

Budget paper (March 26, 2018)

The theme of tonight's Budget is "cheating." One of my two companion authors, a lawyer, agreed only reluctantly, since cheating is the very antithesis of his profession. The other is a psychiatrist, who I should have known would go off the tracks. He has taken up the challenge with such gusto for prurient behavior, that I warn you to usher your guests to the library and shut the door behind them.

But first, it's my turn.

Your Cheating Heart
By James N. Myers

My 98 year old great grandfather cheated at euchre, my 3 year old granddaughter cheated at chutes and ladders, and my 6 year old younger brother played monopoly with the family dog. That dog never had a chance. Everybody cheats at something, but there is one place where cheating has no place, and that's the game of bridge. Bridge is more than just a game. It is a life-choice and it must not be defiled.

As an illustration of how important Bridge is, let me tell you briefly the story of Myrtle and John Bennett. John was playing poorly one night in 1929. Myrtle, after expressing her disapproval of the way John had played, got up from the table, found their pistol, hunted him down and shot him - dead - in front of three witnesses, leaving two bullet holes in the bathroom door and two more in John on the living room floor. What did the jury decide? Accidental homicide. Apparently they had approved of what Myrtle had done.

As a further illustration, I want to tell you about Mike, who died a few years ago. He had moved to Florida to be near his mom, he said, and a few weeks later he was dead. It was hard to tell if Mike was 50 or 60 or even more. No one knew him very well, except maybe Benny, but I'll tell you about him a little later.

By the time I met Mike, he wasn't exactly what you would call a bridge player. If you play competitive bridge, you will recognize the people who play bridge every day. When you walk into the local bridge club, they are already sitting there in their customary seats, waiting impatiently for the game to start. There is a lady, for example, whose husband died. She was back at the bridge table before the flowers had even started to wilt, wearing her favorite bridge sweater - the one with clubs, diamonds, hearts and spades all over it. As I said, bridge isn't just a game; it's a way of life.

Anyway, Mike wasn't like these people. He was the kindly spirit of the bridge club. If a light bulb was out, Mike was up on a ladder screwing in a new bulb. If a toilet was leaking, you would find him on the floor of the men's room fixing it. If it snowed, he shoveled the walk. He

was the one who replaced the decks of cards when they became too dirty or too bent. You hardly ever went to the bridge club and failed to see Mike doing something useful.

You might think that a guy like Mike would play bridge but he didn't, usually. He would play, albeit reluctantly, if pressed into service because someone's partner had failed to show. He would start a round with you if your partner had called and said he would arrive late. He would play as the director's partner if the director needed to play to avoid a half table that would cause there to be a sit-out for all the players in one direction or the other. I played with Mike once when I had showed up without a partner, knowing that he would be there. He was a good player, better than the average Life Master, but he drank. It was just beer, but he drank a lot of it.

Between rounds, in a duplicate bridge game, there is a bit of downtime. If Mike was playing, he played fast enough that he usually had time to go to his car, smoke a cigarette, and drink a can of beer. Five or six rounds later, this break activity of Mike's became more and more obvious both in an olfactory way and in the quality of his bidding and play. If he wasn't playing, he spent a great deal of time outside.

How Mike made it home after these bridge games was a mystery. The local constabulary got to know Mike's car, its back seat and passenger seat littered with crushed Budweiser cans, and he was often briefly in their custody. In fact, if you didn't see Mike at the bridge club, he was either in Florida visiting his mother or in jail. Over time, the sentences for repeated DUIs got longer. But Mike would come back eventually, to replace the bulbs that had gone out, touch up the paint, and set everything straight once more, until, as I said earlier, Mike wasn't there any more.

I managed to piece together Mike's story with a little bridge gossip here and a little there. It turns out that Mike had been one of the minor stars of the bridge world. That made him a big star back home. He was often a member of one of the teams that are sponsored to go to national and international tournaments. You recognize these guys at tournaments because they wear coats and ties. When they aren't playing with other professionals, they are playing with clients who pay them hundreds of dollars per game. How many hundreds? How big a star? When they aren't at tournaments, they do well by playing with paying clients at their local clubs.

So, Benny was one of the regulars. He was leaving the local bridge club a number of years ago when this novice came up and told him an amazing story about Mike, who Benny didn't like very much anyway. It turned out that Mike had picked up his cards in hand number 17 and studied them just a bit, then bid 6 hearts. Now, nobody does that - nobody. But the novice said he saw Mike do it, so all the way home, Benny thought about it. He woke up thinking about it.

