



BRYCE'S PET PEEVE ANTHOLOGY

Volume I

“What drives us crazy and what can be done about it?”

A Day at the Beach • Admitting a Mistake • Airline Magazines • Airports • Analog vs Digital Gens • Armadillos • Beautiful People • Buying Personal Hygiene Items • Christmas • Coffee • Complications • Crud • Death of the Business Letter • Divorce • Doctors' Offices • Driving Top 10 • Drug Warnings • Empty Nests • Everybody's Got One • Finding a Good Mechanic • Finding Jesus • Fixing Toilets • Funerals • Handicap Parking • Handling Failure • Home • Homeowner Associations • Homo Sapien Asshole • How we Dress • The Imagery of Profanity • It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World • Job Interviews • Job Titles • The Last Man on Earth • Lawyers • Matrimonial Territorialism • Microchipping • Moral Decay • Music in the Workplace • New York City • Office Clutter • Office Gossip • Office Meetings • Office Politics • Office Temperature • Our Right to Fail • Our Sense of Humor • Parental Visions of Grandeur • The Passing of Punctuality • Personal Advertising • Personal Hygiene • Political Correctness • Polls • The Pope's Visit • Presidential Candidates • Print Journalism • Pussyfooting • Reality Management • Repairing BBQ Grills • Resumes • Roadside Memorials • Screemers • The Secret to Success • SFB's • The SFB Quotient • Society Pages • Spring Cleaning • Stress • The Stupids • Suburban Nazis • Supermarkets • Symbolism • Talking with Your Hands • Tattoos • Tipping • Trust • Vacations • Voice Mail • Walmart • Wearing Ties • Web Page Design • What Young People Want & Need • What's wrong with a little discipline? • Why do we trust politicians? • Wristwatches • Yes Men • You can put your eye out that way

EDITORIALS ON LIFE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

*“There is only one problem with common sense;
it's not very common.”*

- Bryce's Law

by Tim Bryce
Palm Harbor, Florida, USA

MBA PRESS

BRYCE'S PET PEEVE ANTHOLOGY
Volume I

by Tim Bryce
Palm Harbor, Florida, USA

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BRYCE'S PET PEEVE ANTHOLOGY/Vol I - Tim Bryce

DEDICATION

*To all the HSA's of the world,
wherever they may be.*

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BRYCE'S PET PEEVE ANTHOLOGY/Vol I - Tim Bryce

ABOUT THE AUTHOR (Personal Communications).



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THINK

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INTRODUCTION

I started my "Pet Peeves" in 2005 as a small part of my weekly "Management Visions" podcast. Originally, my intent was to simply point out the absurdities of life we must all endure. To illustrate, here is my very first "Pet Peeve" which I produced on August 2, 2005, entitled, "BOUNTY COMMERCIAL":

My "Pet Peeve of the Week" is a Bounty commercial I recently heard on the radio while driving into work the other day. Now as many of you know, Bounty is Proctor & Gamble's "Quilted Quicker Picker-Upper" paper towels, which I don't have a problem with as such. We use Bounty in our house. However, the new radio ad described it as having "a new blue-dot quilting" that results in a "high resolution shine." Frankly, when I heard this I burst out laughing. People in the cars next to me must have thought I had lost my mind. "High resolution shine"? I guess it seems funny to me to see something as mundane as paper towels go "high tech". Ah, you gotta love Madison Avenue I guess.

So you can thank P&G for starting me down the road of these diatribes. Interestingly, many people related to these early essays as they were also fed up with the irritants of life I described. Since I started the column, I have heard from people all over the world, in all walks of life, who find the problems I describe to be universally applicable and are begging for the insanity to stop. Consequently, "Pet Peeves" has slowly evolved into a rallying cry or plea for some common sense in our society.

I have found the comments from the public to be particularly rewarding. You may not always agree with me, but if I can make you stop and think about something you normally take for granted, then I have accomplished my goal.

My work is intended to get people to snap out of the mindless zombie life they are living. Instead of blindly following the status quo, I am asking people to challenge it. This is not always agreeable to people who are content living a life as lemmings, which is probably why I have detractors as well as supporters. No, you won't always agree with me, but frankly, I am now at a point in my life where I no longer care about being politically correct to please everyone.

I do not write simply to bitch about an issue and leave it at that. Nobody likes a whiner, and, as I learned a long time ago in business, you should never criticize unless you are prepared to offer an alternative. Otherwise, it would just be counterproductive. No, my interest is to turn something negative into something positive. There's enough destructive forces at work in the world today, we need more constructive criticism instead.

The enclosed list of "Pet Peeves" is not all inclusive. There are many others, but the peeves included herein were selected not because they were necessarily the most popular, but because they stimulated the most discussion from my readership. My topics range from the seemingly insignificant to the major problems of the day, but my favorites are those dealing with the human spirit. It seems despite the greatness of the United States, its influential culture and standard of living, its global approach to conducting business, its technology, we seem to be getting dumber, not smarter; lazier, not more industrious; more reactive, not proactive; and more socially dysfunctional.

The United States we knew in the 20th century is certainly different than the country we live in today. Americans are now content with mediocrity and accept inferior quality, we live in a disposable society with built-in obsolescence in our products, we tolerate and reward unethical behav-

ior, we are indifferent to truth and justice, and we no longer trust anyone. Despite our grandeur, are we really better off than we were 50 or 100 years ago? We now have to tiptoe around issues, be politically correct, eat crap, produce crap, and live in contempt of one and other. My concern is that we are rapidly growing into a generation of sheep that only the powerful and unscrupulous can control. The Democrats get mad at the Republicans, the Republicans get upset with the Democrats, but the reality is we are all dancing to someone else's tune and we don't even know it.

Are we too far gone? For our sake, let's hope not, but it is going to require people to get off their ass, engage their brains, to become outraged with how we are being manipulated, and take our destiny back into our hands. Basically, you've got to get mad.

Perhaps the following scene from the movie "Network" (1976) sums it up best, whereby newscaster Howard Beale (Peter Finch) addresses his television audience:

"I don't have to tell you things are bad. Everybody knows things are bad. It's a depression. Everybody's out of work or scared of losing their job. The dollar buys a nickel's worth. Banks are going bust. Shopkeepers keep a gun under the counter. Punks are running wild in the streets and there's nobody anywhere who seems to know what to do, and there's no end to it. We know the air is unfit to breathe, and our food is unfit to eat. We sit watching our TV's while some local newscaster tells us that today we had 15 homicides and 63 violent crimes, as if that's the way it's supposed to be. We know things are bad, worse than bad, they're crazy. It's like everything everywhere is going crazy, so we don't go out anymore. We sit in a house and slowly the world we are living in is getting smaller and all we say is, "Please, at least leave us alone in our living rooms, let me have my toaster and my TV and my steel-belted radials, and I won't say anything;

Just leave us alone." Well, I'm not going to leave you alone. I want you to get mad. I don't want you to protest, I don't want you to riot, I don't want you to write to your Congressman, because I wouldn't know what to tell you what to write; I don't know what to do about the depression and the inflation and the Russians and the crime in the street. All I know is that first you have got to get mad. You've got to say, "I'm a human being God damn it, my life has value.

So, I want you to get up now; I want all of you to get up out of your chairs; I want you to get up right now and go to the window, open it, and stick your head out, and yell, "I'm as mad as Hell and I'm not going to take this anymore."

THINK

A DAY AT THE BEACH

First published - 6/16/2008

I took some time off during the Memorial Day weekend and escaped to the beach. I guess I'm like just about anyone in that I rarely take advantage of the scenery in your own backyard. It's been a while since I've been to the beach and I found the rhythm of the waves in the morning tranquil and somewhat therapeutic. However, I had forgotten about all of the pollution on the beach, eye pollution that is. I was amazed how many women of all sizes and shapes wore a bikini and probably 99% of those I saw shouldn't. Please don't get me wrong, there is certainly nothing wrong with an attractive woman wearing a bikini, but most of what I saw defied belief. Sure, if you've got it flaunt it, but if you haven't got it, forget it. The ship has sailed and it's time to put on a little more canvas in the rigging.

I find women over 40 wearing bikinis to be interesting, particularly those in their 50's and 60's. I don't know what they're advertising but I suspect they're not getting many buyers.

I don't mean to appear to pick on the ladies exclusively as there are of course men out there who wear some pretty avant-garde bathing suits as well, but the volume of bikinis I saw on this trip seemed to be overwhelming.

I guess I should be grateful that we're past the thong fad as you don't see too many of them anymore on the beach. I've seen my share of thongs over the years and it can be pretty scary to see some women wearing them, as well as men. As my son would say, "*That's just not right.*"

My wife and I went to the beach with another couple. We arrived early to get a good spot where we could setup our

chairs and relax. As this was Memorial Day, the beach naturally started to fill up and become somewhat crowded. I find it interesting how some people have no problem invading your space by plopping down right next to you while there is still ample space elsewhere. It's as if you were invisible. To combat this problem, my friend and I have learned a long time ago to smoke some particularly nasty smelling cigars which acts like a repellent for crowd control. This results in a comfort zone around us but inevitably as soon as the cigars go out, the intruders move back in which, of course, is our queue to leave the beach until the next major holiday.

THINK

ADMITTING A MISTAKE

First published - 7/15/2008

Nobody likes to admit making a mistake. We tend to believe it makes us look bad in the eyes of our coworkers, friends and particularly the boss. It's a real test of our integrity. Some people like to cover-up mistakes so they go undetected or, even worse, let someone else take the blame for them. I find mistakes tend to fester and grow if left unchecked, thereby causing bigger headaches and costing a lot more money if we don't catch them in time.

Every once in awhile you have to look your boss straight in the eye and say, "*I screwed up.*" It's kind of like having a priest listen to your confession. Although the boss may be disappointed, he will be appreciative of the fact you came clean with him early on and brought the problem to his attention where it can be caught and corrected with minimal damage.

In this day and age of micromanagement you don't see too many people willing to admit a mistake. They take on an assignment, get in over their head, and fail to yell for help in time. This does a disservice to the assignment, the people depending on you, and yourself. In business, it is not uncommon to see people rising above their level of competency (aka, "The Peter Principle"). In other words, they have been placed in a position where they are incapable of performing their job effectively. Keeping them in this position is a disservice to the company as well as to the person. Frankly, I think we have too many people in over their heads who refuse to ask for help, which I consider a pretty scary operating scenario.

We have all made mistakes we wish we could take back and correct, some small, others real beauts, but there is

nobody out there without a blemish on their record, which is why we are all willing to forgive, provided the person comes clean with it early on.

There's an old axiom in business that says, "*If you make 51% of your decisions correctly, you will be a success.*" I'm not suggesting we don't strive for perfection, but we should all realize it is an impossibility. After all, the last guy who was perfect, they hung on a cross.

THINK

AIRLINE MAGAZINES

First published - 4/14/2008

I was flying home recently and picked up a copy of the airline magazine. Have you ever really read one of these lately? They have got to be one of the most bland and innocuous publications around. I don't want to pick on any particular airline in this regards, because I think they all pretty lame.

Most airline magazines are used to pass the time of day (particularly when you're backed up on the tarmac for take-off). Not surprising, there are also articles promoting air travel. Most allow third party advertising, but I question its effectiveness. I think most people use these magazines to scribble down notes as mine are always marked up one way or another. Even if you want to pass the time by playing some of the puzzles contained in them, they are already completed (usually wrong).

The articles contained in the magazines are not exactly thought-provoking and are generally regarded as fluff pieces. I guess they don't want to offend anyone or challenge them to think. If it's their intent to put people to sleep for the remainder of the flight, I believe they have succeeded.

Years ago, airlines distributed decks of cards for people to play while on the flight, but you don't see this anymore. The chairs and tray-tables are now much too small to play any game and there is barely enough room for a laptop or DVD player. Now, your choices are to either: catch a few winks, read a book (oh yea, I forgot, people don't like to read anymore), or peruse that God-awful airline magazine.

It seems to me these magazines say the same tired thing over and over again. This leads me to believe that it is ac-

tually the same issue, but they just change the cover every month. I think the last original issue of an airline magazine was back in the 1950's as they were ushering in the Boeing 707, but I could be wrong; it could be the 1940's.

Actually I don't think they ever throw out the magazines. Instead they are all collected and sent to somewhere in Passaic, New Jersey where they erase all of the scribble, press the pages back into shape and apply a new cover. Nobody has noticed until now.

Next time you get a chance to read an airline magazine, I defy you to read it from cover to cover without falling asleep. Heck, it's better than a sleeping pill.

THINK

AIRPORTS

First published - 11/18/2008

It has been awhile since I've talked about airports. In the past, I enjoyed air travel but now look for excuses not to go, thereby avoiding the headaches associated with it. Suffice it to say, I find travel to be more laborious than exciting. I think the novelty wore off when they introduced the security checkpoints back in the early 1980's. Now we have to strip and be subject to cavity searches by people who flunked their proctology exams in a foreign country. You really have to hand it to the terrorists for creating a billion dollar industry and putting the homeless to work as security inspectors.

Over the public address system you routinely hear the message, "Please report any suspicious behavior." The whole thing is suspicious. People are plugged in and tuned out. Those people talking on cell phones look delusional as they wander aimlessly through the airport seemingly talking to themselves. Most are dressed as if they are going on a camping trip or bombing run. Even the security people look like they speak a foreign language, certainly not English. Report "suspicious behavior"? To whom? Muhammed, the head of airport security?

I've also noticed airports are now much more handicap accessible than in years past, but perhaps they have gone overboard on some things. For example, when I went to the men's room recently I noticed there was an infant changing table. Okay, fine, men change diapers now. No big deal. Over the table hung a sign denoting the changing table, but in addition to plain English on the sign I noticed a Braille version for the blind. This got me thinking how a blind person would ever find the spot and use it properly. I imagined a person groping around a strange airport and

rest room until he finally arrived at the station only to miss the sign (as it was displayed a tad high and inset, making it easy to miss). He might even end up circling the rest room for hours to find the right spot to change diapers. God knows what he will use if he misses it.

Luggage carousels haven't really changed over the years. The baggage handlers still send out the same 100 empty suitcases before any of the bags from your flight shows up. Actually, I think it's a stalling tactic as they rip through your luggage to find the good stuff.

The Gestapo runs the ground transportation, for both pickup and drop-off, complete with bomb sniffing dogs, mirrors to look under your car, and tow trucks. Most do nothing but wave their arms incessantly, blow their whistle, and yell at you to move your car. I still haven't developed the knack for picking up someone while the car is still moving. I guess I need more practice.

So, do I see anything "suspicious" at the airport? You tell me.

THINK

ANALOG VS. DIGITAL GENERATIONS

First published - 12/3/2007

We've all heard about "The Greatest Generation," "the Baby Boomers," and Generations X, Y, and Z. These are all labels used to describe and contrast the characteristics of the various age groups of people. I've used it myself in my writings to describe the behavior of different classes of workers, but recently I had someone in an Internet Discussion group tell me there was a easier way of differentiating people, namely Analog versus Digital. I found the description to be simple, yet profound, in terms of differentiating people. To illustrate:

ANALOG GENERATION	DIGITAL GENERATION
understands...	understands...
Super 8mm movies	DVD's
Turntables, 45s & LPs	CD's
Rotary telephones	Cell phones, iPhones, and BlackBerrys
Rotating knobs for Radio-TV tuners	Radio-TV Scanners
Clamation and cartoon animation	Pixar Animation
Black and white TV	High-Definition TV
Magnetic Tape	Memory sticks/flash drives
Carburetors	Electronic fuel injection
Cash	Electronic banking
Monitors	Flat screens
VHS and BETA	MP3, WMV, MPG, AVI
Cards, Monopoly, Chess and Checkers	Video Games
Land Line	Wireless
Rand McNally	GPS, Mapquest

These comparative lists could go on and on, but basically,

under this approach you are not differentiated by age, but by how well you have adapted to technology, and there appears to be a lot of truth in this. Those people shopping for jobs acutely understand this. On your resume it is becoming more important to list the technology you are familiar with as opposed to your command of the English language, or your understanding of business and management. In other words, the person who is proficient in the use of MS Office or Adobe Photoshop stands a better chance of being hired than someone who possesses good business and communications skills. This is like being rewarded for your skill in the use of a calculator as opposed to your basic comprehension of math.

