

Comma Quandary
Sherry Strickland
Essay

Comma Quandary

To comma, or not to comma: that is the quandary.

Whether 'tis needed in a bind to stutter

The stings and narrows of sentence fracture

Or to grasp bravely a sea of splice,

Or thereby mend them? To ply: to keep;

For sure; and by a leap to say we blend

The pause-ache and the myriad tongue locks

That grammar is slave to, 'tis a consideration

Desperately to be gist'd. To ply, to keep;

To keep: possibly even to fragment: yes, that is the real flub;

For in that keep of pause or rush to ply what real worth might
perish

When we have shifted pass this minuscule toil,

That gives us pause: that's just subjugation

That makes servitude of writing life;

For who can endure the quips and edits of that brutal red pen

The redactor though strong, the scarlet letters are insolence.

The slangs of dependent texts, the laughs lols,

The *acronymity* of prose and its spurs

That people mean but can't spell out,

When they themselves will finally employ the period

With a keypad, a stylus, or dare say a pen? who could bother,

To strike commas or dare to bear a period in such a busy life,

But that the threat of an editors mark,

Keeps grade point averages below the norms

No coed reforms, perplexing at will

And breaks up post collegiate goals and vexes with post
baccalaureate fears

These apply and often are noticed though we know not of?

Thus conscientious is an adjective worth considering;

Albeit a drudge at most coed affiliates

It's vomitus when you give it a think,

And employ half a brain of occasional cerebrum

So often we turn a blind eye,

And forget that overwhelming oppressor. Tread softly!

Play fair, oh scribe! Agraphia, is prison

Let all my sentences be completely grammar-membered.

“Butter Beans”

Essay

Beverly Carte

. Shortly after moving south, I started hearing ongoing debates about the best butter beans to plant. People started asking me if I liked them and what I thought. When I listened closer to the discussions about butter beans, I started hearing terms like speckled, brown, black and purple and became really confused. Then they brought up green lima beans, which added to my dilemma. What were they talking about?

When my mom said we were having butter beans, she meant that she was going to cook the large dried lima beans with lots of butter. It was clear that I needed to do more research, before weighing in on the matter. I opened up my laptop and started searching through some of the seed catalogues that I had ordered from in the past. Butter beans have the same shape as green lima beans, but there are several varieties that supposedly have different tastes, textures and sizes.

The first time I ate local butter beans, I discovered that they have an entirely different taste and texture than both the dried lima beans and the green lima beans that I was familiar with. Now which is better?

In my opinion, we are more likely to choose what we are most familiar with. However, as with anything we grow, the nurturing, harvesting, processing and cooking all affect the final result. You can buy the best seed and still have a bad harvest. If the weather does not cooperate and you do not plant, water, fertilize, harvest, season and cook them correctly, you may be disappointed. This too is subjective. So, I say, whether you plant them or buy them from the local farm stand, try them all and enjoy the fruits of your labor.

Psssst — Can We Talk About ICE?

(Essay)

Charles Bins

Psssst — Can We Talk About ICE?

Conversing with friends “on the other side”

In today’s politically-charged environment, conversations about current events can become testy and even lead to broken relationships. Yet given the turbulent state of democracy, meaningful conversations with those who may disagree with us are more important than ever.

I live in a “purple” state in a red-leaning county so many of my close friends live “on the other side” of the political spectrum. The default position among most of those in my community is to simply eschew political discussions to avoid putting relationships at risk. However, I believe respectful dialogue, where possible, is a better approach.

The goal should not be to win an argument, but rather to better understand what the other is thinking. It is unlikely that you will change someone’s mind in any single conversation, and it may not be possible no matter how many conversations. While you can provide evidence supporting your point of view, the other person must process that information along with what they already know. If reasonable, they may start to understand the middle ground. This is especially true if you have been listening closely in a non-judgmental way.

Listening is key. Then ask questions to clarify what you don’t understand — and seriously consider their point of view. Unfortunately, this is easier said than done when so much of our news is subjective, and people tend to get their news from sources with which they already agree (i.e., Confirmation Bias¹). A mix of news and opinion sources helps give a 360-degree perspective. You may learn that your preferred news source omits certain facts. You may also hear things that seem categorically false. Yet listening to other channels expands your vision, and with that your ability to understand and influence others.