The thing about duplicate bridge that makes it different from other games is that everybody gets the same cards to play as everybody else. If you are sitting in the north seat, like Mike was that night, you're going to get the same cards that Mike got. And these days, a computer deals the cards, keeps track of who was sitting where and who played against whom, and what the contract was and the final score. It's all there on the internet.

Before checking the scores of that night's game on the internet, Benny came up with a theory. During a bridge game, people talk and some people talk too much and too loud. And some of those people are giving lessons, constant lessons. They never shut up. At the table next to Mike's that night, hand number 17 had just been played by a guy who not only gives lessons but gives them at 80 decibels. Mike had to hear something like, "You could have made 6 hearts." Anyway, that's what Benny thought.

That night Benny had been sitting north and had stopped at 4 hearts on hand 17, while his opponents had gone on to 5 diamonds. Benny or his partner had doubled 5 diamonds and they felt pretty good about scoring 500 for setting it two tricks. But, Mike had scored 980, the top score on that hand for the evening, and had a 60-something percent game overall to come in first over 12 other teams. Mike was probably just showing off for his client. Showing off or not, Benny was certain that Mike was cheating and he was mad, and he stayed mad.

Some time went by and it happened that Mike had some sort of problem with his computer and he called Best Buy or some other geek place and they sent out a technician - you guessed it — it was Benny. And as Benny was working to see what he could do to save Mike's computer, curiosity got the better of him. He needed Mike's passwords to get into whatever you need to get into. And when Mike left the room for a minute or two, Benny slipped a thumb drive into Mike's computer and started downloading all sorts of stuff like pictures, email, and passwords. He didn't know what he would get, but he was pretty sure he'd get something, from a rat who would cheat at Bridge. Benny got the computer back up and working and advised Mike to buy a new one. When Benny went home that night he took the thumb drive with him.

Now bridge is a game of logic. You don't need a lot of mathematical skill to count to 13, but you do need logical skills to determine from the bidding and the play of the hands, who's got what. And it's this logical skill for the most part that distinguishes one bridge player from another. While at the kitchen table, the logical inferences may be often supplemented by signals of another sort, like long pauses, or semi-innocent comments like "oh, 2 clubs, I guess," the organized bridge world has for many years been attempting to eliminate all kinds of cheating, casual or otherwise.

For example, the computer does the shuffling and the dealing now. Duplicate bridge players all get the same cards to play, eliminating the luck of the deal. Bidding is no longer oral, but is done by use of boxes of bidding cards, from which each player chooses the right cards and lays them on the table. Players are encouraged to bid and play in rhythm so as to avoid giving inferences to their partners with long pauses or no pauses at all. Bidding systems and conventions are announced to opponents, as are defensive lead, count, and preference signals. In short, everyone at the table is entitled to know everything that everybody else knows, with the single difference being logical inference. Players are not to discuss hands played for fear of being overheard.

At the very highest levels of national and international bridge, teams of four play one another, with two players each in two separate rooms. Not only are the teams removed to separate rooms, but a barrier is set diagonally across each table blocking the view of each player and his partner. They place the bidding cards in a tray that is slid from side to side, under the barrier, as bids are made. When it's time to play the cards, a flap is raised so that the players can all see the cards played, but still cannot see their partners' faces.

In spite of all of these precautions, cheating still occurs at all levels of bridge. Often the cheating is inadvertent and unintentional. If you have ever sat opposite a husband and wife team and watched as one of them lays down a bidding card and looks up into the other's eyes, you know some information is being passed. A card snapped onto the table, is different, expressing more confidence than one placed quietly. A partner who points at the face cards in her hand as she counts them out has a better hand than when she doesn't point at all.

Surely, you might think that at the higher levels, there's no cheating. But there is. Teams have been caught coughing and sniffing out signals or placing the bidding tray just this way or that. And that is precisely what Benny found on Mike's computer, email about an elaborate cheating plan for national competitions. Benny decided to share the information with the American Contract Bridge League and they sprang into action. Mike and his partner were subsequently filmed while playing in a national tournament, exposed, and banned from competitive bridge forever.

That was when Mike disappeared from even the local club. He eventually shuffled back in, however, sad, apologetic, and less dapper than he had once been. He kibitzed some, and one by one assumed the housekeeping chores around the club. He played only a little, smoked and drank a lot, and then he was gone. We all missed him, and some still do.