The point is, we are defined more by our ability to assimilate with our technology than by age or any other factor. This emphasis on technology is another indicator that the human being is being subliminally programmed, not just the computers and equipment we use.

A lot of people are unsure as to which generation they belong to. I guess the best way to discern whether you are of one generation or the other is whether you can competently program a cell phone or change the clock in your automobile. If you rely on a son or daughter to program it, you're probably Analog.

THINK

ARMADILLOS

First published - 1/22/2007

As you grow older and have a family, you inevitably find out that Dads are saddled with the dirty jobs in a household, be it swatting a spider, fixing a clogged sink, changing a tire, or whatever. I guess it all goes with the territory. I've got a new one though that I would like to add to the list, namely eliminating armadillos; you know, those little critters with cute pointy ears shaped like an armored tank. When I was younger I couldn't understand why people liked to run them over with their cars. In Texas for example, I think its the national pastime, but now I think I understand why.

Prior to moving to Florida years ago, I had never seen an Armadillo up close and personal, but over the last few years I have had to do battle with them on more than one occasion. They're actually pretty destructive little critters that can easily dig up your yard and burrow under your house, and no matter how hard you try to get rid of them, the more determined they try to pester you. For example, when all you do is shovel the dirt back into the armadillo's burrow, they will simply come back and dig it out again. I also tried to fill it up with rocks and other debris, but the armadillo digs them out as well. I even went so far as to try and put some of my pool chlorine pucks into the hole, thinking the smell would discourage them. Nope, they have no problem with it. Frankly, I suspect they munch on the pucks like crackers.

A little known fact about these critters is that they are one of the few animals that can spread leprosy. This makes the job even dirtier as you don't want to physically touch them. I can't shoot them either as you are not allowed to discharge firearms in my area. So what do you do? As for me, I got

a box-like metal trap about four feet in length and one foot in height and width. I've discovered you don't have to bait these traps either; besides I'm not quite sure what armadillos eat other than grubs, but I've discovered if you set the trap in an area they frequent, they will simply walk into it and trap themselves. They're not very bright.

Then comes the problem of disposing of the armadillo. I've seriously thought of drowning them by throwing them in a nearby lake while they are still in the cage, but I guess I didn't want to foul the lake. Instead, I usually drive them out into the country where I release them. I guess I owe a lot of farmers an apology. I sometimes wonder if the armadillo I just released will try to return home to my property, but I think the chances of this are slim to none. Why? I guess its because of all of the armadillo carcasses I see on the highway coming home.

THINK

BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE

First published - 12/02/2008

I never understood the public's fascination with the beautiful people; you know, the actors, actresses, musicians, and models who are supposed to represent how we are supposed to look, dress, and act. Then again, I never understood the Madonna phenomenon either. It always bothered me that we are supposed to idolize air head tramps and haggard looking bums. When you watch television these days, you don't see too many normal people out there, particularly in commercials. Instead you have men and women who are supposed to be too cool and sophisticated for their own good hawking everything from soup to nuts. Are these real people or a clever director's fantasy? I suspect the latter.

One that particularly annoys me is actor Ashton Kutcher who, in the Nikon camera ads, sports a disheveled/bad boy look that is supposed to be irresistible to women. Maybe its just me, but I feel like slapping him around a bit, and get him to comb his hair, shave his face, and tuck his shirt in. I certainly wouldn't let a bum like that run around in my office.

You don't see too many people over 30 in TV commercials anymore, not unless the advertiser is trying to sell something for erectile dysfunction or prostate problems, but this hasn't really changed that much as young people have always been active in commercials. Let's face it, nobody over 40 has any money and shouldn't be bothered with, right? Instead, advertisers want to primarily focus on the people under 30, after all, they're the ones that spend the money.

The tabloid media, whether it's in print form or on television, trips over themselves following the beautiful people.

The public must have an enormous appetite for this type of baloney as they can't seem to get enough of it. What does Ashley, Britney, Angelina, Paris, Lindsay, Christina, Brad, and George. etc. think about this or that? Who cares? These are not real people; they are simply playing a role and have virtually nothing in common with their on-screen personas. Yet, the public obsesses over their every move. They would probably be disappointed if they ever got to really know the beautiful people (I'm sure the lights are on, but nobody is home).

Why not obsess over political or corporate leaders, craftsmen, composers, builders, the real "movers and shakers" of the world. In other words, how about some real models; people who tell the truth, have integrity, and are trying to build something of substance, not facade. I guess they don't have the visual sex appeal needed to sell something, and that's what it's all about; sex, plain and simple, which is why we'll continue to see glitzy bimbos and cutesie girlie-men as opposed to someone of substance. As I said, I didn't get Madonna either.

THINK

BUYING PERSONAL HYGIENE ITEMS

First published - 1/22/2008

Maybe I'm old fashioned, but I've always felt uncomfortable buying personal hygiene items at drug stores. Buying such things as cold remedies, bandages and toiletries is one thing, but buying things like feminine napkins, contraceptives, skin ointments, and adult diapers are something else altogether. I don't care if it's for yourself or a loved one, it's kind of like the uncomfortable feeling you get when you buy a "Playboy" magazine for the first time as a teenager.

People tend to look at you funny as you are standing in line waiting to check out; kind of like, "*Wow, what does he need THAT for?*" Inevitably, you either try to hide your items in your shopping cart or say something stupid like, "*No, it's not for me,*" which is usually a lie. Regardless of how discreet you try to be in purchasing these items, there is nothing more embarrassing than having the sales clerk get on the overhead PA system and shout, "*Price check for a pack of Trojans.*" I've seen more than one shopper bolt out of a store after hearing something like this.

The manufacturers of personal hygiene items no longer package their products in plain unassuming wrappings anymore. Today, just about everything is wrapped in bold eye-catching packages to attract the shopper's attention. This may be fine for display purposes but a bit annoying at check out.

As I've gotten older, buying personal hygiene items doesn't bother me as much anymore. If I have to buy the item, I have to buy the item and try to move along with my life, but I know this still bothers a lot of shoppers. Maybe what the drug stores need is some sort of confessional booth where you can buy the items privately, thereby allowing the shopper to save face.

Over the years there have been numerous jokes made about buying certain things at drug stores. I'm sure some sales clerks could tell us some entertaining stories about what people have had to purchase, but I think most are jaded and don't think twice about it anymore. Nonetheless, there are still a lot of consumers who get nervous and are embarrassed at the checkout counter. Maybe they should just order these things through the Internet and have it shipped to them in plain brown wrappers; either that or setup a kiosk of vending machines for such items. Regardless, if the drug stores made it less embarrassing to buy such items, they would probably sell a heckofa lot more of them. I think people would be more inclined to buy their personal hygiene items from a machine as opposed to a human being.

THINK

CHRISTMAS

First published - 12/24/2007

I don't want to sound like Scrooge or the Grinch, but Christmas is not one of my favorite holidays. I see it more as something for the kids as opposed to adults. Before I get started though, I want to make something perfectly clear; I still refer to this season as "Christmas" as opposed to the "Holidays" which may sound more politically correct, but to me it's an admission that Christians are in retreat in this country. I am not a super-religious person mind you, but it bothers me that we have turned the celebration of Christ's birth into a marketing bonanza. To illustrate my point, consider the following:

- We spend millions on lights and decorations around the house as opposed to investing in our planet and conserving energy resources.
- Instead of helping the less fortunate, we give opulent gifts to people who really do not need them. Last time I checked, there are still places in the world where people are sick and hungry, and need an education or a roof over their heads.
- As opposed to trying to replenish our forests, we kill trees to do nothing more than decorate our homes for a few scant days.
- Instead of promoting Christ's words of peace, we are still at war with ourselves, particularly at the checkout counter.

If this has all changed, I must have missed the memo on it.

In the workplace, we exchange superficial gifts more because we feel we have to rather than because we want to. I would much rather have a heartfelt handshake than most

of the gifts I have received in the office, but then again, this probably isn't politically correct either. I have even seen people compete over who is going to give the most extravagant gift to someone for political purposes as opposed to the generosity of their heart.

It is also customary to hold office parties this time of year, much to the delight of caterers, restaurants, hotels, entertainers, etc., but I wonder if the substantial money expended here would be put to better use by rewarding the employees with a bonus instead.

Following Thanksgiving, the media immediately shifts its programming into the Yule tide swing with Christmas music on the radio, and specials on television. It seems a little like brainwashing to me to force you into the Christmas spirit weeks before the actual holiday. I'm sorry, but I don't like being coerced into anything.

I wonder what Jesus would say about all of these shenanigans. First, he would probably wonder who the jolly fat guy was in the red outfit. I imagine he would tell us that we all have our priorities wrong. I can even hear him say, "*Hey guys, you even got the day wrong!*"

If Jesus were to come back, I'd bet he would be kidnapped by the marketing people for at least the month of December, maybe longer.

With this said, I sincerely wish everyone, be you a Christian, a Jew, a Muslim, or whatever, a very merry Christmas, not because I'm trying to force my religious beliefs down your throat, but because I genuinely wish you Peace on Earth, good will toward men. Maybe I do have the Christmas spirit after all.

THINK

COFFEE

First published - 5/13/2008

I actually enjoy a good cup of coffee. I recently celebrated a birthday and in doing a little simple math I determined I have consumed over 25,000 cups of coffee in my lifetime; that's over 1,500 gallons of coffee and a heckofa lot of caffeine.

I began drinking coffee while in college in order to stay up late at night to write a paper or cram for a test. Like a lot of people, I started out by adding cream and sugar to make it palatable, kind of a creamy flavor, but over time I learned to drink it black and believe I have a better appreciation for coffee than when I put in all of the additives (plus there are a lot less calories in a black cup of coffee).

I've sampled coffee from around the world and admittedly some countries are better than others. For example, in Japan, a country that specializes in green tea, it's difficult to find a really good cup of coffee. Brazil has some excellent coffee which they drink in small espresso-like cups. Brazilians jokingly admit that the most important person in a company is the "Coffee boy/girl" as they wander around pouring coffee for anyone wanting it. The coffee is rather thick and strong. Consequently, most people add sugar to sweeten it up. They were amazed I could drink it black, cup after cup.

When I entered the workforce in the 1970's, just about everyone seemed to drink a cup of coffee. Not so anymore. Now it seems people prefer some sort of tea or bottled water. I guess this is why I'm surprised companies like Starbucks have become so successful selling coffee. Somehow they were able to take a mundane product, put a new spin on it, and make quite a bit of money off of it. It used to

be, you would pay as little as a nickel, dime or quarter for a cup of coffee. In New York we would jokingly refer to the "Manhattan Breakfast" as two cigarettes and a cup of coffee for 55 cents, but Starbucks and others have turned the simple cup of coffee into a prestige or elegant dessert, kind of like what you see at a pastry shop, and for a price much heftier than your pocket change. You really have to hand it to American marketing on this one; to take something which costs pennies to make and turn it into a cash cow.

I find it all rather amusing how some people like to hold a pseudo-intellectual conversation about the merits of their favorite coffee. What was once known as "the rocket fuel of business" has become the "national pastime for frivolous discourse." As for me, I just wanted the buzz.

THINK

COMPLICATIONS

First published - 9/30/2008

For years my family had a black and white TV with nothing more than an on/off/volume switch, a knob for channel selection, a rabbit ears antenna, and maybe five channels to pick from (NBC, CBS, ABC, PBS, and maybe a local UHF independent station if you were lucky). If you wanted to change the channel, you had to get out of your chair and go over to the TV to turn the knob yourself; remote controls as well as color TV's were considered luxuries. Programming was good and we watched shows like "Combat," "Mission Impossible," "Andy Griffith," "Bob Newhart," etc. Best of all, it was cheap; aside from the purchase of the TV, it was all free. There were no monthly fees or pay per view.

As we all know, television has changed a lot since then. Today I have a large screen High Definition color TV fed by cable which features hundreds of channels, some included in my monthly charge, others available on demand for a fee. As the number of channels increased it has become more difficult to navigate and locate all of the shows available to me regardless of the on-air guides they provide. Whereas it was commonplace to stay on one station all night, now we constantly change channels to dodge commercials. As an aside, does anyone remember that one of the proposed benefits of Cable-TV was that there wasn't going to be any more commercials? Sure.

My remote control has dozens of buttons on it, but I only use three or four of them. I'm not sure what all the other buttons do. I think one is used to either light my Christmas tree or launch an ICBM, I'm not sure which.

Now that we have so many stations to pick from, the pro-

gramming has been watered down considerably. Unlike years ago when stations signed off the air at 1:00am, and signed back on at 5:30am with the Farm Report, now everyone is on the air 24/7, most of which is filled with meaningless infomercials. Actually, I feel sorry for the insomniacs who are mesmerized by the endless amount of kitchen gadgets, garden tools, and sex toys for sale in the wee hours of the morning, but prime time has also lost its luster. There are very few shows out there offering intelligent plots, decent writing, and good acting. Instead, the media execs want us to watch reality shows that are more surrealistic than anything else. Interestingly, I find myself watching more and more reruns these days, shows like "Combat," "Mission Impossible," "Andy Griffith," "Bob Newhart" etc., but at a heck of a lot more expense than years ago.

Technology is suppose to improve our quality of life, not complicate it, but if television viewing is any indicator, I don't think we have realized this. The quality of programming has deteriorated, operating the equipment is more complicated, and costs have skyrocketed. If this is progress, then I yearn for more simplistic times, such as black and white television.

THINK

CRUD

First published - 12/16/2008

I find it interesting the amount of general crud we collect during our lives. Actually, its rather substantial. We fill up rooms, closets, attics, basements, and garages with a lot of debris, most of which could be disposed of, but we keep it primarily for three reasons: because you never know when someone might need it (which is rare, if ever), it has sentimental value, or we just plain forget about it. This happens both at our homes and at the workplace. At the office though we tend to shove crud in and on desks, put it on the wall, or pile it in the corner.

This brings up an important point: crud is magnetic. The moment we decide to save something, more of the same is collected and stored with it. Business cards are a perfect example of this. People like to exchange business cards as part of introductions or to hawk their products or services. Have you ever noticed that the number of business cards you save never decreases? We're afraid we'll need a person's number some day, so we tend to keep everything. Rarely do we sort through them and file them properly (or encode their contents to an address book). In fact, if you were to go through the stack of business cards you have in your desk, at least 50% could be thrown away. Go ahead, try it.

There is a lot of flotsam and jetsam we like to collect other than business cards though. As a computer man I tend to look at inputs, outputs, and files. For everything my family brings into the house, I am looking for what goes out in the garbage. If there isn't that much trash, I know the crud magnets are at work. This is why it is important now and then to do a little spring cleaning, whereby you purge the crud you have been collecting. If it is something that is

truly worth keeping, file it properly. If not, dispose of it as quickly as possible before more crud collects with it.

Consider this, at some point everything in your house will end up being thrown away. Even if you pass something down to your heirs, someone will eventually say, "*Why on Earth are we keeping this crud?*" and will throw it away. If you have ever had to cleanup after a departed loved one, you know exactly what I mean. You go through all their momentos and keepsakes, which were precious to them, but you scratch your head and ask, "*What in the hell did they want this for?*"

If you look around your neighborhood and consider that everything must ultimately end up in the garbage dump, you've got to ask how and where we are going to dispose of everything. The enormity of the crud we collect is truly mind boggling. So much so, that it makes a Pack Rat look like it's lazy.

