

As bad as ear hair

By Dan Hammes

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Tie fast or suffocate.

That is just one of the many lessons I've learned with age. I would like to claim such things as evidence of wisdom but I there is a difference between experience and knowledge. That is, we learn things from experience but that has more to do with age than wisdom.

Like the ear hair.

There was a time when the only attention my ears received from the barber was when he would comment on how much they bled after he nicked them. Which is why dad stopped cutting hair. Stitches cost more than haircuts.

But nowadays my barber, a trained professional, actually cuts my ears on purpose. Not the ears necessarily, but the hair that grows there. And this process takes more than just a little time. The point being that I'm not necessarily wiser now that hair sprouts from my ears, but it is a sign I do have some experience in life.

It is that very experience with which I ciphered what I watched at the grocery store last summer. There was a young guy in front of me. You know the type. Young twenties, fit and strong, tank top; in his prime without even trying. The type who can take all the time in the world tying their shoes because they can breathe and tie at the same time.

The point is I'm standing in line waiting to pay for my groceries watching the kid in front of me. Watching him pay for his groceries with one of those welfare cards. One of those cards that replaced food stamps a few years ago. One of those cards the state gives to people who need help.

And, apparently, to other people.

Now it is true, if this story were really, really good I would tell how he was buying steak and lobster. You know, the real expensive stuff that mere taxpayers cannot afford to eat. But that is not what he was buying. Besides, that's not the point.

The point is he is young, healthy, strong as a mule n and on the dole.

And not the least bit embarrassed about it.

Sure, it's possible. Perhaps there is more to the story. Perhaps it is true that I am simply a cheap, miserable, miserly curmudgeon who does not understand. Perhaps the fit young man had just come off the job and rushed to the store to help a neighbor who really did need taxpayer support.

But experience says different.

Experience tells me this kid was shackled up with some young cute girl. And, I figured, the young cute girl had a young cute kid. The young cute kid may belong to the guy I saw at the grocery store. Or not. Those relationships tend to be somewhat fluid these days. But what was certain, is that the welfare card belonged to the young cute girl. The state gave it to her because she had the young cute kid.

I thought of grocery-store incident last week while chatting with someone recently. That

someone was relating his grocery store story. Seems he encountered a relative at the store who was boasting about his good fortune. Not only did the state provide subsidized housing for him and his girlfriend, but because there was a baby involved, the state gave them money to buy groceries too. Cheese, juice n all sorts of stuff he wouldn't usually eat but, darn, it was so good. Better, even, since someone else was paying for it.

And yes, for those keeping score at home, this kid is perfectly healthy and has a job.

Then there is the couple that has been together for years. A grandmother told me about this pair. They have children but are not married. Through some magic of the welfare system, the state pays for medical care for the kids. Has for several years now. This a hard-working family with a pretty good income and they would never dream of shoplifting or cheating a neighbor.

But they'll accept welfare from the state.

When they don't need it.

Without qualm.

The point is (with the possible exception of the young buck in the grocery store who I did not know) these are not bad people. But they've been raised in a time when taking welfare is accepted. And common. Most people know folks who take from the system when they really don't need the help.

And what a change that is.

To a person, these kids' parents would have been mortified to accept charity. They would have taken a third job, worked weekends, cut firewood, swept streets n anything to support themselves without being a burden on anyone else. Yet in one generation n perhaps two n all that has changed.

Nowadays folks on welfare boast loudly about it in grocery stores.

While I have enough experience to have witnessed the change first-hand, I don't pretend to have the wisdom to understand it.

But I do know, like ear hair, it is not a good thing.

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