

“*Boot Strap Religion*”

June 22, 2008

Rev. Thomas G. Anastasi

What exactly is “boot strap religion”?

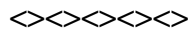
We have to start by asking what a boot strap is. I thought I knew, but when I went online, I found out there’s another whole meaning to the word. That’s about a computer program. Here’s what it says:

“Bootstrapping is the practice of estimating properties of an estimator (such as its variance) by measuring those properties when sampling from an approximating distribution. One standard choice for an approximating distribution is the empirical distribution of the observed data. In the case where a set of observations can be assumed to be from an independent and identically distributed population, this can be implemented by constructing a number of resamples of the observed dataset (and of equal size to the observed dataset), each of which is obtained by random sampling with replacement from the original dataset.”

Of course, that’s *computerese*, and I don’t know the language. I don’t know what an “estimator” is, or a “sampling from an approximating distribution.” I surely don’t understand what “a number of resamples of the observed dataset (and of equal size to the observed dataset), each of which is obtained by random sampling with replacement from the original dataset.”

I don’t know bout computers or even the new world of electronics. I recently bought an amplifier to use with our new HDTV, and to this day I haven’t figured out how to set it up. When I asked the guy at Magnolia HiFi about assistance, he announced that would cost \$300. Just to have somebody come and set it all up.

I said No, I could do it myself. I could “pull myself up by my bootstraps” and get the thing working. It hasn’t happened.



So I thought about the *theology* of pulling oneself up by one’s bootstraps. Maybe you’re like me and were raised with that idea: “the only way you’re ever going to make it in this world is to pull yourself by your own bootstraps.” That means, of course, that there’s a means of advancing oneself or accomplishing something, relying entirely on one’s efforts and resources. A bootstrap process is “self-generating or self-sustaining”.

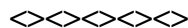
“To help (oneself) without the aid of others, as in “*She spent years bootstrapping herself through college.*”

Or, to “pull oneself up by one’s bootstraps”, to help oneself without the aid of others; use one’s resources as in “*I admire him for pulling himself up by his own bootstraps.*”

“To promote and develop by use of one’s own initiative and work without reliance on outside help.”

Also this: “Bootstrap”: A situation in which an entrepreneur starts a company with little capital. An individual is said to be boot strapping when he or she attempts to found and build a company from personal finances or from the operating revenues of the new company.

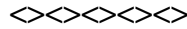
And then there’s the “BootStrap Foundation”, whose mission is to help artists bootstrap their way to visibility to create their own followings. They focus on professional productions of original plays by San Francisco Bay Area playwrights.



There’s even, of course, a country music band call BootStrap. They are a Central Texas band who plays a wide variety of music, including traditional and progressive country, 50’s and 60’s rock & soul and Texas blues.

Oh, and one more: Over the years motorcycle riders have loved wearing the heavy duty Holdup Suspenders, the unique Hold-Down™ Biker Stirrups. They sell for \$19.95 and come with a lifetime no-slip clip warranty. “Existing Biker boot-strap stirrups suffer from many practical use flaws addressed by the patent pending Hold-Down™ design. First off Biker boot Stirrups are used to keep the motorcyclists pant

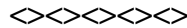
legs from riding up when using foot peg rests, while cruising at highway speeds. Without them your pants just ride up in the high winds, often causing a safety danger when leaning over to pull them back down. Bikers are well aware of this and the risks of a highspeed spill when performing this constant chore”.



The definition of a boot strap is “a loop of leather or cloth sewn at the top rear, or sometimes on each side, of a boot to facilitate pulling it on”. So that means, I guess, the process by which you pull on the boots when you’re mired in the mud or in, let us say, “deep doo doo”.

Fortunately, most of us don’t have to do that, since most of us are not mired down, stuck, unable to free ourselves from the muck of our circumstances. If that’s true for you, God bless you. Unfortunately, it has *not* been true for me.

In fact, I have spent most of my life attempting to get out of the jams I have found myself stuck in. Luckily, most of you don’t have to think about that.