Try to remember this as the holiday season approaches and you're about to be hit with a new wave of crud.

THINK

DEATH OF THE BUSINESS LETTER

First published - 9/22/2008

I've noticed I don't get much mail anymore at the office. Of course, I still get bills and junk mail, but aside from this, little else. I can only surmise that only a handful of people know how to write a business letter anymore. Most of the true correspondence I get nowadays is by e-mail and telephone (both of which have their share of junk).

When you do get a business letter today, it seems to be poorly written in terms of style, layout, and grammar. I know we have made a lot of progress in word processing technology over the years, but it sure seems people don't know how to run such things as spelling and grammar checkers. I think the real culprit here though is text messaging which has basically annihilated any sense of syntax and word formation.

Now, instead of this...

Dear Sir,

It was a pleasure talking with you today. Concerning your order, I have made the correction and credited your account accordingly. Thank you for bringing this to my attention. If I can be of any further assistance, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

We now have this...

Dude,
don't tabooma. cy. All is kewl. cm.
stys
plo

Actually, I don't blame Gen X and Y for these bad writing habits as they are only innocent victims of technology. Instead, I blame my generation for not teaching them how to communicate properly in a corporate setting.

I first learned to write business letters in my high school typing class and have written numerous letters over the years, but the kids today don't take typing anymore and are definitely not familiar with writing for business. Text messaging may be fine for quick and dirty interpersonal communications, but it also leads to some horrible writing habits. I don't care what your age is, a well written business letter can work miracles in terms of sales and service. Too bad it is slowly disappearing from the corporate landscape.

THINK

DIVORCE

First published - 4/9/2007

I recently read the divorce rate in the United States is at an all-time high of 47%. This jives with a lot of friends of mine who have also been divorced, as well as my High School class. I even had a classmate who was married three times after being out of school for only five years.

Most of the divorces I have known of were simply because they married too young and didn't really know what they were getting into. Frankly, they married for lust as opposed to love. This makes me think that we make marriage too easy or convenient to get into without really thinking about it. Nobody offers a training program on marriage at the high school or college level. Most people simply jump into it and hope for the best, yet discover the worst, particularly the cold reality of divorce court. Maybe what we need is a trainer's permit or some sort of certification program before people are allowed to marry. In other words, I think we ought to make it more difficult to marry as opposed to easier. Maybe we should treat a marriage license like we do earning a drivers license. For example, attend classroom instruction, pass a test, then get a temporary permit whereby the couple can live together, and if all goes well, you can get a marriage license. If it doesn't work, than no legal proceedings are required; the couple just separates. I would bet this would lower the divorce rate radically and put a lot of lawyers out of work.

I just think its odd that for an institution we consider so important that we put forth the least amount of effort to prepare ourselves. People should go into marriage with both eyes wide open, not their fly.

DOCTORS' OFFICES

First published - 7/16/2007

One of the most uninviting places to visit has to be a Doctor's office. First, we normally go there because we have a pain or suffer from some ailment which doesn't put us in the best of moods to begin with, but to add insult to injury, you have to contend with the peculiarities of the doctor's office staff, a very cold group of workers who are more concerned with processing you like an order as opposed to treating you like a human-being. On your first visit to a doctor's office, you are bombarded with a substantial amount of paperwork in triplicate, which I guess we have to thank our lawyer friends for. I visited a new doctor recently and was overwhelmed by the paperwork. There were more waivers of rights than there was anything pertaining to my medical history. I felt like I was more in an attorney's office than a doctor's.

The decor of doctors' offices are basically the same which is pretty plain, with outdated or irrelevant magazines to read, and a whiff of isopropyl alcohol in the air. I find patients in the waiting room tend to keep to themselves and do not like to engage in conversation, maybe because they're embarrassed by their ailment or maybe because they only speak a foreign language. When you try to strike up a conversation with someone, they look at you like they are being interrogated by the FBI or border patrol. On the walls of the office are the doctor's degrees and certificates which are intended to impress you. Some doctors tend to over-due it though as they frame everything from their college degree to their safety patrol or bar mitzvah certificates.

I guess what irritates me the most though is making an appointment with a doctor which he or she rarely keeps. If I've got an appointment, medical or otherwise, I tend to

arrive a few minutes early as I do not like to be late, but doctors' really do not care about your time, even when you take time off from work to visit them. I've got a real problem with this as I wouldn't treat my customers this way. If the doctor is late, my impatience slowly brews until I can't take it anymore and storm out of the office (I've done this on more than one occasion), and frankly, I wish more people would do this. The office staff then tries to threaten you that they will still bill you for the appointment, which is actually a veiled threat. I just point out the time to them, and threaten to bill them for my lost time. I just can't figure out why after practicing medicine for so long, they can't make a simple schedule and keep it. Everybody else does. To me, its a sign of disrespect.

Doctors are not alone in terms of having poorly run offices; Dentists are just as guilty, but the only thing worse than a doctor's office has to a hospital, which even the doctors describe as, "*One of the unhealthiest places on Earth.*"

THINK

THE DRIVING TOP TEN

First published - 8/13/2007

I recently drove from the South to the Midwest and back again. It has been quite a while since I've driven a long distance (about 1,000 miles each way) and it caused me to remember why I don't like to take such trips anymore. We all have our own little idiosyncrasies for driving; for example, older people tend to move more slowly and cautiously than younger people who race pell-mell down the highway; and people tend to drive according to the customs of the geographical region they come from regardless where they currently are. Nonetheless, I have assembled a "Top 10" list of the basic driving habits that really irritates me and, if corrected, would make driving a lot more bearable for all of us. There is nothing earth-shattering here, just some observations on common driving deficiencies:

10. TURN SIGNALS - I guess I'm among the few people who still know what that little stick to the left side of the steering column is all about. It amazes me how many people do not use turn signals anymore. Maybe its because most of us are driving with one hand on the steering column and talking on a cell phone with the other. I guess letting another driver know where you are turning pales in comparison to asking Aunt Edna what to pick up at the grocery store. I tend to believe people who drive with a stick shift are more inclined to use turn signals as they are less likely to be talking on the phone as they are shifting (although I have seen it done). As trivial as the turn signal appears to be, it is a simple and effective means of communicating to other drivers what your intentions are, be it a turn or a lane change, but I think most drivers just want to keep others guessing what they are doing.

9. TAILGATING - You see this a lot in situations where younger and more aggressive drivers are frustrated with the old codgers driving below the speed limit. Its a little nerve-racking seeing someone draft another car like it was the Daytona 500. It makes you wonder why there aren't more accidents. Maybe the best way to overcome this problem is to assign times during the day when we are allowed to drive, thereby overcoming the problem of different driving speeds; for example:

Age	Morning	Lunchtime	Dinner
16-22	6:00am - 7:30am	1:30am - 12:00pm	3:00pm - 4:30pm
23-65	7:30am - 9:00am	12:00pm - 1:00pm	5:30pm - 7:00pm
66-90	9:00am - 11:30am	1:00pm - 3:00pm	4:30pm - 5:30pm

You are on your own anytime between 7:00pm - 6:00am.

8. OBNOXIOUS TRAFFIC LIGHTS - This is more of a problem with the Department of Transportation than a particular set of drivers. I don't know who programs the traffic lights these days, but someone seems hell bent on gnarling traffic during rush hour. Maybe its a game someone is playing with us as to who can cause the biggest traffic build up. I've had people tell me that traffic lights are becoming very expensive. If this is true, maybe it would be more economical to replace them all with traffic cops who at least know what they are doing. I realize we have some pretty sophisticated computer technology to help us with traffic but I for one don't see how it is helping us. When it comes to traffic control, I still don't believe a computer can match the commonsense of a human being.

7. WEAVING - No, I'm not talking about drunk drivers driving erratically on the highway. Instead, I'm talking about the younger people who are weaving between lanes at breakneck speed, either on motorcycles or high performance vehicles. Weaving has become somewhat of a national pastime on our interstate highways, a dangerous

game of "Chicken" that could kill not just the drivers, but the other innocent drivers who are trying to mind their own business as well. Why can't they just stay home and do this on their X-Box or Playstation as opposed to driving the rest of us crazy?

6. LOST "OUT-OF-TOWNERS" - You know what I mean; those people who are just plain lost and instead of reading a map, they are content to slow down at every intersection to see if this is the road they should turn into. Wouldn't it be nice if the out-of-towners simply drove in the right-hand lane with their emergency signals flashing to let us know they are lost and to avoid them? It will never happen.

5. RUBBERNECKING - This drives me particularly crazy as I have been tied up in miles of bumper-to-bumper traffic too many times only to discover that drivers were rubbernecking to look at some insignificant problem on the highway. I don't care if the problem is large or small, keep your eyes looking forward and drive the car. You can always read about the accident in tomorrow's newspaper. Hey, maybe that's it: Instead of sending out a tow-truck or emergency vehicle to the site of a problem, let's rush a news team to the site first so they can report on the accident which the other drivers can tune into on their radios.

Rubbernecking turns small problems into larger ones.

4. LACK OF COMMON COURTESY - How many times have we seen people cut off others, or someone not allow another driver to enter traffic? Far too many I'm afraid. I tend to believe how we drive is a reflection of our socialization skills. As opposed to cooperating, we tend to viciously compete on the roadways which, of course, leads to road rage. Wouldn't it be nice if we had some other signal to use other than the one finger salute?

3. SLOW TURNS - Lately I've been seeing a lot of drivers who don't seem to know how to make a turn. Instead of just slowing down a bit before making their turn, I'm seeing people come to almost a standstill; kind of like having an invisible red light they are obeying. I hope they are not seeing something that I'm not.

2. EXPRESS LANE DRIVERS - Another name for the express lane is "passing lane" which perhaps more accurately describes the intent of the left lane on our highways. It disturbs me when it isn't used for this purpose. For example, some people get into the express lane and do nothing more than the speed limit, if that. They act like a pace car when the danger flags are out. I don't know why they do this other than they want to deliberately irritate the other people driving around them. It is kind of like them saying prissily, "Well the speed limit is 55 and I'll be damn if I'll let anybody go faster than that." I just wish I had a James Bond type of car where the rear axle would extend with knives on the end to rip out their tires.

1. CELL PHONES - Well, Duh!! What did you think my number one would be? I wish I had a jamming device which would shutdown all cell phones around me when I'm driving. This would force the other drivers to use both hands on the wheel and concentrate on traffic.

The rules and regulations of the road are really not that complicated. I remember when I first took the written test when I turned 16. The one section I found humorous is where they asked you to identify various street signs. For the "Crossroad" sign they gave you the following multiple choices: 1-Crossroad ahead, 2-Church ahead, 3-A person died on this spot. I wonder how many people got this wrong? Interestingly, I remember the Valedictorian of my High School class (a real "Brainiac") failed the written test three times. I guess he was looking for the meaning of life

in a stop sign.

Driving should be a simple and pleasurable experience. Unfortunately, it's not. It seems we go out of our way to misinterpret the rules or devise our own on the fly. Which makes me wonder who is passing out the drivers licenses: 1-Homer Simpson, 2-American Foundation for the Blind, 3-Your local gas station attendant (Hint: we haven't had gas station attendants in 30 years).

Back in 1965, CBS aired the National Drivers Test during prime time, the purpose of which was to educate adults and try to determine the level of driver competency. This was well received and helped improve awareness of basic driving techniques. Sounds like it's about time CBS ran it again.

THINK

DRUG WARNINGS

First published - 5/6/2008

Whenever I want to find out the latest in the world of medicine I just tune into the evening news. I think there is now an FCC ruling whereby only drug ads can be shown by the news media. Everything else has to wait until prime time. I suppose the reason for this is because only people over 40 years old watch the news anymore, and this is the market the drug manufacturers are after.

The drug ads are aimed at treating everything from heartburn, to cancer, to cholesterol, to erectile disorders, and everything in-between. We probably have a pill for just about everything which we inevitably see during the evening news. Interestingly, all of the drug ads seem to be the same (and I suspect only one ad agency produces them). The first half is spent painting a rosy picture of how their product can solve our problems, but the last half is spent with warnings required by the FDA of the possible side effects. Unlike the first half where the narrator cheerfully articulates the product, the warnings are reviewed at a fast clip, kind of like a car salesman on the radio. The dialog by the announcer goes so fast that we only grasp a couple of words clearly, such as "*possible side effects include...*" and "*consult your doctor before taking...*"

It bothers me that I cannot fully grasp all of the warnings, so, as a public service, I've done some research and compiled the warnings into a single statement for your use:

"Do not take while awake or asleep. Should be taken one hour before or after either eating or vomiting. Possible side effects include a six hour erection, dizziness, memory loss, acute depression, shortness of pants, lack of appetite, a compulsion to shop at WalMart, nausea, er, ah...did I mention memory loss?"

Consult your doctor before taking. He isn't doing anything right now and doesn't mind innocuous telephone calls in the middle of the night. His number is 800-325-3535. Go ahead, call and wake him up right now; it's only 3:00am. If you cannot sleep, why should he?"

Now play that warning back at twice the speed and you get an idea what we, the consumers, comprehend.

Here's a better idea; why not just tell the public to read the instructions before using the drug? And write the instructions in terms John Q. Public can understand, and not just the attorneys for the drug companies?

THINK

EMPTY NESTS

First published - 6/18/2007

I have finally reached that stage in my life where my children have grown up and are off pursuing other interests. Its kind of strange experiencing the empty nest syndrome. You start to notice small changes right away, such as how the volume of trash goes down, as does your water, power, and food bills. The phone doesn't ring as much and its generally a lot quieter around the house at night. Maybe the hardest part is changing your eating habits. Instead of shopping and cooking for a group of people, you find yourself staring at the TV over a Marie Callender pot pie or a Stouffer's pizza. It takes quite an adjustment to learn how to cook for two.

As your offspring leaves, you determine its finally time to clean out their rooms. This is when you find that socket set you've been missing for the last five years and your old records and CD's you had forgotten about, and when they come back for a visit they look at you mortified as to why you found it necessary to clean out their rooms. "*Wasn't it okay the way it was?*" Some people like to go the extra mile and replace the furniture and create a new guest room or den. This really exasperates the kids as to why you didn't do this earlier when they were still home.

Although you were always looking for a little peace and quiet around the house after the kids were gone, now you find you cannot sleep as the house seems too quiet to you. I guess we get conditioned to a little helter-skelter being around us.

You also discover you're starting to get some free time on your hands. Instead of school functions and chasing the kids around the ball fields, you finally have time to reac-

quaint yourself with your spouse. The only problem is you are not in your twenties or thirties anymore and you both find more solace in reading a good book or watching a movie than chasing each other around the bedroom. You're not dead yet, but you come to the painful realization that life isn't quite the same anymore.

But perhaps the hardest part of the empty nest is realizing the kids are no longer chasing you around anymore and that you are now chasing them. You no longer take them for granted and cherish every moment you speak to them on the phone as well as every e-mail or letter they send you. The hardest part is simply missing them.

THINK

EVERYBODY'S GOT ONE

First published - 8/20/2007

In talking to my network of friends and business associates, I've discovered that everybody seems to have a family skeleton in their closet, a "Black Sheep," meaning there is some relative who you can count on to disrupt the harmony of the family. This could be a nutty aunt or uncle, a brother or sister, son or daughter, you get the idea. Time and again they seem to go out of their way to embarrass the family. Consequently, we like to keep them locked up at major family functions such as at weddings or get-togethers. We keep them at arm's length as we do not want their screwy life to disrupt our own and pray they do not drain the family emotionally or financially.