Last week, I heard a radio talk show host say, “Protestors want to protect illegal aliens who are rapists, child molesters and murderers.” Unfortunately, this black-and-white rhetoric demonizes anyone who takes issue with ICE tactics and creates obstacles to everyday dialogue. For this reason, we must call out media distortions and omissions on both sides.



Others will be much more likely to listen to us if we listen to them first.

Image credit: Photo by [ev](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Others will be much more likely to listen to us if we listen to them first. ICE has, in fact, taken dangerous criminals off the street. But they have also deported citizens without due process and killed those who have interfered with their operations. One does not “forgive” the other.

Regarding the killing of Renee Good, the Department of Justice’s policy on the use of deadly force states: *“Firearms may not be discharged solely to disable moving vehicles. Specifically, firearms may not be discharged at a moving vehicle unless: 1) a person in the vehicle is threatening the officer or another person with deadly force by means other than the vehicle; or 2) the vehicle is operated in a manner that threatens to cause death or serious physical injury to the officer or others, and no other objectively reasonable means of defense appear to exist, which includes moving out of the path of the vehicle.”*²

Given the above, it is useful to pose questions when we engage others: Did the officer think he was in danger when he fired? If you knew he had been dragged by a vehicle more than 100 yards last summer after firing a taser at a Mexican driver,³ would that make him more or **3 of 3** less likely to a.), fire or b.), put himself in harm’s way? Was he seriously injured? Why did he continue to fire through the side window?

To its credit, NPR recently did a piece titled, “How Minneapolis killings look from Trump country.” The story provided a window into the conservative mindset and showed how personal experience can shape one’s opinions: A man from the U.K. noted his mother was deported after 9/11 because she had not kept up with her immigration paperwork. “Paperwork is important,” he said.⁴

The bottom line is we can wield greater influence when we take others’ views (and news sources) into account. Reality is messy, so we must reach beyond black-and-white thinking to understand truth in all its color. That is the groundwork for meaningful dialogue, so we can begin, one person at a time, to forge a more perfect union.

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Footnotes

(1) For more about Confirmation Bias see: Modgil S, Singh RK, Gupta S, Dennehy D. “A Confirmation Bias View on Social Media Induced Polarisation During Covid-19.” *Inf Syst Front*. 2021 Nov 20:1-25. doi: 10.1007/s10796-021-10222-9. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8604707/> Accessed 2/1/26.

(2) Justice Manual, U.S. Department of Justice, 1-16.200 “Use of Deadly Force and Prohibited Restraint Techniques,” <https://www.justice.gov/jm/1-16000-department-justice-policy-use-force#1-16.200>, Accessed 2/1/26.

(3) Langfitt, Frank. “How the Minneapolis killings look from Trump country,” NPR, January 29, 2026. <https://www.npr.org/2026/01/29/g-s1-107734/minneapolis-alex-pretti-renee-macklin-good-ice-border-patrol-trump>. Accessed 2/1/26.

(4) Bogle-Burroughs, Nicholas. “Court Records Reveal Details of ICE Agent’s Previous Dragging Incident,” *New York Times*, January 8, updated January 20, 2026.

IT'S ALL IN YOUR HEAD

Literary Arts – Essay

by Eric Mens

IT'S ALL IN YOUR HEAD

“The happiness of your life depends on the quality of your thoughts.” Marcus Aurelius, Roman Emperor (7 March 161 – 17 March 180) and Stoic philosopher. The complete meditative translation is: “The happiness of your life depends upon the quality of your thoughts: therefore, guard accordingly, and take care that you entertain no notions unsuitable to virtue and reasonable nature.”

I studied philosophy, including Stoicism, during my first stint in college after leaving the Army. Aurelius reached this point of wisdom through observation and contemplation of human behavior. Reflecting on my 76 years on earth, I appreciate his shared meditation even more.

Stoicism teaches us to focus on what we can control and accept what we cannot. Through managing our thoughts and emotions, we determine our actions and build our character. Not to overplay a popular (but minimizing) idiom—“It’s all in your head!”

Indeed, it is. And, as most of us know, our heads can be a dangerous place to live. Ultimately, what we choose to do with our thoughts and how we put them into play becomes a personal odyssey.

