes, our lusts, our vanities, our longevity?

Or do we turn our attention, and godlike talents, elsewhere—to the salvation of the planet, for example?

“We’ve evolved in an ecological system in which we had to focus on ourselves,” Fisher sighs. “We’ve gotten past that.”

Prometheus and Friends

It all seems so new. It’s not.

From Day One, humankind has seized its own evolution—sometimes with glorious results, such as improved sanitation, cured diseases, ameliorated pain, saved lives.

Sometimes with vainglorious—and disastrous—outcomes, such as genocide, the “unsinkable” Titanic, Chernobyl and weapons of mass destruction. The high-flying, fast-falling mythic Icarus also comes to mind—using a pair of wax wings fashioned by his techno-tinkerer father, Daedalus.

Ancient Greeks also sang of Prometheus, the Titan who stole fire from Zeus to give to man. Zeus, for his part, sent man a gift—Pandora. And, through her, a whole box of troubles.

The ancients, explains Victoria Pedrick, an associate professor of classics at Georgetown University, “had an interest in gifts.”

Gifts from the gods, she says, “are deceptive. Inside of them are dangerous consequences. Their contents are powerful.”

These days Prometheus is lifted up as a hero. Here’s a blurb from a New York publishing company: “Founded in 1969, Prometheus Books took its name from the courageous Greek god who gave fire to humans, lighting the way to reason, intelligence, and independence.”

The Judeo-Christian tradition uses a similar story. Adam and Eve were warned by God not to eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But the serpent told the nudist couple that if they did eat the fruit, “ye shall be as gods.”

By eating the fruit, the couple seized part of their own evolution. They hoped to determine their own destiny. “By craving to be more, man becomes less,” writes Saint Augustine in “The City of God.” “and by aspiring to be self-sufficing, he fell away from Him Who truly suffices him.”

There are other instances in the Bible of mankind outreaching its grasp. The tower of Babel, for instance. “Now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do,” God said. So He put a stop to the tower-building.

Through the ages, cultures have recognized the pros and cons of playing god. In eastern Europe, the tales of the Golem and Pinocchio are stories of man creating life. From this tradition comes the cautionary novel, published in 1818: “Frankenstein” by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley.

Inspired by the experiments of Luigi Galvani, an Italian scientist in the 1790s who used electricity to force the nerves of dead frogs to twitch, Shelley crafted a brilliant tale of human overreaching.

“It was the secrets of heaven and earth that I desired to learn,” says narrator Victor Frankenstein, “and whether it was the outward substance of things, or the inner spirit of nature and the mysterious soul of man that occupied me, still my inquiries were directed to the metaphysical, or, in its highest sense, the physical secrets of the world.”

Frankenstein, like scientists of today, purports to be motivated by the best intentions. “I entered with the greatest diligence into the search of the philosopher’s stone and the elixir of life; but the latter soon obtained my undivided attention. Wealth was an inferior object; but what glory would attend the discovery, if I could banish disease from the human frame, and render man invulnerable to any but a violent death!”

But hubris takes over. He proclaims: “I will pioneer a new way, explore unknown powers, and unfold to the world the deepest mysteries of creation.”

Shelley wrote the novel in response to her times, a period of immense scientific discovery. All around her, people believed that science and technology would bring great change to the world and usher in a period of prolonged prosperity.

Shelley wasn’t so sure. “Frightful must it be,” she wrote in an introduction to a later edition, “for supremely frightful would be the effect of any human endeavor to mock the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the World.”

The subtitle of her novel: “The Modern Prometheus.”

A Century’s Achievement

It all came together in the 20th century:

Radical scientific advances, rampant existentialism blended with the godless nihilism born of world wars and unparalleled vanity from the Hollywood dream factory.

During that long-ago century, life on Earth became so comfortable for most people in developed countries that thoughts of a better afterlife faded into a blue TV mist. Because many pains were relieved, infirmities overcome, diseases cured, doctors and pharmacologists turned their attention to the enhancement of humanity, making the good life better.

The elitist eugenics movement, dedicated to “improving” humankind by better breeding, gained a foothold in America in the late 19th century. More than 30 states passed laws in favor of forced sterilization under certain circumstances. It’s estimated that more than 60,000 people underwent the procedure. The horrors of the practice were driven home when the Nazis used eugenics to attempt to create a master race.

In the post-World War II West, attention turned toward self-augmentation. These days an industry has arisen from medical or technological self-improvement—from plastic and Lasik surgery to steroids to vitamin therapy. In the past 10 years, according to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons, the number of cosmetic surgery patients in this country has tripled. In 2001 7.5 million people underwent some form of cosmetic plastic surgery. That year: 125,000 Americans had their faces lifted, 220,000 received breast enhancements and 275,000 received liposuction. It’s no wonder that we have come to believe a long, happy, healthy, handsome pain-free life is our inalienable right.

See CREATION, F3, Col. 1

BRIDGE | Frank Stewart

Both sides vulnerable

NORTH			
♠	3		
♥	8 6 5 3		
♦	Q 10 7 4		
♣	8 7 6 3		
WEST		EAST	
♠	9 8 5 2	♠	7 6 4
♥	4	♥	A Q J 9 2
♦	K 9 8 6 3	♦	5
♣	J 10 4	♣	Q 9 5 2
SOUTH (D)			
♠	A K Q J 10		
♥	K 10 7		
♦	A J 2		
♣	A K		

The bidding:
South 2 ♣ Pass
West Pass
North 2 ♦ NT
East Pass
Opening lead: ♥ 4

to make 3NT, I’d never get a decent meal.”

Oedipus saw a chance: He had to force West to give dummy a diamond trick.

“After I win West’s trump exit at the third trick, I draw trumps, take the A-K of clubs and lead the ace and jack of diamonds. West must duck, and I win with the queen, ruff a club and lead another diamond at Trick 11. West must win and give dummy the 10 of diamonds.”

“And what if West shifts to a diamond at Trick 3?” growled the Sphinx.

“No problem,” replied Oedipus. “I win with the ace and play as before.”

The monster, enraged, threw itself off a cliff.

“It was a complex deal,” Oedipus observed. “Perhaps one day it’ll be known as the Oedipus complex.”

© 2003, Tribune Media Services