I always found it interesting that American presidents have had to keep a lid on certain relatives. For example, Jimmy Carter was always worried about the antics of his brother Billy who was best known for his beer and registering as a foreign agent on behalf of the Libyan Government. Ronald Reagan worried about what his offspring might say in public. I think Patti's pictorial in Playboy probably pushed him over the edge.

But the presidents are not alone in this regard. I think everyone has some relative, either distant or close, that has caused heartbreak for the family either because of money, substance abuse, something said out of turn, committing a crime, or just their whacky personality. I remember my father-in-law had an estranged brother living in Florida whom he hadn't spoken to in years over a fallout they had regarding the care of their elderly parents. Once a year though he would call his brother on the phone; if the brother answered, my father-in-law would promptly hang up on him before saying a word. He just wanted to know "*If that bastard was still alive.*"

It seems strange we all have some dysfunctional person in the family we have to deal with. It is very awkward for all involved and is something we don't like to openly discuss with others but I think it's a fact of life. I think the old adage sums it up nicely, "*You can pick your friends, but you cannot pick your family.*"

Maybe this is why we liked such shows in the 1950's like "Leave it to Beaver," "Father knows Best," or "The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet" ("Adventures"?) Critics claimed their squeaky clean personas were unrealistic but it was a lifestyle we all yearned for. Today, shows like "The Simpsons" and "Married with Children" reflect life as we know it, complete with embarrassing relatives and situations which many claim are more realistic.

Frankly, I think if we honestly had a choice, we would rather live more like Ozzie and Harriet than Homer and Marge Simpson, but such is not to be.

THINK

FINDING A GOOD MECHANIC

First published - 2/5/2008

Years ago we used to use the local "service station" for basic car repairs, such as tune-ups, lube jobs, tire rotations, oil changes, etc. There was usually a senior guy there who you trusted to take care of your car, and if he didn't know how to take care of a problem, he would know someone reliable who could. Local service stations though disappeared as the price of gasoline escalated and replaced by mini-marts that also happen to sell gasoline.

Today you basically have four choices for taking care of your car; do it yourself, dealerships, service centers, and independent mechanics. Sure, you can still repair your automobile yourself, if you have the time and inclination to do so, but cars have become more complicated over time, as well as over-engineered, making them much more difficult to work on than years ago. You can also take it to the dealership where it is typically "hit or miss" in terms of getting good workmanship. More troublesome to consumers though is when they go in for one thing to be fixed, and the dealership recommends five more things; I call this "harvesting" of the consumer by the dealership, others call it a "shakedown," but it is an expensive proposition nonetheless.

Service centers are usually run by tire companies who also try to "harvest" the consumer by selling new tires at every opportunity. I also don't find the mechanical workmanship to be very good at these places. I had a mechanic at one of these centers replace a worn belt on my engine. Unfortunately, he put on a new belt backwards which caused the water pump to spin backwards causing the car to overheat and make a strange squeaky noise. It took me a long time to figure out what was wrong. I took it to an

independent mechanic who appeared to be reputable. He thought the transmission was breaking down and that I should replace it, at considerable cost. I took it to another who thought there was a problem with the engine seals. I finally took it to a mechanic who studied the problem and discovered that the belt was simply on backwards and rather inexpensive to correct.

To me, auto repair is about trust. If I trust the expertise of the company or individual working on my car, I will gladly pay them whatever they ask, but if the trust is broken by either a mechanical snafu or harvesting of the consumer, I'm going to pick up my marbles and go somewhere else, and blacklist those who have wronged me, as well as tell my friends about them.

I have seen a lot of mechanics come and go in my area. Those that are out to make a quick buck rightfully don't last very long, but those who are honest and conscientious about their work are worth their weight in gold (such as the mechanic who figured out my belt problem). If you find such a mechanic, hold on to him and tell your friends about him. Without such support, these craftsmen of the auto world will eventually disappear.

When we go into service shops, we want to believe they will maintain our best interests like they did at the service stations of yesteryear. In reality, most are interested in only maintaining their own interests and consumers are crest-fallen when we discover this, usually too late. Perhaps what is needed is an independent consumer rating system implemented over the Internet whereby we can grade the companies and people who service our cars. Without such a watchdog, we will inevitably go on spending good money for bad service.

THINK

FINDING JESUS

First published - 5/26/2008

I recently had a friend confide in me that he had found Jesus. Frankly, I didn't know he was missing. Religion is always a touchy subject, but in the Christian world we still find people who have sudden epiphanies about their faith. I think these are the same people who slept through Sunday School years ago and are just now catching up.

Years ago I went back for my high school class' 20th reunion. I hadn't seen most of the people in quite some time. Those that were jerks in high school, were still jerks as grownups. The people who were "wallflowers" in high school actually turned out quite well, but what I found particularly interesting were the people who were heavy into alcohol and drugs or had promiscuous reputations in high school had all found Jesus. Some wore prominent crosses around their neck and it was kind of awkward trying to talk to them. When you asked them about what they were doing with their lives, they would inevitably tell you how Jesus had saved them. I never did find out anything else about them. I even had one guy quote me chapter and verse on the evils in the world today. I thanked him for his words but said I needed some more ice for my drink.

I guess the secret to finding Jesus is that you must have screwed up pretty bad somewhere along the line and, in desperation, you turn to the Bible where you have your revelation. What I find disconcerting though is that these people now feel they are authorities of the faith and unless you share their zealousness you are perceived as a heretic. I fail to see how those of us that didn't screw-up, attended church, and practiced our faith accordingly were somehow not on a par with those who just caught on.

I don't want to be too harsh on my friends who find Jesus though. After all, I would rather have them study the Bible than continue down a road of self-destruction, but guys please remember this, just because you've found the faith, doesn't mean the rest of us have been napping.

THINK

FIXING TOILETS

First published - 1/7/2008

As the man of the house I have had to do a lot of odd jobs around it, everything from fixing sprinkler heads and garbage disposals to replacing lights, but I would have to say one of the most irritating jobs to perform is fixing the toilet. Regardless how clean they are, I don't think anybody likes to work on a toilet which typically breaks down at the worst possible moment, such as just before you host a dinner party.

It seems you never have the correct parts on hand to fix the toilet. You then have to go to the hardware store where you inevitably pickup the wrong parts which forces you to return them to the store and pickup replacements. For those of you who have had to fix a toilet, wouldn't it be nice if they had standard parts so you picked up the right thing the first time? I remember one time when I picked up the wrong overflow pipe. It worked fine, but the back toilet lid sat up several inches too high. I kind of felt like the guy on the old Ed Sullivan show who spun dinner plates on top of six foot wooden sticks. The wife didn't think it was funny either.

I also had to replace the copper tubing that feeds water to the toilet with some of the new flexible tubing. These worked great but the sales clerk sold me lines that were simply too long. Now my toilet looks like its got a Boa Constrictor hiding behind the bowl.

The biggest problem though is when you have to totally replace all of the guts in the tank. No matter how you try to drain the tank before you work on it, whenever you unscrew the master screw underneath it, water inevitably comes out either on the floor, you or both. I'm sure some-

one who designed the tank did this deliberately for a good laugh. They also designed it so all of the screws are in the most uncomfortable place possible, making it awkward at best to loosen or tighten them. In most cases you feel like Helen Keller groping around underneath the tank.

Thomas Crapper is credited with the propagation of indoor toilets, hence the use of his name to denote what you are using the toilet for. I find it somewhat ironic that the name of the person who gave us what is generally regarded as the most useful plumbing device ever is now a term we use in a derogatory sense. I wonder what would have happened had his name been something else like "Schmidlap"? Would we say, "I have to take a good schmidt"? But I guess we use something like that already.

Toilets may be invaluable indoor commodities but I wish they were easier to work on. I guess the alternative would be to go back to outhouses and Sears catalogs.

THINK

FUNERALS

First published - 11/27/2007

Something I don't think we do well as a species is funerals. It seems I have been attending a lot of them lately. More than anything, I believe funerals are for the living as opposed to the dead; I see it as part of the healing process for the loved ones left behind. I don't think the dead can hear our eulogies and ceremonies. It's a shame we don't tell people how we feel about them while they're alive. After all, isn't it a little late after they have passed? It also amuses me to listen to people who give heartfelt testimonials for the dearly departed, yet aggravated them to no end while they were alive.

I'm also amazed by the cemetery markers and monuments we leave behind. It seems they are either ostentatious or modest. If you look at the "Find a Grave" web site, you can look up the markers of a lot of celebrities. I find it interesting that the "Rat Pack" alumni (Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, and Sammy Davis, Jr.) all have modest markers. Quite a contrast to their larger than life presence they had when they were alive. U.S. Presidents tend to have large headstones or monuments, usually near their library, home, or place of birth. I find it interesting in local cemeteries when some families build monuments that challenge the size of those built for the presidents. I wonder if they thought they were bigger than the members of the "Rat Pack"? To me, large monuments are there to beg for attention from the public. If they didn't get the attention they deserved while they were alive, why bother when they're dead? But if you've got the money and a slick funeral salesman, I guess the sky is the limit, which was precisely the point of the movie, "The Loved One," a cult comedy classic from the 1960's starring Robert Morse and Jonathan Winters. In the movie, Morse works for a funeral home who specializes in opulent ceremonies and grave sites. Ultimately, the funeral

home invents a way to rocket bodies into orbit around the Earth, for a hefty fee of course.

I have also seen families argue over family grave sites, specifically who is going to be buried next to who. Believe me, such nonsense has led to family feuds on more than one occasion. To solve the problem, I think you should hold a family dinner party. Whoever, sits next to who at the table is how you will be planted in the ground.

After a loved one is gone, I have seen families turn on each other in terms of divvying up the estate. Unless every napkin is spelled out in the will, it is not uncommon to see family flare-ups over who is to get what which can turn rather ugly and vicious.

As I said, funerals are not something we as a species handle very well. The only person who fortunately misses out on all of the excitement is the departed. I'll bet this is where the expression "lucky stiff" comes from.

THINK

HANDICAP PARKING

First published - 12/11/2006

Let me make something clear from the outset, I don't have a problem with the concept of handicap parking as it was originally intended to be used, it is certainly needed by those people who need a little extra room to maneuver and access an establishment. No, what bothers me is how some people abuse this privilege. For example, is it just me or do you also see a lot of people these days who look perfectly healthy using handicap parking? The other day I saw a guy who I judged to be in his early 60's pull his new Lexus convertible into a handicap spot, he hung a handicap sign on his rearview mirror, hopped out of the car and went into the store. Heck, he looked healthier than I did. This is not some rare occurrence either; I've seen this a lot lately, particularly with people of all ages driving new cars. Maybe the handicap sign is a standard option in today's luxury automobiles. I must have missed the memo.

It used to be handicap spots sat empty most of the times; not so anymore. Now they are actively used, but I wonder how many people truly need them. To me, its become more of a status symbol than anything else. I like the smug look on the faces of these people, such as the Lexus driver; it was kind of like, "*Ha, I get to park up here while you clods have to park out in Timbuktu.*"

I wonder if anyone in government or in our police departments is truly worrying about the abuse of handicap parking, or has it become the valet parking of the 21st century. If so, where do I sign up to get up handicap parking permit?

THINK

HANDLING FAILURE

First published - 11/17/2008

Failure is something we don't handle very well as a species. You would think we would be better at it since we all experience some form of failure in our lives, from major blunders to minor snafus. We fail due to errors in judgment, unforeseen circumstances outside of our control, or perhaps we underestimated the amount of risk involved, or we were just plain wrong about something. We have all failed at something and I cannot imagine life without failure. Yet, we don't seem to know how to handle it with tact and dignity. We even go so far as to cover-up our failures or blame others as opposed to acknowledging defeat. Admitting failure is a bitter pill to swallow, yet I have more respect for the person who admits and takes responsibility for his failings than someone on the sideline who does nothing but jeer or condemns the failure. Nobody should be made to suffer embarrassment from failure if they have put their best foot forward. There is no disgrace.

I'm certainly not suggesting we encourage failure, but we should at least understand it. For example, I've noticed people today tend to be sore losers. This may be because of our competitive nature and our inclination to try and win at all costs. Consequently, we do not tend to be gracious in defeat. In contrast, Abraham Lincoln shocked everyone after losing his first Senate race by appearing at the victory party of his opponent and offered a genuine hand of friendship and support. This did not go unnoticed and was well remembered by his opponent who fought for his candidacy years later. From this perspective, Lincoln teaches us that you are not going to lose all of the time, and it might not be wise to burn bridges to those who might assist us later on.

I've also noticed some people become so obsessed with the possibility of failure they go into a state of paralysis whereby they prefer doing nothing as opposed to risking the sting of defeat. This is a tragedy as it represents the arrest of progress.

I think the biggest problem with failure is that we do not recognize it as a natural part of life. For every success, there is usually one or more failures not far behind. To illustrate, I believe bankruptcies have quadrupled since the 1980's, probably due to some rather liberal bankruptcy laws. If you have declared bankruptcy, you may have saved yourself, but I can guarantee you someone else is suffering a loss, such as the creditors you owe money to. If we establish a system where it is beneficial to fail, people inevitably will (see Murphy's Law).

I tend to believe in the old axiom, "*If you make 51% of your decisions correctly, you will be a success.*" In other words, you don't have to bat 1.000 to be considered a success, just stay ahead of your mistakes. Frankly, it's a matter of carefully picking your fights and contests.

Perhaps Rudyard Kipling put the best spin on failure in his famous poem, "If"; to paraphrase:

*"If you can make one heap of all your winnings
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings
And never breathe a word about your loss;*

*Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And - which is more - you'll be a Man, my son!"*

Perhaps the only thing we do worse than failure is success.

THINK

HOME

First published - 2/10/2009

This is not so much a pet peeve as it is an observation about the concept of "Home." I don't think we really appreciate home until we leave it for awhile, whether it is to go off to school, the military, or we simply grow up and move away. Even if we go on a business trip for a day, week or longer, we still want to get back to our own surroundings where we can kickback, scratch, belch, and be ourselves. It is our fortress of solitude.

If we've been away from home for an extended period, we notice small changes upon our return, perhaps a new street sign, new neighbors who painted the house next door or changed the landscape, or maybe the decor of your house has changed a bit. Nonetheless, you still know the roads, the people, the weather, the food, along with the schools and buildings. Even though your bedroom has been converted to a guest room, it is still "your" room with all of its hidden nuances.

This leads to an important point, I tend to believe that home is where your parents are. Sure, some things may have changed but home is still basically the same; your parents maintain the same routine, talk about the same type of things, and enjoy the same comfort food and special snacks you've grown accustomed to. This means there is a predictability factor associated with home. Even if your parents move, such as retiring to Florida, their new house or condo bears a striking resemblance to their old one; they decorate it the same way, they organize and store things the same way, and the tempo and cooking are still the same. In other words, you intuitively know where everything is and can predict what's for dinner, what they'll watch on television, and when everyone will go to bed.

Even when your parents pass away and the house has been sold, and you now live hundreds of miles away, there is still a special fondness in your heart for "home." Home is much more than a physical structure, it defines what we once were and who we are now; it is our roots, our values, our likes and dislikes, our beliefs, and it represents our growing pains where we experienced both triumph and disaster.

Unfortunately, some people drift through life without any concept of home, perhaps due to a failed marriage or maybe they were orphaned. Such turn of events can emotionally scar a person and leave them with an identity crisis, never knowing their place in the world. As such, home obviously represents much more than a roof over our heads; it is an interesting tapestry reflecting our personalities, our values, and how we want to live our lives. It is most definitely where the heart is. Pity those who do not have one.