The journey to improve the quality of our lives and find happiness requires *discovering and applying* the right tools to improve the quality of our thoughts and, thus, our actions. Many people cannot do this on their own. At that point, finding the right tools and learning to use them appropriately and at the right time requires the assistance of a trained, empathetic therapist.

Most scientists and health professionals agree that the prefrontal cortex, the part of the human brain behind the forehead, is among the last regions of the brain to mature. According to the National Institutes of Health, most people have fully developed frontal lobes by age 25. Young adults (ages 18 to mid-20s) continue to experience changes in their decision-making and emotional regulation in their early 20s, with full development and maturation not occurring until their mid-

to late 20s. This explains why certain human traits, such as *reasoning*, *long-range planning*, and *impulse control*, aren't fully operational during adolescence. I can attest to that.

As a child and into my early youth, I struggled to survive the hazards of a toxic family environment. My father's traumatic experiences as a prisoner of war in Nagasaki's notorious Camp 2B during World War II played out in the way he treated my older sister and me. He did not speak of his experiences until he shared them with me shortly before he died. He never acknowledged or confronted his demons. He did not know how. Still, before he died, he apologized to me for how he had treated me, his oldest son.

Reflecting on my early years, I realize that the many hours I spent in forced confinement and deprivation, isolated from other family members, gave me ample time to contemplate my existence. As young as I was, those contemplations centered on what I might have done to deserve such treatment from my father and stepmothers (my father remarried several times).

I questioned my existence and why my birth mother had abandoned me. I was confused, and oftentimes both angry and sad. The family environment that existed at the time shaped my self-image as unworthy, a simpleton, and weak-willed. I fought hard against the judgments my father laid on me. I learned to hide behind a smile and to disassociate when circumstances became unbearable. I strove to excel academically to show him how wrong he was and to earn his respect. Still, doing so did not affect how he ultimately viewed and treated me.

After starting high school, I moved in with other families and friends. Once I was away from my toxic home life, I discovered meaningful friendships through scouting and sports. Participating in soccer, cross-country, and track helped build my confidence and self-esteem.

In 1967, when I turned 17, I enlisted in the Army. Having no place to live and no idea how to apply to college or what to do after graduation, I found the Army's promise of "three hots and a

cot” reassuring. My budding confidence and self-esteem served me well during Basic Combat Training and helped me earn rank early.

My faith in the Army was shattered when I was denied entry into Officer Candidate School because of my Dutch citizenship. When offered the opportunity to attend nursing school, I instead chose to go to Vietnam immediately after graduating from Medic Training. I was angry at having been denied the chance to become an officer and thereby elevate my status in my father’s eyes.

Serving as a medic in Vietnam during 1967 and 1968 turned my world upside down. I quickly revived the dissociation skill I had practiced as a child to protect myself in bad situations. I steeled and trained my mind to distance myself from the worst. I would quickly learn that, in Vietnam, those skills only went so far.

As a medic, I had easy access to a variety of drugs, including codeine. I became increasingly dependent upon them to soothe my nerves and quell my anxiety. For a time, they provided refuge from the war. Soon enough, the more I took, the more I needed. I became an addicted, nervous, and paranoid mess. Nonetheless, I worked hard to maintain an appearance of normalcy and do the job expected of me. I never faltered in that regard.

In a short time, I came to hate the behavior of some of our soldiers. I hated what the war was doing to Vietnamese civilians. I hated the injustice and very nature of war—the destruction, the blood, the gore, the cries of the wounded, and the body bags. At one point, in a sudden uncontrollable burst of anger, I tried to kill a fellow trooper. I blamed him for the death of my friend, Ernie. Thankfully, another medic quickly subdued me and took away my gun.

I was 19, as was Ernie when he was killed. We had celebrated our birthdays one month apart that summer of ’68. I hated myself for what I had become—a monster in my own mind and body.

When I was preparing for discharge in 1970, withdrawing from drugs was the hardest and most physically painful thing I have ever done. I had to be ‘clean’ to be honorably discharged. Thankfully, my friend Craig was in the same situation as I was.

Craig could have been my twin—not only did we share the same birthday, but he was my size and weight, had the same hair color and mustache, and wore glasses. He had also been a combat medic in Vietnam. Thankfully, our regular duty assignment was in the battalion medical clinic, and the other soldiers hardly noticed our absence from the daily work parties during our weeks-long cleansing. We helped each other through the excruciating physical pain, hallucinations, nausea, vomiting, and dehydration until we were ‘clean’ to pass our discharge physical.