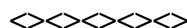
The U.S. Census Bureau released its most recent poverty report Tuesday. According to the Bureau, the report shows positive change, income is rising and poverty rates are falling. According to Bush, “more of our citizens are doing better in this economy, with continued rising incomes and more Americans pulling themselves out of poverty.” I didn’t really have to look very far to smell the bull.

Today’s data release revealed another troubling fact—real median earnings of full-time, year-round workers fell by more than a full percentage point. “Although some areas of the economy appear strong, today’s numbers are a troubling reminder that prosperity is benefiting only the very highest earners,” says Dr. Jane Knitzer, Director of NCCP.

“Whenever someone pulls out the ridiculous line about how their family “pulled themselves up by their bootstraps, and they didn’t even have boots! Poor people should just get a job!”, I suppress an urge to break my vows of pacifism. The Capitalist American Dream success story is fairly rare, and even rarer for those who start out living at or below the official poverty line of \$20,000 for a family of four--which, by the way, is completely unrealistic and utterly stupid, reflecting the absolute ignorance certain people (hint, rich white dudes who drew the line) have of how much it costs to live somewhere besides a box. I don’t know many people who can successfully support themselves, much less four children, on \$20,000 and still have plenty of time for ladder-climbing.”

“And children get the really ugly end of the stick. It’s really hard to do anything about your own dental appointments, living conditions, nutrition, or education when you are 10. Pulling oneself up the capitalist ladder is hard when the foundation you have to build on is a crappy education in a poor school, parent(s) who work full-time at crap jobs to make sure the family doesn’t get kicked out of the crap apartment, and little to no social networking that so benefits the upward climb of those who start out middle class. There are exceptions to everything, sure, but they are exceptions and shouldn’t be used to back up the claim that capitalism allows any person who wants to and works hard enough to end up a millionaire. Hell, we can’t even say capitalism allows every child the right to good (or any) health care.”

“We know that sound public policies can make a difference. “To provide for their children, low-income workers need higher wages, and they need assistance paying for expensive budget items like child care and health care,” asserts Dr. Nancy Cauthen, NCCP’s Deputy Director. “It’s rather ironic that we’re having to fight to preserve and expand the State Children’s Health Insurance Program at a time when the number of uninsured children is increasing. We should—and can—do better,” continues Dr. Cauthen. “It’s simply a matter of priorities.” *Right on!*



Do you remember the great 20th century author, Upton Sinclair? He wrote *The Jungle* (1906), a novel about the corruption of the American meatpacking industry during the early 20th century. The novel depicts in harsh tones the poverty, absence of social programs, unpleasant living and working conditions, and hopelessness prevalent among the have-nots, which is contrasted with the deeply-rooted corruption on the part of the haves. Sinclair was influential in the establishment of the Federal Food and Drug Administration.

Here is a quotation from another book he wrote called *The Profits of Religion* (notice the spelling of “profits”) in a section called “Bootstrap-Lifting”.

It is a vision I have seen: upon a vast plain, men and women are gathered in dense throngs, crouched in uncomfortable and distressing positions, their fingers hooked in the straps of their boots. They are engaged in lifting themselves; tugging and straining until they grow red in the face, exhausted. The perspiration streams from their foreheads, they show every symptom of distress; the eyes of all are fixed, not upon each other, nor upon their bootstraps, but upon the sky above. There is a look of rapture upon their faces, and now and then, amid grunts and groans, they cry out with excitement and triumph.

I approach one and say to him, “Friend, what is this you are doing?” He answers, without pausing to glance at me, “I am performing spiritual exercises. See how I rise?”

“But,” I say, “you are not rising at all!”

Whereat he becomes instantly angry. “You are one of the scoffers!”

“But friend,” I protest, “don’t you feel the earth under your feet?”

“You are a materialist!”

“But, friend, I can see --”

“You are without spiritual vision!”

And so I move on among the sweating and groaning hordes. Being of a sympathetic turn of mind, I cannot help being distressed by the prevalence of this singular practice among so large a portion of the human race. How, is it possible that none of them should suspect the futility of their procedure? Or can it really be that I am uncomprehending? That in some way they are actually getting off the ground, or about to get off the ground?