THINK

HOMEOWNER ASSOCIATIONS

First published - 2/19/2007

I have served on several board of directors over the years for a variety of nonprofit organizations, but I don't think I can find a more thankless job than serving on a board of directors for a Home Owners Association (HOA). I served my HOA a few years ago as Vice President, and then President. I got involved because the Association was screwed up financially and its governing docs required considerable update. During my year as President I was able to turn the Association around, from operating in the red to operating in the black without having to raise dues. Further, we able to make sweeping changes to our governing docs and made the board more accountable for their fiduciary responsibilities. Basically, I made the trains run on time.

Despite all of my efforts, there were those in the neighborhood who wanted to run me out of town on a rail. I think the problem here is that I see nonprofit organizations as no different than a commercial enterprise and should be treated as such. Others do not share this view and think it should be run as some sort of "feel-good" club. Its not. I don't care what the nature of the association is, a nonprofit organization is a legal entity that has responsibilities to its constituents. Not surprisingly, the officers of organizations such as Home Owner Associations are often well meaning volunteers with some time on their hands, but haven't got a clue as to how to run a business.

Believe it or not, some people get involved just to gain a title and establish some sort of notoriety. I remember one pompous Past President of our Association who loved to attend neighborhood cocktail parties, shake everyone's hand and say, "*Hi, I'm President of the HOA.*" I found this

amusing as this was the same clown who almost bankrupted the Association.

Then you have the problem of the cranky retirees who have nothing better to do than complain about the slightest thing, such as a blade of grass out of place. Instead of offering assistance to help out in some capacity, they would rather sit on the sidelines and bitch.

Like I said, I've been involved with a lot of nonprofit organizations over the years, many of which exhibit the same characteristics, but I would have to say that Home Owner Associations are perhaps the worst, which I affectionately refer to as "Snakepits."

THINK

HOMO SAPIEN ASSHOLE

First published - 9/7/2006

This is going to be an unusual essay; it may sound a bit avant-garde at first, but it is designed to make a specific point. So please bear with me. And for those of you insulted by the slang used herein I offer my sincere apology right upfront.

I remember an incident years ago where my father was on his way home late at night after being out of town on a business trip. At the time, he owned a new Cadillac. The interstate was relatively empty that evening making motoring a pleasure, particularly at a late hour. The exit he took emptied on to a main suburban thoroughfare which naturally intersects with several smaller streets, one in particular is an unusual junction where a feeder lane merges with the main road. Cars in the feeder lane must yield to drivers in the main thoroughfare; not only would commonsense dictate such an apparent yield, but it is clearly marked as such with a road sign.

As my father passed through the junction, he noticed out of the corner of his eye an old Ford slamming on its brakes in the other fork, narrowly missing him. Evidently, my father had surprised the other driver who was failing to yield. What ensued was an excellent example of what is today called "Road Rage." In the other driver's eyes, some "Fat Cat in a Cadillac" had just cut him off. Outraged, he began to chase my father down the highway hurling every obscenity he could think of. To try to stop and reason with him was definitely out of the question. To make matters worse, he then tried to drive my father off the road. Only by some clever maneuvering on my father's part was he able to elude the other driver. He felt lucky to have escaped without any material injury to himself or the auto-

mobile.

Afterwards he reflected on the incident and why it occurred. From the other driver's perspective, he obviously felt my father had wronged him, even though commonsense and a clearly marked road sign proved otherwise. His perception of the situation had no basis in reality. In his mind, he was right and my father was wrong, and acted accordingly. It was this little episode that inspired the concept of "Homo Sapien Asshole" and the basis for this essay. As illustrated by the other driver, human beings become assholes when their perception of reality is inconsistent with others and act abnormally. We have all encountered Homo Sapien Assholes at various points of our lives; sometimes we get hurt, sometimes we survive. Or, even more frightening, perhaps we were the ones instigating the problem. So, look upon this work as a "Survival Guide" to understand the nature of the beast and how to deal with it.

WHAT IS A HOMO SAPIEN ASSHOLE?

The term "ass" is actually an American variation of the old English word "arse" which has always referred to the human posterior, usually in a sexual context. For many years, "ass" was used in relation to a stubborn or stupid person, such as that related to a Jack Ass (donkey), e.g., "*He is making an ass of himself.*" However, it has been theorized the term "asshole" didn't come into our vernacular until the 20th century, probably during World War II. Although "asshole" is simply an extension of the word "ass", it has a much stronger connotation than its predecessor and is now used throughout the world. Some examples:

"ASSHOLE" IN DIFFERENT LANGUAGES

Danish - røvhul

Dutch - klootzak

Faroese - reyvarhol
Finnish - persereikä
French - trou du cul
German - arschloch
Greek - kolotrepa
Hungarian - seggfej
Italian - buco del culo
Portugese - cuzão
Russian - zdhopa
Spanish - gilipollas
Swedish - rövhål
Swiss - foura chül

Although a little something may be lost in the literal translation of the word; make no mistake, it is how it is intended to be used.

So what exactly is a Homo Sapien Asshole? Is it something we intuitively know or does it have identifiable characteristics? Actually is not as abstract of a concept as you might think. Although the word is often used to curse another person, we shouldn't necessarily take offense to it, after all we are all HSAs at different points in our lives, some more so than others though. The trick is to get by with a minimum number of occurrences.

DEFINITION - a person who acts in a seemingly absurd manner towards others based on their erroneous perception of reality either for personal gain or to react to a situation.

PERCEPTION

Our perception of reality dictates our actions. For example, we dress according to how we believe the weather will be; if we believe it will be cold, we will wear a warm coat. But if our perception is wrong, that the weather is actually quite hot and humid, wearing a warm coat would be considered

a foolish decision. A false perception of reality is one of the underpinnings of HSA and can be caused by such things as attention deficit disorder (easily distracted), or by our own sense of worth (ego).

Having worked in the computer field for a number of years I can tell you authoritatively if the input is wrong, everything else that follows will be wrong. Even if a computer's processing logic is correct, the resulting output will be wrong. The human being is no different. Even if we have competent mental faculties, if we do not perceive a situation correctly, we will act incorrectly.

So, what influences our perceptions? Our human senses (predominantly sight and sound) coupled with our attention to detail. In our "Road Rage" example mentioned earlier, the other driver failed to see the yield sign and only saw a Cadillac pass in front of him. Consequently, he leapt to the wrong conclusion and took the wrong remedy. Sometimes we deliberately block our perception of reality due to ignorance or preconceived assumptions. In other words, we "tune out" and listen to only what we want to listen to. In the first O.J. Simpson trial for example, the prosecution presented some compelling evidence as to his guilt. This went in one ear of the jury, and out the other. Instead, they saw him as an unfair victim of a prejudicial police force and consequently acquitted him.

One exception to this is in the area of foreign translation. If we try to converse in a language we are not proficient in, we may not properly understand what is being said. In this situation, the person is not a HSA, just simply misguided. For example, I once had a visiting Australian ask me in the office for a "rubber"; whereas he was actually asking for an eraser, I knew it as a prophylactic, hence confusion. The same phenomenon is true observing the local customs in a foreign country, e.g., dressing inappropriately

or how we conduct ourselves. These are simply innocent mistakes.

If our perceptions are correct, yet we do not have the mental faculties to process them accordingly, as in a mentally challenged individual, that person is not an HSA, just incompetent. Therefore, the HSA is a mentally competent person who either accidentally or deliberately doesn't understand their surrounding reality. From this viewpoint, animals cannot be HSA's. In fact, the designation "Homo Sapien" is a clear indication only people can be assholes. Some may argue their pets are assholes. This cannot be true since they are not graced with the adequate brain power to reach logical conclusions and are easily deceived.

Alcoholism and drug abuse are no excuses for being an asshole. In fact, it heightens your ability to become one. Assholes do some of their best work when under the influence.

One must ask when are we old enough to become a HSA? Do infants qualify? No. An infant is totally dependent on others and excused for any accidents they may cause. Only when a person gains consciousness and begins to think for him/herself can he/she become a HSA. An infant has no preconceived notions and, therefore, cannot act upon them.

Is being an asshole hereditary? As much as we would like to think it is in the genes, it is not. Being a HSA is learned behavior we pick up from our contemporaries.

INDICATORS

So what are the characteristics of a HSA? How do we know when someone is acting like one, even our self? First, a HSA is not restricted to any socioeconomic class. We can find them in all walks of life, in all cultures, all over the world.

The following is a list of common characteristics of a HSA and are not in any particular order:

- When we try to talk authoritatively about something we know nothing about, e.g., "bullshit".
- We use abusive language to berate another, particularly when they don't deserve it.
- We make change simply for the sake of change. Even worse, not changing when times dictate you should do otherwise.
- We jump to conclusions without learning all of the facts. The press is notorious for shaping public opinion by carefully controlling the dissemination of information. People act according to what they know; if they do not know the facts, they may make erroneous decisions.
- When you cut someone off to suit your whims, either in traffic or a conversation. There is a general lack of courtesy today which is greatly affecting our interpersonal relations.
- When you have huge egos with little regard for others (aka the "I am God" complex). This includes pseudo-experts who think they know everything, and you know nothing. Dictators also fall into this category, be it a government, company, or nonprofit organization. These are people who zealously exert their will over their constituents because they have little regard for them. HSAs do not like to have their authority challenged.
- They viciously slander someone's integrity for personal gain. It has become common in politics and our legal system to vilify or demean a person when the other person takes an opposing viewpoint. The intent is not to just win an argument, but to humiliate and control your opponent.

- When a person has risen above the level of their competency and, instead of seeking guidance or help, pretends to know what they are doing. We, of course, remember the classic adage, "*You don't have to be a brain to be a boss, just an asshole.*"
- Lastly, HSAs tend to rationalize their actions. They are never at fault and blame others for their mistakes. Very few people today are willing to admit they made a mistake and assume responsibility. When was it ever a crime to admit "*I screwed up?*" Again, this is ego related.

WHEN IS IT NECESSARY TO BE A HSA?

Sometimes it becomes necessary to be an asshole. Two examples come to mind; First, when you are cornered in a situation, you can conveniently become an asshole to cloud an issue. A vintage example of this was President Clinton's infamous deposition in the Paula Jones case; "*It depends on what you mean by 'Is'*" - a classic. Becoming a HSA can be a clever tactic to distract people from the real issue at hand.

The second example, is to use assholeism as a means to motivate people to work harder. When you cannot get your subordinates to do their work properly, it sometimes becomes necessary to rant and rave (aka "browbeating").

You can only justify acting like this when you want to get your way. Regardless, you are still a HSA.

HOW TO DEAL WITH A HSA

Okay, you have a HSA in front of you. What do you do? Don't panic. Reasoning with a HSA is out of the question since they believe their point of view is the only one that is valid. You have only two alternatives: walk away from them (and let cooler minds prevail) or become a HSA yourself

and do battle accordingly. Regrettably, it is this latter alternative which has led to many court cases and wars.

Automobiles and HSA naturally go hand-in-hand. You are either driving badly or the other person is. Everyone has a different viewpoint on the open road and everyone believes theirs is the most important; from the retired spinster who can barely see over the steering wheel, to the kid who weaves through traffic like a kamikaze on his motorcycle, to the soccer mom who pays more attention to her cell phone than the road, to the guy running at breakneck speed to keep an appointment, to the delivery man who waddles through traffic and double-parks, etc. The variety of driving personalities inevitably will cause a HSA incident to occur on a routine basis. You can bet on it. Pity the traffic cops who have to deal with it.

Love also seems to bring out the asshole in us, whether it be during courtship or competing for the attention of another. How many times have we done something stupid to impress another? Too many. Divorce results when our perspectives change and we suddenly wake up next to an asshole. There should be some sort of mandatory test to check compatibility prior to wedlock; e.g., review comparable values, goals, and maturity. It would sure save us a lot of aggravation (and money) later on.

If you have become a full time HSA, it is difficult to become a real person again (ask Rev. Jim Bakker). Arrogance has a lot to do with it; it propels the ego; lose the arrogance and you are on the road to becoming a recovered assaholic.

And for those of you wondering, Yes, I too have been an HSA and, no doubt, I will screw up again in the future for which I apologize in advance. Admitting you have a problem is the first step towards recovery.

THINK

HOW WE DRESS

First published - 4/7/2008

I realize "business casual" is the norm in most companies today but I am wondering if we have forgotten how to dress appropriately for all other occasions. Years ago, when we attended church, we were usually expected to dress up as a sign of respect, but I don't see too many men in suits and ties anymore. There was also a time when you flew on an airplane or went to a Las Vegas casino you were expected to dress up. Alas, no more. In fact, we now look pretty grungy most of the time.

Recently, my wife and I went to see comedian Martin Short at Ruth Eckerd Hall here in Clearwater where he was putting on a one man show and supported by a five piece band. You might remember Marty from Saturday Night Live, Second City TV, Jimminy Glick, or some of his movies, such as "The Three Amigos" with Chevy Chase and Steve Martin. Nonetheless, prior to the show, we waited in the lounge area enjoying a drink and doing some people watching.

We saw quite an eclectic group of people dressed in a wide variety of tastes. I noticed the older men tended to dress up for the occasion, some in suit and tie, but most with a sport coat and slacks. The younger men tended to wear jeans and T-shirts. Rarely did they wear a collared shirt, but my favorite was a gentleman I judged to be in his late 50's who wore a blue Polo shirt, cargo shorts, and tennis shoes (no socks). To me, he stuck out like a sore thumb, looking more like he belonged at a picnic as opposed to the theater. I chalked it up to changing times.

Martin Short put on an excellent show that evening. In addition to his standup comedy, he demonstrated a fabulous singing voice which I didn't know existed. During

one portion of his program, he asked for three volunteers to help him with a sketch related to his "Three Amigos" movie. He went into the audience and selected three gentlemen, one of which was the guy I saw earlier dressed in the cargo shorts. As the three stood on the stage, Short briefly interviewed each of them prior to performing the skit. When he got to the cargo shorts, Short gave a shocked expression and facetiously said, "*It's good to meet someone who still knows how to dress for the theater.*" This resulted in gales of laughter from the audience. Short approached the man more closely on the stage, who now appeared a little embarrassed, and said, "*Let me ask you something, if this is how you dress up for the theater, how do you dress when you go bowling?*" I think the man wanted to crawl into a hole at this point, but took the ribbing graciously.

I know Short did this all in jest, but I sensed he was trying to make a point. Since he knew the patrons had paid good money to attend this prominent venue, he was trying to put on a first class show and dressed accordingly, and I believe he was offended to see someone dress like a slob for the occasion. His message was clear: How we dress is a sign of respect for the others around us. The cargo shorts may have been fine for some other more casual events, but not for the theater. As for me, I found it interesting how he was able to teach this lesson through comedy, and hopefully nobody's feelings were hurt, but then again, there are some people who are just plain thick and will never get it, no matter how you insult them.

THINK

THE IMAGERY OF PROFANITY

First published - 3/3/2009

I really don't have a problem with someone who swears, provided it is done in the proper context and with a little finesse. Profanity is useful for venting frustration, expressing disgust, anger, or to ridicule someone. They are powerful words which command attention and are intended to produce a reaction, but I think we use such words to invoke a particular image as opposed to what they truly mean. The same is true in racial expletives where we try to invoke certain images and stereotypes. Frankly, I find the etymology of such expressions extremely interesting and amusing.

Although some of the profanity we use today can be traced as far back as the 14th century, most originated in the 1800's, but it took two World Wars to popularize such expressions, a truly joint American-British effort. Let me review some of our more popular expressions for which I apologize **if anyone is offended (if such profanity bothers you, I suggest you turn back now)**.

"Son of a bitch" - At one time, SOB was considered one of the most common and offensive insults in America. Today, it is considered somewhat mild and is commonly found on television. Obviously, it is intended to describe an illegitimate bastard, but you've got to wonder about the person who first put it together which was most likely used in a derogatory vein towards someone. It sounds like it was used in anger and, lacking the skills to condemn the other person properly, attacked the person's ancestry. Interesting image though isn't it? Instead of saying we do not like the person, we attack his mother's character. I think today though we are more inclined to use SOB to express frustration as opposed to attacking someone.