Withdrawal from drugs convinced me that my mind was strong and I could overcome the worst that life could throw at me. I was wrong. The absence of easy, no-cost drugs in civilian life soon led to a dependency on alcohol and nicotine. As a civilian, I worked hard to build a successful career in the civil service and maintain an image of living a normal life – getting married, pursuing a college education, raising a family, and succeeding in my career.

Yet what appeared normal in the workplace was not so normal at home. As my first marriage began to fail in the mid-1980s, I was diagnosed with wartime PTSD during couples counseling. I had no idea what PTSD was.

As a result of my divorce, I gained custody of my three young children. Still, I felt no need to control my drinking or smoking. Soon after the divorce, my youngest child asked me, “Dad, who is going to take care of us when you are gone?” He pointed to the cigarette I held in one hand and the drink in the other. He was five years old. I was drinking and driving with all three kids in the car. I immediately felt a strong sense of shame and guilt, but also a strong motivation to do better for them. I stopped drinking. Smoking cessation would come later.

Convinced that I could battle the demons myself, I stopped going to therapy and quickly remarried. After all, my children needed a mother, didn't they?

At home, uncontrollable fits of anger, manifesting in verbal and physical abuse, continued. These were mainly directed at my oldest son and followed by lengthy depressive episodes. At one point, as I was pummeling my eldest in a frothy fit of anger, I had an epiphany. A voice in my head said: *Stop! You're going to kill him!*

At that moment, I knew I needed help. I could *not* 'fix' myself.

When the second marriage began to fail, coupled with a mid-career crisis and the death of my father, my depression returned like an unwanted guest. Prescribed anti-depressants made me physically ill, which I attributed to my body rebelling from my former drug abuse. Suicidal ideation was a frequent but uncomfortable companion. Fortunately, I had had the foresight to sell my pistol a few years earlier.

I remarried in 2003. While I had learned to control my physical outbursts, my unpredictable verbal outbursts continued. Despite my years of therapy, I had been unable to effectively identify my triggers, much less accept them and learn alternative behaviors. I kept my truths hidden from myself and others, still trying my best to be 'normal.' My undefined and unpredictable anger turned inward, and I entered another deep depressive period. Once again, I sought private counseling.

In 2012, the VA diagnosed me with PTSD and acknowledged my exposure to Agent Orange. I did not trust the VA, so I re-entered counseling with a private therapist. After moving to North Carolina in late September 2018, I was convinced that I had 'fixed' myself and stopped going to counseling.

Within a few years, after the loss of three dear pets, one right after the other, my depression returned. This time, I was extremely fortunate to find and connect with the best therapist I have ever had. Natasha diagnosed me with wartime PTSD exacerbated by childhood PTSD and major

depressive disorder. The VA agreed. We worked together to identify my triggers, dug deep into my past experiences, and worked on effective resolution skills.

Over the last ten years, with the help of my therapist, I have learned more about myself and the generational trauma that I was passing to my children from my father and through my own experiences. Through the hard work of counseling and Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), I learned about and was able to develop and use the proper tools to recognize and deal with my triggers. I was able to improve the quality of my thoughts and, in turn, the quality of my life and that of those closest to me.

Some of us, or perhaps many of us, cannot improve the quality of our thoughts without the help of others. Perhaps, the biggest lie we tell ourselves is “There is nothing wrong with me that I can’t fix myself.” That was me.

I can fix myself. There is nothing wrong with me. I have fixed myself.

I have seen the lie repeatedly with other Vietnam veterans. I’m sure there are others who are not veterans, but who suffer from PTSD and lie to themselves, are ashamed to admit their vulnerability, or assert their machismo as a defense. They immerse themselves in alcohol or drugs and engage in other self-destructive behaviors that affect not only themselves but also others in their orbit—spouses, family members, and friends. That was me.

I consider myself lucky. I finally admitted that I could not ‘fix’ myself. I sought help.

It’s been a long, torturous road, but I know that I am not alone. Others have braved the same journey and survived to create their own happiness. To reiterate Aurelius: “The happiness of your life depends upon the quality of your thoughts..., guard accordingly, and take care that you entertain no notions unsuitable to virtue and reasonable nature.” Amen to that!

The End