

PUZZLING OVER PUZZLES

by Fred Hobbs

Life itself can be just one big puzzling situation. Why am I here? What is it all about? Why do so many people commit such outrageous acts? Remember the famous contemporary quote from an African-American man named Rodney King beaten by Los Angeles police after a high-speed auto chase: "Why can't we all get along?"

As the king in the fictionalized novel based on the real life Anna and King of Siam, observed: "Is a puzzlement!" Although tempted to delve into a serious philosophical discussion of puzzling facts and foibles of humanity, to fulfill this writing assignment, let's confine the subject to a more common and personal application of puzzles.

Puzzles don't like me. My brain just doesn't want to be teased or twisted. I've tried in vain to get those colored squares lined up properly on a Rubik's cube. Embarrassingly, my eight-year old granddaughter can do it, in addition to beating me in a matter of seconds in assembling correctly an ordinary picture puzzle. As a man of words, not pictures or abstractions, I do fairly well at crossword puzzles unless they deal with too many contemporary entertainment figures such as rockers and rappers. But math-related puzzles? Not a chance.

I'm not even very good at figuring out "who done it?" in detective and crime dramas. That's why I've always been a fan of "Columbo," the character portrayed by Peter Falk in a vintage TV series (still seen on cable re-runs.) Viewers know the identity of the killer near the start of the show; the fun is watching Columbo turn up the clues that inevitably trap the villain.

Fortunately, I was more successful in solving a puzzle in real life, as part of a very important, perhaps life-changing exam: the college deferment test given to draft-eligible male students during the Korean War. My dorm roommates and I were among the approximately one hundred students filling a lecture hall at the University of Colorado in Boulder to take the test. Pass the test and maintain a C-plus or above average and your obligatory military service was postponed until graduation. Flunk and you are probably Korea-bound...pronto! A score of 70 percent or above was a passing grade.

The test covered English comprehension, language skills and grammar. Fine for me. But it also contained a passel of math questions and worst of all what might be classed as a "special acuity" section. Pictured were four or five separate printed patterns representing un-folded boxes. The student had to choose in each illustration from four choices what the box would look like when assembled. I tried mentally to cut out the pattern and assemble it in my mind. Sweat covered my brow. Finally, I decided to concentrate on making sure I did my best on the other parts of the test and just flip a mental coin on the "battle of the boxes."

Based on the test parameters, I guessed correctly on most of the box illustrations. I eked out a not-to-brag about 74 on the overall test. One of my roommates scored a 69 and received his draft notice just before the end of the semester. He joined the Navy; two years later (after graduation) I was in Army basic training starting my two-year obligation. And, now in the

process of wrapping gifts for Christmas or birthdays, I find that I still can't assemble a box, mentally or otherwise!