"Asshole" is another old expression and I've always found it amusing how someone established this analogy between the human posterior and how someone deports himself. I guess "loser" wasn't in our vernacular yet, but it most certainly is an effective way of classifying people. Closely related to it is, "Kiss my ass" (which I think replaced "Go to Hell"), as well as "Dumb Ass" and its counterpart "Smart Ass" (of the two, I think I would prefer being called the latter as opposed to the former).

"Shit" is derived from the Old English word "shite" meaning to defecate or befoul. As an aside, the "e" was dropped in the 16th century, but it wasn't until the 1870's that it became popular. To me, the various manifestations of shit are what makes for some of the most interesting images around:

- "Shit for brains" is one of my favorite images and I would love to know the person who came up with this one. I think it is closely related to "Shit head."
- "Shit faced" refers to someone being intoxicated, but the literal translation is funnier.
- "Shit on a shingle" is from the military delicacy of chipped beef on toast.
- "Shit house" of course refers to outdoor plumbing (see "outhouse").
- "Shit list" is something nobody wants to get on.
- We are "Shit out of luck" when we are down and out.
- And "Eat shit" doesn't exactly endear us to another, and it's something we certainly do not want to order from the menu.

My favorite derivative though is "Bullshit" which can be used in a variety of contexts, particularly in business. How "bull" got linked to "shit" is a bit of a mystery, but certainly makes an interesting image doesn't it? The Japanese love the word "bullshit" as they have nothing comparable to it in their language.

"F**k" - Then, we come to the "Big Kahuna" of profanity, the legendary "F" word, which still makes a lot of people squirm uncomfortably. Actually it is as old as the word "shit" and was originally used as an expletive of anger as opposed to sexual intercourse. When you think about it, it's an ugly word that sounds vulgar thereby making it preposterous to associate it with the act of love. Maybe if it had a French twist it might sound more appealing, like "Le fuckéé."

As in the use of "shit" there are many derivations of the "F" word we have used over the years:

- "Go f**k yourself" - which would be an interesting trick if someone could do it and, in all likelihood, it would cause a lot of people to stay in bed all day.
- "F**k it all" - is either an admission of defeat or someone with a greatly exaggerated libido.
- "Motherf**ker" - which is used to attack someone's integrity through incest.

Even the word "snafu" is linked to the "F" word, meaning: situation normal, all f**ked up. Yet, "snafu" is much more socially acceptable than the root word itself.

Obviously, there are many other words and expressions we use which, when we think about them, you have to wonder how they were derived and the image associated

with them. I wonder what the circumstances were to trigger such outbursts. As for me, I just listen and laugh, which is probably not the reaction most people are looking for. Because of all of the interesting quirks in the English language, I guess it is no small wonder why it is the hardest language to learn.

THINK

IT'S A MAD, MAD, MAD, MAD, MAD WORLD

First published - 7/28/2008

Is it just me or does it seem there are more people pissed off these days? There doesn't seem to be any more chuckles, no fun, no sense of achievement, no conquests, just survival. I can't remember the last time I ran into someone in business or socially who said, "*Business is great, we're knocking them dead!*" or "*Wow, good news, wait until you hear this!*" And you have to remember that I know a lot of people in a lot of different businesses, in a lot of different places. No, there seems to be more doom and gloom these days. The excitement is gone, and we seem to be enveloped in a depressing dark cloud. Even the jokes I read on the Internet these days are stale and are more politically correct than funny. It makes you wonder if we have lost our sense of humor.

If my thesis is correct, you have to wonder what is causing us to change. Is it generational or some sort of social change? If you look around I guess there's not a lot to be cheerful about these days:

- Bankruptcies and foreclosures are up.
- The unemployment rate is up (and we still ship jobs overseas).
- Inflation is up and we're taking less home these days.
- Divorce is up, and interestingly the marriage rate is down.
- We're losing market share in several industrial sectors to foreign competition.

- The economy is sagging and we're rightfully worried about our portfolios.
- We're frustrated in the use of ever changing technology.
- We have a pending presidential election in the offing with candidates that are more ho-hum than inspiring.

Bottom-line, nothing seems to be working for us lately. There also seems to be less enthusiasm and positive thinking in the workplace. For example, people are more apt to engage in callous arguments as opposed to rational discourse. People commuting to work look more like the march of the zombies as opposed to an invigorated workforce. Maybe its because they are being micromanaged to death.

Then we hear about such things as road rage, sports rage, work rage, and shootings in our schools and businesses. People seem to "snap" more readily than in years past and some accept it as normal behavior. Sorry, it's not.

The fact we can't build prisons fast enough is indicative that being mad seems to be contagious and has perhaps reached epidemic proportions. We either need to start passing out the chill pills or find some outlets to harmlessly vent our rage. For example, in Japan it is customary not to be confrontational with your boss. Basically, you must bite your tongue. Realizing this might cause worker frustration, Japanese businesses may have a small room where the employee can go into and beat the boss in effigy with a bamboo stick, thereby releasing some steam. This may seem a little strange, but it has proven to be effective.

As the producers of Monty Python's "Spamalot" said at the show's opening, "*We need silly.*" I tend to believe this. People are much too uptight these days. A little sense of

humor in this day and age can go a long way to relieving tension. Even something as simple as a compliment can help relieve stress, as well as a sincere, "Good morning; how are you?" But for some reason we have forgotten these simple pleasantries which promote cooperation and goodwill. I guess what I'm saying is that it is time to unplug the iPods, close the cell phones, and learn to be civil again. In other words, lighten up.

THINK

JOB INTERVIEWS

First published - 3/20/2009

Something that really irritates me in the corporate world today is how companies interview candidates for a job. Instead of having you describe who you are, what you've done in your professional life, and what skills you know, Human Resource types today ask questions like:

"Where do you want to be five years from now?"

"How do you handle pressure?"

"How do you deal with conflict?"

"Tell me something nobody knows about you."

"Did you notice the receptionist outside had six fingers?"

"What is your favorite color?"

"If you were an animal, what would you be?"

Instead of getting to the meat and potatoes of what the person knows, interviewers are asking pseudo-psychological questions aimed at examining the personality of the candidate. It kind of reminds me of the asinine question Barbara Walters asked of movie stars years ago, "If you were a tree, what kind would you be?"

These questions are aimed at determining what your personality type is (such as A, B, C, D) and how you present yourself, e.g., how articulate you can present an argument, and how well you can fit in with the corporate culture.

Instead of dancing around the issue, and using amateur

psychological techniques, why don't they just ask for a psychological profile of the candidate instead, as prepared by accredited professionals? Somehow the interviewing questions asked today remind me of the neurotic Personnel Manager, Granville Sawyer, in the movie classic "Miracle on 34th Street."

Another interviewing phenomenon I have trouble with is what is now called "speed interviewing," which I'm told is derived from "speed dating," whereby a number of people are interviewed briefly in a rotational format. It kind of reminds me of how people audition for "American Idol" and some of the other entertainment contests. It might be nice for a first blush, but hardly a way of honestly getting to know someone.

The last thing I think is lacking in interviewing is professional courtesy. It used to be if you sent in a job application, you would get a written note acknowledging the company received it and what they intended do with it, which perhaps was nothing. Further, after an interview, the candidate would be sent a letter thanking him/her for their time and let them know what their status was, but you don't see such letters anymore, not even in this age of e-mail. To me, this says a lot about the professionalism of the employer, which is probably not very good.

THINK

JOB TITLES

First published - 4/21/2008

I think the idea of job titles originally came from the military centuries ago when it was necessary to delineate the chain of command, such as generals, colonels, captains, etc. In business you were simply known by your profession, such as accountant, attorney, baker, doctor, laborer, etc. As big business flourished though we started to add titles like the military to denote the administrative hierarchy, such as president, vice president, director, manager, supervisor, etc. Today it seems like everyone has to have some impressive job title and the more obnoxious, the better. The I.T. field alone has more than its share of cryptic titles, for example: New Metrics Analyst, Content Engineer, E-mail Channel Specialist, Metamediary CEO, Chief Knowledge Officer, and Chief Internet Officer. I even ran into one entitled, "Webmistress Extraordinaire." I'm not too sure what these titles mean (I can only guess) but it sure seems that titles are becoming increasingly more important to people, probably because it massages our ego and own self worth.

I had a friend who was an I.T. manager in New England who had an opening for a programmer at a very generous pay level with excellent benefits. Interestingly, he had one guy turn him down simply because he wanted the job title of "Software Engineer" as opposed to a mere "Programmer."

Some companies cannot offer their employees large salaries and give fancy titles instead. I think banks probably have more vice presidents than just about any other institution. In fact, they have taken it to the sublime whereby they have Executive Vice Presidents, Senior Vice Presidents, Associate Vice Presidents, Junior Vice Presidents, etc. I wonder where the janitor fits in this scheme?

Frankly, I think most of these job titles are nothing more than malarkey, impressing nobody but themselves. I am finding those companies who emphasize teamwork are moving away from fancy job titles, even going as far as to omit job titles from business cards altogether. In other words, by having everyone on the same level playing field, ego problems are eliminated or at least minimized.

Then again, there are those who will always need a big salary and job title. I am reminded of an I.T. Director who had a pressing project to be accomplished requiring him to hire many new people. Basically, he was told by his superiors to hire whoever he wanted, give them whatever they wanted, and whatever job title they desired; but when the project was over, fire them all.

I guess the point is job titles have more value to you than it does to others, and if you cannot operate without being referred to as the "Head Raccoon" or some other obnoxious job title, then you've got some real problems pal.

THINK

THE LAST MAN ON EARTH

First published - 5/5/2009

As many of you know, I have never been a big fan of cell phones, particularly as people use them when driving their cars. My loathe for them was such that I vowed to be the last man on the planet to own one. Well, after seeing countless housewives in the grocery store talking on them, the multitude of idiots using them in cars, kids on tricycles, the homeless gabbing away, even prisoners using them, and finally seeing nobody else in line ahead of me, I finally succumbed and acquiesced to get one. Actually, my wife got it for me as she was frustrated in tracking me down and felt it was time to bell the cat.

Unlike a lot of people, I see the cell phone as something used in emergencies and not as an integral part of my daily life. I can do very well without one. No, I do not need a cell phone to relieve the tedium of waiting in traffic, the radio will do just fine; nor do I find it necessary to entertain someone while sitting on the toilet or standing in the shower. There is a time and place for everything and I do not believe cell phones fall into these categories. Then again, this is not the first time I've been accused of being old fashioned, and likely it will not be the last. I tend to believe I am more pragmatic about the use of the cell phone than most and have no intention of allowing it to change my life style. Consequently, I hereby pledge the following in the use of my cell phone:

- That I will not use it while driving an automobile. If I really need to use it, I'll pull off the road to talk on it thereby not causing a traffic hazard.
- That I will not use it in the bathroom. I'm sorry, if another party wants my full attention, they will just have to wait.

- That I will keep it muted or off in a public venue and if I find it necessary to talk to someone in a public setting, I will excuse myself so that I do not interrupt others.
- That if I find myself in a situation where I must either focus my attention on either a pressing problem at hand or talk to another party on the cell phone, I will quickly determine which has priority and devote my attention to one or the other, but not both. In other words, I may ask the caller to excuse me so I can finish what I am doing and will call them back when it is convenient for me to do so.
- That I will be judicious in distributing my cell phone number. I don't need another blockhead calling me regarding some inconsequential nonsense. If I give you my number, it means I trust your judgment, value your friendship or business, and recognize you will not redistribute it to others unless I ask you to. Further, I will do likewise to safeguard the cell phone numbers I have in my address book.
- If I have a voice mail message that says I will call you back, I will, but if I have a voice mail message stating I will be unable to return calls, don't hold your breath.
- That I will not send text messages while driving or performing some critical function.
- That I will read the manual even though it is written incomprehensibly by programmers who haven't got a clue what "user friendly" means.

In other words, I pledge not to let the cell phone run my life, but I'll run it instead. I may be the last man on Earth to get a cell phone, but, alas, I fear I'll be the first to use it rationally.

THINK

LAWYERS

First published - 9/23/2008

Of all of the professions out there, I think being an attorney has to be one of the most awkward. People tend to either love them or hate them, but most seem to regard them as a necessary evil. Lawyers are well aware of this which often causes awkward social situations for them. Consequently, they are somewhat cliquish and socialize amongst themselves. Whenever lawyers and judges get together, they have to be careful what they say as it might be used against them or they might need a political favor sometime down the road. Being "on-guard" 24/7 can cause anyone to become uptight.

Some people hold attorneys in high regard as some sort of lofty intellectuals. As for me, I see them more as the original Systems Analysts who are knowledgeable about the legal system and know how to traverse it. Nothing more, nothing less.

If an attorney is proficient in his or her profession, the next logical progression is to either become a judge or politician (as they are the ones who typically write legislation). I tend to believe such politicians spend an inordinate amount of time worrying about verbiage and chalking up political brownie points than getting anything done, but I digress. The point is, lawyers are naturally inclined to become political. They can't help it, it's in their DNA.

Actually, most attorneys aren't bad people and, believe it or not, possess a good sense of humor. So why do so many people hate them? Actually, I think there are certain types of lawyers that malign the profession, namely "ambulance chasers" (personal injury) and divorce lawyers. I think this is where the adjectives "frivolous" and "ruthless" were de-

rived from, but it is this small group of attorneys that give the profession a black eye and probably caused Shakespeare to call for all of them to be killed.

Whenever I tell a lawyer joke to my attorney friends, they politely chuckle but I can tell it gnaws on them. Nonetheless, they say nothing. As tasteless as the joke may be, they never utter a word in defense of their profession as it might offend someone. Again, they have to be on guard 24/7, but it kind of makes me wonder what kind of jokes lawyers tell when they are amongst themselves, probably Doctor related.

As a note, for a comprehensive listing of attorney jokes, see Lawyer-Jokes.us on the Internet which seems to have all of the classics, such as:

Q: What's the difference between a lawyer and a catfish?

A: One is a slimy, bottom dwelling, scum sucker. The other is a fish.

THINK

MATRIMONIAL TERRITORIALISM

First published - 10/28/2008

I've been married for over a quarter of a century now. This doesn't necessarily qualify me as an expert in marriage, but I have learned a couple of things along the way. For example, the marriages that have endured over the years seem to be those based on situations where the couple have learned to compromise on a variety of things, such as food, music, sleep, driving, work, relaxation, conversation, family, religion; the list is actually quite extensive. In other words, there is a lot of give and take until the couple finds common ground in terms of their values and living habits. When this happens, the couple works more like teammates than as two individuals trapped in a relationship. If the couple can't find the fulcrum it's just a matter of time before they are divorced.

As part of the compromise process, married couples unknowingly establish territories within the home. You won't find the boundaries written on any map, but they are there nonetheless. To illustrate, garages, basements and attics are typically the domain of the husband, whereby things are maintained and organized in accordance with his wishes. Of course, the wife is welcome to visit the territory, but if she tries to reorganize it, she is met with stubborn resistance from the husband. Conversely, if the man decides to reorganize the bedroom, living room or kitchen, it is highly likely he will be met by Attila the Hun.

Bathrooms tend to be neutral territories as they tend to be shared, but if bathrooms are separated for him and her, then all bets are off and you have to have a visa to be granted entrance. The same is true with closets. Hallway closets tend to be open to the public, but personal closets requires an armed escort.

As long as the couple understands their territory and respects the borders accordingly, harmony will prevail in the household. If not, all Hell will break loose. So, as important as compromise is in establishing a successful marriage, an inherent part of it is knowing the boundaries of your relationship. It is better to live with a partner who knows and respects the boundaries of the territories as opposed to an invader who crosses them.