Then I observe a new phenomenon: a man gliding here and there among the bootstrap-lifters, *approaching from the rear and slipping his hands into their pockets*. The position of the spiritual exercisers greatly facilitates his work; their eyes being cast up to heaven, they do not see him, their thoughts being occupied, they do not heed him; he goes through their pockets at leisure, and transfers the contents to a bag he carries, and then moves on to the next victim. I watch him for a while, and finally approach and ask, “What are you doing, sir?”

He answers, “I am picking pockets.”

“Oh,” I say, puzzled by his matter-of-course tone. “But -- I beg pardon -- are you a thief?”

“Oh, no,” he answers, smilingly, “*I am the agent of the Wholesale Pickpockets’ Association*. This is Prosperity.”

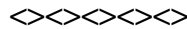
“I see,” I reply. “And these people let you --”

“It is the law,” he says. “It is also the gospel.”

I turn, following his glance, and observe another person approaching -- a stately figure, clad in scarlet and purple robes, moving with slow dignity. He gazes about at the sweating and grunting hordes; now and then he stops and lifts his hand in a gesture of benediction, and proclaims in rolling tones, “*Blessed are the Bootstrap-lifters, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven*.” He moves on, and after a bit stops and announces again, “Man doth not live. by bread alone, but by every word that cometh out of the mouth of the prophets and priests of Bootstrap-lifting.

There are the Holy Roman Bootstrap-lifters, whose priests are fed by Transubstantiation; the established Anglican Bootstrap-lifters, whose priests live by “livings”; the Baptist Bootstrap-lifters, whose preachers practice total immersion in Standard Oil. There are Yogi Bootstrap-lifters with flowing robes of yellow silk; Theosophist Bootstrap-lifters with green and purple auras; Mormon Bootstrap-lifters, Mazdaznan Bootstrap-lifters, Spiritualist and Spirit-Fruit, Millerite and Dowieite, Holy Roller and Holy Jumper, Comd-to-glory Negro, Billy Sunday baseball and Salvation Army bass drum Bootstrap-lifters. There are the thousand varieties of “New Thought” Bootstrap-lifters; the mystic and transcendentalist, Swedenborgian and Jacob Boehme Bootstrap-lifters; the Elbert Hubbard high-art Bootstrap-lifters with half a million magazinelets at two bits apiece; the “uplift” and “optimist,” the Ralph Waldo Trine and Orison Swett Marden Bootstrap-lifters with a hundred thousand volumes at one dollar per volume. There are the Platonist and Hegelian and Kantian professors of collegiate metaphysical Bootstrap-lifting at several thousand dollars per year each. There are the Nietzschean Bootstrap-lifters, who lift themselves to the Superman, and the art-for-art’s-sake, neo-Pagan Bootstrap-lifters, who lift themselves down to the Ape.

But for the most part the priests and preachers of Bootstrap-lifting walk haughtily erect, many of them being so swollen with prosperity that they could not reach their bootstraps if they wanted to. Their role in life is to exhort other men to more vigorous efforts at *self-elevation*, that the agents of the Wholesale Pickpockets’ Association may ply their immemorial role with less chance of interference.



I propose to nominate Unitarian Universalism as a Bootstrap Religion, even if that phrase may be pejorative. Our most popular adult religious education curriculum is called “Building Your Own Theology”. In that class ordinary folks are encouraged to figure out what their religion is and to express it in what is called a Credo (Latin, for “I believe.”) Among us, there is no silver-plattered creed given to you—maybe shoved down your throat—which is the authoritative explanation of what it means to be in this religious community.

Instead, you are encouraged to build your own theology, your own creed. This is a central feature of our recently completed Coming of Age program. Two weeks ago, the three youth delivered their own Credos right here in the pulpit. In a way, we witnessed a pulling up of individual religious autonomy by their own authority.

That’s the way we do it around here. But there’s a great big plus: As you are creating you personal theology, you are encouraged and heartened by everyone else here. In truth, *that is the ministry of the Community of Faith*. Our ministry means helping one another pull on those boots, even as we begin to rise, as we say: “each of us and all of us.”

Amen