

On the Corner

Dog days

by Robert Docter, Editor-In-Chief

Well—what used to be called Sextillus has arrived. It's a month we now know as August and was named to honor Augustus Caesar. Our August is now half over, and as it fades into history, it closes the "dog days of summer." What can we possibly learn from them?

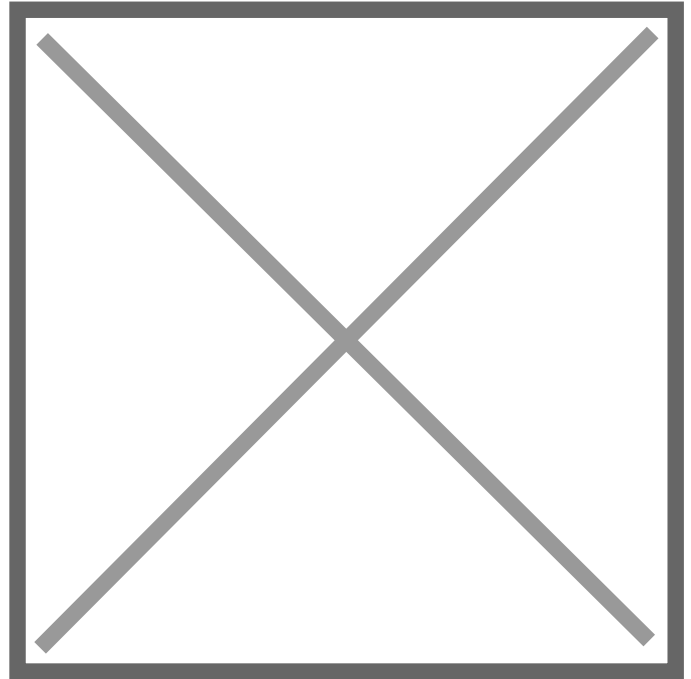
The Romans had formerly used numbers to name the months of their ten month calendar, and the last four months of our current calendar still bear English versions of those same names—September, (seven); October, (eight); November, (nine); and December, (ten). Sextillus, as you might guess means six. It's a good thing we don't translate those names literally, because they don't fit our 12 month calendar at all.

An astronomer advised Julius Caesar that the ten month calendar wasn't working. The vernal equinox was occurring too early—well back into the previous year. He listened—probably noticing that spring started in the middle of winter. March was, at that time, the first month of the year. The Roman calendar, then, didn't fit the solar year. So Caesar decreed that 46 BC would have 445 days and, also, added what is now January, named for the Roman god of "doorways and beginnings" and February, named for the Roman festival of purification.

March, therefore, became the third month of the year, and spring bounced back to its usual season and began on March 21. This brought the calendar mostly back in line with the seasons. Other changes occurred later with the nearly international adoption of the Gregorian calendar—the one we use.

So, we learn that a strong leader using viable data can even remedy significantly wrong decisions if that leader is willing to admit a mistake and set forward to correct it.

Later, the Roman Senate honored Julius Caesar for all his accomplishments by changing the name of the fifth month, Quintillus, (five) to July. A few years later they did the same thing for Augustus, Julius's grand nephew and successor, after Brutus and the ides of March did him in.



Augustus was quite a guy—very much like our current August—both warm and cool. He conquered the known world, ended all civil wars with the defeat and deaths of Marc Antony and Cleopatra, made the Roman Republic the Roman Empire and ushered in Pax Romana, a 200 year period of “relative tranquility,” prosperity, and accomplishment. Augustus, an autocrat, nevertheless, did not take upon himself the massive perks of high office. He kept the title of Princeps—the “first leader” rather than assuming the title of Emperor. He maintained the Senate, led them, and followed their direction. We learn that good leaders don’t need all the trappings that some leaders believe to be essential for their status. When the triumphant crown was held above the head of the triumphant Augustus, the individual holding the crown was charged to repeat continually, “Remember, thou art mortal.” Augustus remembered.

We must not assume we have measures of personal stature and status when the greatness actually emanates from the position held. Nor should we ignore the important characteristic of humility. For, in the grand scheme of things, the last becomes first.

Augustus, actually a religious title, ruled during the time a baby was born to a poor couple in a distant Roman protectorate called Palestine. They had traveled from their own town to a city named Bethlehem, mentioned in Hebrew writings as the city of David. It was this town that ancient prophets had identified as the birthplace of the long awaited Messiah, whom we choose to identify as Jesus.

Augustus was probably unaware of this event and its future impact on his empire.

The Roman Emperors, Julius and Augustus, with their months of July and August, introduce us to summer with its “dog days” spanning their 31 days’ duration.

Dog days—that’s an interesting expression.

I always knew it related to the summer, but I thought it simply described the tendency of dogs to stretch out and sleep in the sun during those hot days. Now I know differently. It relates to the constellation Canis Majoris—the Big Dog. The brightest star in this constellation is Sirius—the Dog Star—often seen as the brightest star in the sky. It’s best seen in the winter months in that it rises and sets with the sun each day during the summer. It is so close to the sun during July and August that the ancients thought its heat added to the heat of the sun and caused the weather to be sultry, muggy, hot, humid and uncomfortable. Thus, the dog star’s heat was blamed for hot summer days—dog days.

Sirius seems to take a siesta during the northern hemisphere’s summer. It’s visibility goes “on holiday” for a considerable period. It’s no dumb star. It’s bright. It knows how to live. It models appropriate dog behavior and human behavior for all the occupants of Earth. It takes a break.

We call it “vacation.” We need this period of rejuvenation. Going full speed all the time only leads to “burn-out”—where we lose focus, forget our goals, fail to remember our calling, become exhausted, prone to irritability and laziness as the noon day sun piles in on us with enervating ferocity. We must remember that They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength.

Sirius might not be visible all the time, but it’s still there—fulfilling its role in the heavens—ready to shine brightly in the autumns of life.

I don't know if it's true or not, but, according to Noel Coward, "Mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the noonday sun." Maybe "Englishmen detest a siesta," but I've known too many who have a different point of view in the heat of the day.

Yes, Sirius, the brightest star of the heavens, takes a vacation in the summer. I've discovered that one is not required to travel to have a vacation. "Getting away" is a state of mind. Be still, and know that I am God.

As August winds down and the dog days of summer from early July to late August creep to a close, we experience high temperatures in southern California and across the nation. With the high pressure system parked almost permanently over the four-corners region, our thermometers will continue to register over 100 degrees for a month or two. Then, even mad dogs and Englishmen will stay in the shade.

Me—I'm going to "get away," and I hope you do, too.