THINK

MICROCHIPPING

First published - 6/10/2008

Every now and then I have to clean out my wallet; it's kind of like an annual spring cleaning ritual. Guys don't particularly like to clean out their wallets as they never know what they're going to find in them. Consequently, men's wallets tend to grow and swell in size. Since we typically sit on them all day, we don't address the problem until our legs begin to suffer from sciatica. I guess that's nature's way of telling us to clean up our act.

There is actually nothing remarkable about what we carry in our wallets, mostly credit/debit cards, a driver's license, insurance cards and other forms of identification. Interestingly, if you were to remove all of the credit and identification cards, there really isn't much left and our wallets would look rather thin. This got me thinking on how preposterous all of these cards are, and how vulnerable we are to having them lost or stolen, thereby causing us headaches to replace them. It also got me thinking about alternatives. Since we microchip our pets for identification purposes, why not microchip humans? Now hear me out on this first...

For dogs and cats, veterinarians inject a tiny chip about the size of a grain of rice just under your pet's skin between the shoulder blades. The number on the chip is then entered into a data base to keep track of them. These chips have become rather sophisticated and can now hold quite a bit of data. There should be no reason that such a chip couldn't be hidden somewhere in the human body and contain all of our identification and credit/debit card information. Instead of swiping cards, special scanners could access the data off of the microchip.

Not only would this free us of sciatica, but we wouldn't have to worry about losing our wallets anymore which, I might add, is something every parent worries about with their offspring (not to mention their whereabouts).

The microchip could also be used to record blood type and medical conditions such as diabetes, heart problems, and medication. This would be invaluable to paramedics and physicians in case of an emergency. It could also carry specifications about our health insurance.

But why stop there? Why not add keys to the microchip which could unlock and start your car for example? I'm one of those guys who is forced to carry a lot of keys with me for my home, my cars, and my office (39 keys in all). No matter how I organize the keys, they still clunk around with me wherever I go. If I had them microchipped, I could free myself of this ball and chain once and for all.

Now I know what you're going to say, microchipping would just be another step towards a world of "Big Brother" where the government or someone would invade our privacy and start monitoring our activity. I've got news for you pal, that started when they issued you your first credit card. Since we're already heading in the direction of implanted chips for cell phones, why not go the extra mile and add personal, financial, health identification, along with eKeys?

The technology is certainly available to us, including encryption, and as I see it this could certainly thwart identity theft, but would we sit still to have something like this injected into us? Well for those of us who have an aversion to needles and the concept of personal identification, probably not, but for those of us who want to be unshackled from our wallets and keys, why not? It makes perfect sense to me. Either that or I learn to carry a purse.

THINK

MORAL DECAY

First published - 10/20/2008

I recently went out to dinner with a business friend who owns a medium sized manufacturing company with just over 50 employees. Over a couple of cocktails he started to express to me his frustration with his people. He claimed to pay them well, provides a comfortable work environment, and offers a respectable benefits package. Regardless, he wished his people were more dedicated and professional in their attitude. He yearned for the old days when there was more pride in workmanship (and you thought I was the last of the whiners). I've known my friend for a long time and know his management style; he works well with people and although he insists on organization and structure, he tends to empower his workers to assume responsibility as opposed to micromanaging them to death. Frankly, I know a lot of people who would love to work in his environment, yet he still had this problem of employee attitudes and asked me for my thoughts on it.

I told him what he was experiencing was a simple matter of moral decay. Regardless of the work environment he provided and his interpersonal relations with his employees, there are other forces at work, namely our eroding system of values. I explained the following to illustrate the point:

- It used to be a person's word was his bond. If he made a verbal commitment, you could count on it. Today, lying and deceit are commonplace in just about every corner of our society. Consequently, our expectations to honor a commitment have been lowered and, even worse, we have lost faith and trust in our fellow man.
- We used to have dedicated workers who cared about

their work and doggedly saw a task through to completion. Now, we no longer associate our reputations with our work products. This may be because we have laws today making it difficult to reprimand or fire anyone regardless of their performance. Further, we now suffer from the "99% complete" syndrome whereby we never seem to finish anything with the excuse that, "We'll get around to it." In other words, determination and pride have been replaced by indifference which erodes production and opens the door for competition.

- We used to respect our bosses and were loyal to our companies. As long as you were employed by someone, you bit your tongue and endeavored to help the company succeed. For example, I knew a loyal Boeing employee who steadfastly refused to fly on anything but Boeing aircraft. Today, concepts such as corporate loyalty and respect are a thing of the past as employees no longer trust management, and management doesn't trust its workers, all of which leads to an inordinate amount of back stabbing and political maneuvering. It's no small wonder that today's employees are regarded more as free agents as opposed to team players.

To me, morality means giving of one's self, putting aside our self interests for the common good of all. However, if in fact such things as honor, courtesy, pride, respect, sacrifice, courage, dedication, commitment, loyalty, honesty, perseverance, integrity, and professionalism, are adjectives of the past, then we are indeed witnessing the moral decay of our society. Actually, it's rather remarkable we have progressed as far as we have as a species, but it makes you wonder how much farther we would be if we had the moral fortitude to overcome greed, corruption, and other vices. As Samuel Clemens correctly observed, "*Man is the only animal that blushes. Or needs to.*"

Interestingly, American morality seems to change whenever we change presidents from one political party to another. I can think of no other single event which benchmarks a change in our culture than the passing of the presidential torch. Consider for example, the social changes incurred in the transition from Eisenhower to Kennedy, from Carter to Reagan, and Bush to Clinton. A change in Presidential party signals a change in social norms and moral priorities.

So what can be done about deteriorating moral values? You would think that our religious institutions would have a significant role to play here. Not necessarily. There are those who go to church simply to absolve themselves of their sins from the preceding week, not to correct any character flaw. After being "cleansed" they revert back to their indiscretions. No, we need to lead by example, reward accomplishments and truly penalize violations as opposed to looking the other way. There will always be those who are morally handicapped and persist in attempting to undermine our system of values, but we owe it to ourselves and our posterity to persevere. Our ability to surmount moral corruption defines who we are as a civilization.

Years ago, Arnold Toynbee said succinctly, "*Civilizations die from suicide, not by murder,*" meaning our social problems are actually self inflicted. If we can cause the problems, I would like to believe we are strong enough to solve them, regardless of the price to be paid. Going back to my friend's problem, what is needed is a little inspiration, hope, belief in ourselves, a little brother/sisterhood, and a legal system that doesn't stifle morality, but rather promotes it. Regardless of the magnitude of the job, from major to menial, workers must believe they are leading an honorable and worthwhile life. There is nothing wrong with ambition, as long as it doesn't lead to incessant politics. There is nothing wrong with personal achievement/recognition, as

long as teamwork doesn't suffer. There is nothing wrong with criticism, as long as it's constructive, not destructive. Basically, we just need some common sense and respect for the human spirit.

So, the question comes down to this; Do we still possess the fortitude to do what is morally right? That is a question for each of us to answer and for our heirs to judge.

THINK

MUSIC IN THE WORK PLACE

First published - 8/28/2006

I'm curious, does anyone have a corporate policy on the use of iPods in the work place, particularly I.T. departments? The reason I ask is because I see more and more people plugged into iPods in offices these days. God only knows what they're listening to; I doubt if its Tschaichovsky or Beethoven. Probably some rap crap instead. I've talked about iPods in the past and discussed how they can have an adverse effect on a worker's productivity, but I'm not sure managers are paying attention to this; they're probably plugged in themselves and haven't noticed.

Now don't get me wrong, I'm a big believer of music in the workplace, but the volume and type of music is very important. Like it or not, music does affect our senses and concentration. As much as I like good, old-fashioned Rock and Roll, it is hardly the type of music I want played in the office. The same is true of rap and country. We may like such music personally, but I don't think it is wise to play it in the office. Instead, jazz and "easy listening" stations are probably better choices. The volume and tempo is not too distracting. In fact, I don't believe anyone really listens to "easy listening" music, and that is just the point. Its nice to have something playing in the background without actually distracting us from our work. Offices get hectic enough and some calm music in the background can greatly relieve the tedium.

Any manager who allows workers to plug into their own music is asking for trouble. Basically, they are abdicating control over their environment. Take back control; outlaw iPods in the office, and tune in some more suitable music for your workers.

THINK

NEW YORK CITY

First published - 7/29/2008

I've been visiting New York City in some capacity or another for nearly 50 years and have seen a lot of changes. It's still a great place to do business, shop, eat, or take in a show, but I was taken aback recently by the sheer filth of the city. Sure, it never was an oasis for guys like Felix Unger, but for some reason the dirt really caught my attention on my latest trip there.

The dirt starts at a grungy looking LaGuardia Airport and circles the city (JFK and Newark aren't much better). You see the filth in the soot stained flags flying overhead on buildings, chewing gum paved sidewalks, subways where you dare not touch anything, and general garbage and sewage lining the streets, thereby making New York a veritable minefield to walk through. I would be remiss if I failed to mention the city's taxi drivers who have evidently never heard of soap or deodorant.

The East River is a strange and sickly shade of green. Interestingly, I'm told the aquatic life has improved three-fold in the river since the city started treating the water. I'm sorry, but in my book three times zero is still zero.

You don't see too many trash receptacles on the sidewalks, probably because they make inviting places to plant bombs by terrorists. Nonetheless, pedestrians are forced to either carry their refuse or throw it in the street (mostly the latter).

New York is definitely not a place for those suffering from Mysophobia (a fear of being contaminated with dirt or germs). If you come, be sure to bring at least a gallon of hand sanitizer with you. Frankly, I'm surprised diseases

don't spread faster in New York as just about everything is contaminated one way or another. It makes you wonder what would happen if you were to take one of those lost Amazon tribesman who has never encountered outside cultures and diseases and transported him to New York. Most likely he would catch every disease known to man in a couple of hours and be dead before the morning rush hour.

Some would say this is all part of the ambiance of the city. Baloney! Filth is filth no matter how you try to put a spin on it. It made me just want to go home and take a bath and burn my clothes.

The other thing that caught my eye in New York were the roads which do not appear to have been paved since the 1960's; as an aside, the roads back then looked exactly like they do today - doesn't sound like they've made a lot of progress does it? If you don't already have a back problem, you'll undoubtedly get one after driving over the pot-holes in the Big Apple, and will someone please tell me what genius designed the spaghetti traffic patterns around LaGuardia; he must have been high on something when he came up with that one.

Yes, New York is very cosmopolitan, very wealthy, very sophisticated, etc. The natives are friendly and you can actually have a great time there (albeit expensive). Too bad it's also very filthy.

THINK

OFFICE CLUTTER

First published - 2/4/2008

I cringe when I hear someone say, "*A cluttered desk is the sign of a brilliant mind.*" I don't know who invented this little gem, some say Albert Einstein, but I can't seem to find any record of it. More likely, it was some slob who got called up on the carpet by his boss for running a pigpen.

It has always been tough to run an organized and efficient office, but this seems to have been compounded in recent times when PC's started to pop-up on desks and we allowed employees to eat at their desks. Now it is not uncommon to see a number of wires running everywhere, overloaded electrical sockets, and empty fast food bags and cups laying around. We used to complain about ashtrays, but this appears to be a thing of the past. Instead, we find cigarette butts on the ground just outside of the office or outdoor ashtrays overflowing with them. Very professional.

Since I believe our work is an extension of our personal lives, I tend to think of the office as our home away from home. This makes me wonder what we might find if we visited some employees homes. Are they as big a slob at home as they are at work? If not, why do they find it necessary to trash their office as opposed to their homes?

Office clutter is indicative of management's organization and a part of the corporate culture. Some believe the sloppier they look the more they give the appearance that are hard at work. Not necessarily. More likely, sloppiness is indicative that the person is trying to hide something and is actually quite lazy.

The military understands the need for organization and

keeps their facilities spotless; you are expected to either work on something, file it, or throw it away. If you need new file cabinets, buy them. Your work is obviously not important if you keep the same clutter on your desk all of the time. In fact, such clutter will grow over time. For example, have you ever seen someone with a plastic tray on their desk? Theoretically, such trays are used for work in progress, but you'll notice the trays never empty and, if anything, the paperwork grows. Every now and then you have to simply throw the contents in the plastic tray into the garbage can.

Programmers typically like to keep a cluttered desk. To overcome this problem we warned our programmers to clean up their desks or they might find the debris in the trash. At first, they thought this was a hallow warning. They found we were serious when they came in one day and found their desks spotless (and their paperwork in the garbage). We didn't have a problem with office clutter after doing this a couple of times.

Office clutter is a reflection of a person's professionalism and, as mentioned, a part of the corporate culture. It can be remedied if management is so inclined to do so. I admire an office that is well run and organized. It tells me the people are serious about their work and a company I want to do business with. Just remember, a cluttered desk is the sign of a lazy mind, not a brilliant one.

THINK

OFFICE GOSSIP

First published - 3/17/2008

I have a problem with gossip in the office but I think we are all guilty of some infraction of it at some time or another. Petty gossip is one thing, vicious slander is something else altogether. Not surprising, there is a lot of misinformation floating around in an office regarding people and corporate direction. We often hear of rumors of people bucking for a certain job, looking to leave and join a competitor or customer, to sabotage a key project, or that the company is going to down size or outsource the operations to Timbuktu. Naturally, such rumors can put a damper on employee morale, making it harder to concentrate and see assignments through to completion. Managers should be sensitive to rumors and squelch them as soon as possible. If not, productivity will suffer. To do so, the manager should always keep in ear open as to what is being said around the water cooler or lunch table. Meeting with key members of the staff periodically for a drink after hours can also be useful for detecting what is being said as well as to build camaraderie and trust with the staff.

Perhaps the best way to overcome gossip in the office is for the manager to keep an open line of communications with his workers. This means the manager must be viewed as approachable and trustworthy by the staff. In addition to an open door policy, managers should hold routine meetings and issue memos on what is going on. This can be done through such things as bulletins, e-mail or a private departmental discussion group, but if the manager maintains a closed-door policy, rumors will inevitably circulate.

If rumor control is left unchecked, it can turn particularly nasty. No doubt we have all met people who are past masters at spreading rumors for political maneuvering. Some

people thrive on political back stabbing which, unfortunately, I believe is a part of the fabric of our society. If it were not so, we wouldn't have the tabloid media which thrives on drama, intrigue, and innuendo.

Like it or not, office rumors affects the corporate culture. We can either have peace and tranquility through open communications, or a lot of backbiting and finger-pointing. Interestingly, I have met managers who prefer the latter and use it as a means to set one employee against another in order to determine who is the stronger of the two. Kind of sounds like a new version of "American Gladiator" to me, and something I do not believe any of us signed up for when we were hired. As far as I'm concerned, there is no room in the office for malicious smear campaigns or character assassinations. Any manager promoting such an environment is simply an idiot and should be removed from power, but I have to be careful, it kind of sounds like I'm starting a rumor of my own doesn't it?

THINK

OFFICE MEETINGS

First published - 6/30/2008

I don't think there's too many of us who like to attend seemingly inconsequential meetings. It's hard to look attentive at those meetings where the boss is boring us to death about his recent fishing trip while we have a hot project waiting for us back at our desk. I am amazed by those people who seem to have no problem wasting your time.

There sure seems to be a lot of meetings that are poorly planned and run. Some managers just like to get together and "rap" about what's going on (and maybe sing a chorus of "Kumbaya" while they're at it). Michael Scott, the manager in NBC's sitcom "The Office" is perhaps the poster child for how to hold an ineffective meeting. I think the writers of the show have lampooned the subject from just about every possible angle.

I'm surprised how insensitive those running such meetings are to the people attending it. Understand this, unless someone is looking for an excuse to duck a work assignment, nobody wants to attend an inconsequential meeting.

Back when I first got involved with my homeowners association, the meetings lacked structure and would drown on literally for hours. When I finally became President I bought a gavel and printed up agendas for each meeting. What used to take hours to perform I got down to 55 minutes. In other words, it's certainly possible to put on a good meeting, you just need someone who knows what they are doing.

The other thing that bugs me about meetings is when people show up late thereby holding everybody up. Even worse, some people come totally unprepared. Only an asshole

comes to a meeting without something to write with. Yet, we see this time and again, particularly by the newbies who simply don't know better.

I don't mind a good meeting that is constructive, timely, and well run, but please don't expect me to sit still anymore where we are going to do nothing more than talk about the number of angels that can dance on the head of a pin.

THINK

OFFICE POLITICS

First published - 3/31/2008

When we join a new company, we're all hoping for a fresh start and clean slate. The last thing we want is to get embroiled in political intrigue, regardless of how petty it might seem. Most of us just want to do our work and move along with our lives. Even if this were so, which is rarely the case, we must still deal with "political correctness" as defined by society; we have to recognize certain protocols in our mannerisms, language, and conduct. So, even before we get started in a new job, we have to recognize there is going to be some form of politics, like it or not. I remember visiting a manufacturing company in the Midwest where a Vice President proudly said to me, "*You'll like this place Tim, there's no politics here whatsoever.*" And I think he firmly believed it too. In reality, they had more cutthroat politics than I had ever seen before.

Whether you are a new employee or a visiting consultant, one of the first things you have to determine about a company is its pecking order. An organization chart makes a convenient road map in this regards, but it doesn't truly define the power structure in a company. For example, a weak manager may actually draw his strength from a powerful assistant. Nonetheless, it is important to identify the fiefdoms of the company, who the key players are, and who the allies and adversaries are. Without such knowledge, you will inevitably trip into some political dispute or become an unwitting pawn in a power play. The best advice in the early going is to simply keep your eyes and ears open, and your mouth shut.

Aside from the power players in an organization, the three most common types of political animals you will encounter are the Suckup, the Radical, and the Saboteur. The

Suckup (aka "Brown Noser") essentially has no spine and is the perennial "Yes Man" to the boss. The boss says "Jump" and the Suckup says, "How High?" But the Suckup has a political agenda of his own which typically is an advancement through the assistance of the boss. He therefore bends over backwards to please the boss at the expense of losing the respect of his coworkers.

The Radical represents "the bull in the China shop" or "loose cannon" and is best known for revolting against the status quo, not quietly but loudly, and is not afraid of stepping on a few toes along the way. In many ways he is like Sherman's march to the sea. Perhaps his mission is correct, and perhaps it isn't. Regardless, this type of person has a slim chance of succeeding as his detractors will work overtime to undermine him. When dealing with such a person you basically have two choices: either join him and hope for the best, or get the heck out of his way so that you are not run over.

The Saboteur is perhaps the most vicious of the three and can probably best be characterized as the "conniving weasel" or "backstabber" who schemes to make the lives of others miserable. He is driven by petty jealousy and wants desperately to be seen as a power broker in his institution. Since he has no real life of his own, the Saboteur gets his jollies by undermining anybody that garners more attention than he does. Whereas the Suckup and the Radical can be dealt with politically, the Saboteur is a pest that must be exterminated.

Office politics is about loyalty and trust. At some point, you will be asked to choose sides and this to me is what makes office politics ugly. I might understand this in government politics, but not in a company where we are all suppose to be on the same team. Politics is an inherent part of the corporate culture; some companies deplore it,

others thrive on it. I guess it's a matter of whether a company values the concept of teamwork or rugged individualism. I have found there is much less politics in companies promoting the former versus the latter. Either way, my advice to anyone joining a new company, be it a corporation or nonprofit organization, is actually quite simple: "*En Garde!*"

THINK

OFFICE TEMPERATURE

First published - 1/21/2008

One of the touchiest subjects in any office is the room temperature. This has probably touched off more arguments in the office than just about anything else. It may seem like a small thing but people tend to be passionate about the temperature. When it comes to controlling the thermostat, women typically like to turn it up, while men turn it down.

There are pros and cons to keeping the office cool or warm. If it is cool, people tend to be more alert but it may also affect the joints (as anyone with arthritis can tell you). Interestingly, certain office equipment, such as computers, operate better under cooler temperatures. On the other hand, a warm room on a cold winter day is welcomed by just about everyone, but if it becomes too warm, especially on a summer day, it can put people to sleep particularly after lunch. It can also cause people to slowly become irritable, impatient and irrational which isn't exactly conducive for a cooperative work environment.

If you leave the temperature to the employees to control, you'll probably hear the thermostat click up and down like a pogo stick which inevitably drives heating and air conditioning bills sky high. If you're an office manager, you would be wise to put a lock on the thermostat and hide the key. Whatever you do, don't turn the temperature over to the employees by a show of hands. I've seen this done and believe it or not has led to a division in the employees and hurt morale. As manager, you are responsible for controlling the work environment which includes the temperature of the room as well as other things, such as noise and cleanliness.

As for me, I'm of the school of keeping it "cool" as I would

rather keep the employees more alert during the work day.
If you've got a problem with it, they've got this new thing
out to keep you warm: sweaters.

THINK

OUR RIGHT TO FAIL

First published - 3/6/2008

As a youngster, one of the things I learned early on was that winning and losing was a natural part of any game I played, be it baseball, football, hockey, Monopoly, cards, you name it. Somebody wins, somebody loses. Nobody likes to lose, but as I have written in the past, there is nothing to be ashamed of if you have tried your best, but still failed. In fact, I have more respect for the person who valiantly tried and lost, as opposed to the person who won by cutthroat tactics.

The point is, failure is a natural part of life and an inherent property of evolution (see Charles Darwin). It is a strong message telling us that what we are doing is not working, and we can either learn from it and change or ignore it and perish. It's nice to have a safety net, but where would we be if nobody took a risk? Without failure, life stagnates. We cannot make progress if we are not allowed to fail. Entrepreneurs, adventurers, and other Type A personalities understand in any venture there is a certain element of risk, whereby they will either reap the rewards of success, or taste the agony of defeat. They weigh the risks carefully, then work overtime to assure success, but they clearly understand there is no such thing as a guarantee for success.

There are people today who want to eliminate our right to fail, that nobody should experience the pain or embarrassment of defeat. This is why I have a problem with the bailout plans our government has devised for the banks, automotive industry, and other financial institutions. I contend the bailouts will only be a temporary fix, and the companies will not make the severe and necessary changes to survive in the years ahead. Only failure will cause them to

make the required changes. To my way of thinking, the government bailout plans are only delaying the inevitable.

All of the greed and corruption we allowed to creep into our business practices have finally come home to roost. Consequently, companies are no longer maintaining a competitive edge in business, and are losing money due to unscrupulous self-centered interests and just plain stupid business decisions. The companies are all sorry for the problem and promise to never allow it to happen again. Hell, an accused murderer or rapist couldn't say it any better. They all want redemption without having to worry about paying a penalty. I'm sorry, but that is not how the game is supposed to be played, but then again there are those who want to change the rules so that nobody loses. This is just plain wrong.

If you believe companies will make the necessary changes in their policies and operations, simply because the government is going to bail them out, you are taking it in the arm. Like it or not, failure is the only real catalyst to invoke true changes. Nothing is more powerful to truly change someone, than failure; ask anyone who has experienced it.

Nobody likes to take their medicine, but I'm afraid it is time to pass out the Castor Oil and tablespoons. It may sound silly and I don't expect a lot of people to jump on the bandwagon, but it's time to "*Protect our right to fail!*"

THINK

OUR SENSE OF HUMOR

First published - 1/27/2009

Everyone seems to be grouching about how bad things are today, and maybe they are right, but I wonder how much our sense of humor contributes to our mindset. If you listen to the late night comics on television, everyone is an idiot. Sure we might chuckle now and then, but I find this to be more cynical and destructive than positive and beneficial.

Comedy has changed a lot over the years and I believe it is a reflection of our culture. First, our language has become cruder and more sexually explicit. I believe we can thank Lenny Bruce for this. Just prior to Bruce, standup comedians like Bill Cosby and Bob Newhart won over their audiences with observational comedy whereby they drew upon past experiences and embellished on them. Their routines could hardly be considered risqué, but they would consistently pack the house. This all changed with the likes of Lenny Bruce, George Carlin, Sam Kinison, and many others who introduced shock comedy. Today, nothing is sacred, and it seems we no longer see the humor in simple things anymore, and seem to prefer grungy images instead.

Let me give you an example, years ago Jack Benny and Mel Blanc would bring the house down with their Mexican "Si, Sy, Sue" routine. Abbot and Costello would make the house howl over some of their bits involving math or "Who's on First?" Groucho Marx had a fast wit and tongue who could make your head spin. Today, all of these routines would be considered lame. I think the difference here is that the comedians of yesteryear wanted you to use your head and think. They offered mental gymnastics based on some very simple observations familiar to the common man. If you wanted something risqué, you either had to go to Las Ve-

gas or a nightclub. Today, you can find it on just about any channel on your television set, including Disney.

Today's humor can best be described as "in your face" leaving nothing to the imagination. I'm not saying the humor of yesteryear is necessarily better than today's, but I am noting the differences in perspective and to suggest comedy influences our perceptions and attitudes. We have gone from poking fun at ourselves, our foibles and frailties, to vicious attacks on others; from subtle to biting humor; from suggestive to explicit; from witty to crude; from avant-garde to shocking; from positive to negative. Probably nothing clarifies the difference in comedy better than the Dean Martin roasts of the 1970's to the roasts on Comedy Central these days. The differences are substantial.

The reason I stopped reading Garry Trudeau's "Doonesbury" years ago was because I believed he had nothing positive to say. Maybe it's just me, but I find it tiresome to constantly hear the glass is half empty as opposed to half full. I guess that is why I eventually tuned out Leno, Letterman, Jon Stewart, and Stephen Colbert, even though they still command good ratings.

As the producers of Monty Python's "Spamalot" said at the show's opening, "*We need silly,*" meaning we need comedy to relieve the stress in our lives, but I don't think we're really getting it. Instead of diverting us away from our problems, the humor of today tends to emphasize our problems by telling us how screwed up we all are, that we are losers living in a no-win world. I would much rather hear something like Henny Youngman's, "*Take my wife, please.*" Or Rodney Dangerfield's, "*I could tell my parents hated me. My bath toys were a toaster and a radio.*" And Groucho Marx who asked, "*What do you get when you cross an insomniac, an agnostic, and a dyslexic? Someone who stays up all night wondering if there is a Dog.*"

What's funny is funny regardless of when it was said, but also understand what's cynical is cynical.

THINK

PARENTAL VISIONS OF GRANDEUR

First published - 1/15/2008

Naturally, we all love our kids, but it has always bothered me how parents want to impress you with how much better their kids are than your own. I remember years ago hearing a friend brag to me, "*Well, our little girl has been accepted into Montessori school.*" I would counter by saying, "*Gee, I didn't know she was having a problem.*" I don't think he saw the humor in this.

Back when I was coaching Little League, I ran into many parents who saw their kid as the next Babe Ruth and made sure I knew about it. One by one, they all eventually dropped out of baseball in favor of pursuing other interests or simply because they knew they couldn't excel in it any longer. This was fine with me as it meant I didn't have to listen to the parents' malarkey anymore.

I find it interesting how parents try to live vicariously through their children. I guess they feel they blew it in life and are now getting a second chance through their children. This puts a lot of pressure on the kids to satisfy their parents and not enjoy the moment. Kids have a tough enough time with school and learning how to socialize; the last thing they need is an overbearing parent pushing them too hard. Yes, we want parents to be an active part of their children's lives, but they shouldn't try to live their lives through them. Sometimes, kids just need to be kids.

In Little League, as well as youth soccer and football, it's now quite common to have parents sign a code of conduct requiring them not to be obnoxious at sporting events. I never dreamt we would ever need such a contract, but with some parents trying to live through their kids, I guess I'm really not surprised.

I'm now a little older and have seen the kids grow into adulthood. I find it amusing that the kids who were touted as geniuses by their parents are now working at convenience marts, and the star athletes now work on fishing boats. I guess they either peaked too early or their parents wore them out.

Those parents suffering from visions of grandeur need a reality check. There is certainly nothing wrong with a kid who shows signs of intelligence or possesses a talent, but there is a difference between nurturing their abilities and pushing them too hard. I guess some parents need to be reminded whose life it is, their children's or their own? Whichever it is, please keep it to yourself as nobody else really cares.

THINK

THE PASSING OF PUNCTUALITY

First published - 10/22/2007

One thing that really sets me off is when someone is late for an appointment (you'll probably remember me ranting about "Doctor's Offices" not long ago). It really drives me bananas when the person is unapologetic for being late. To me, being late is a sign of disrespect to the person or persons you are to meet. I believe it was Mahatma Gandhi who said, "*Being late is an act of violence, an act of terrorism, because you unnerve people.*" Consequently I make an effort to keep my appointments and try to arrive on time if not a bit earlier. My friends kid me that I operate on "Tim Time" as I show up earlier than just about everyone else.

Punctuality is a sign of discipline, something we try to ingrain in our youth through school bells. If you're late for a class, you are given a "Tardy Slip" which might carry a penalty of serving in "Detention" (the school's version of jail). Nonetheless, schools are trying to operate on a routine basis and have an agenda to follow in order to properly educate our youth. I cannot imagine a public or private school that doesn't operate according to such structure.

I understand President Bush is a stickler for punctuality, going so far as to lock the door to cabinet meetings when they start. I think it would be rather amusing to see the door handle jiggle from the outside by a Cabinet Secretary who arrived late for a meeting.

Back when I was managing a critical I.T. project, I would start the day with a status meeting with my team of programmers at 8:30am. Inevitably someone would show up a few minutes late thereby holding up the meeting. Being a baseball fan, I would admonish the programmers, "Do baseball players show up at game time? No, they arrive

early to stretch, warm-up and practice a little." (In fact, baseball players are fined if they show up late). To overcome my problem, I changed the start of the meetings to 8:00am ("Tim Time") thereby forcing the programmers to show up earlier so we could properly accomplish our work. It's sad that we have to do such tricks to get people to show up on time.

We could also berate people for being late, fine them, or let them go, but more than anything, it bothers me that people simply lack the discipline and consideration for keeping an appointment. Maybe we need to institute some school bells in the work place and pass out some "Tardy Slips." That would be a hoot.

THINK

PERSONAL ADVERTISING

First published - 12/11/2007

We may not be fully aware of it, but advertising has crept into the American psyche. For example, we used to name sports stadiums after prominent citizens and Presidents, now they are named after the highest bidder, usually a company involved with financial management, energy, or telecommunications. It wasn't good enough for them to just have the largest billboard in the park, but instead companies found it necessary to hijack the name and turn it into a trademark.

We also see advertising on the roadways, not just billboards and buses, but on our own vehicles as well. It's not uncommon to see cars and pickup trucks sporting advertisements describing a person's business, such as a realtor, plumber, electrician, pool supplies, etc. I actually don't have a problem with this; people are simply trying to promote their businesses on a rolling billboard. What I have a problem with, and I am mystified when I see it, is when people with no connection to companies place ads, decals or bumper stickers on their cars to promote a business. For example, "*Follow Me to ABC Company who offers the best deals on this or that.*" I'm sure we've all seen examples of this. I particularly chuckle when I see fans of professional sports decorate their cars with stickers and signs promoting their favorite team. Not only did they have to pay to see their team play, but they have to pay to promote them. No wonder these athletes are millionaires, they soak the little guy for every nickel he has.

We also see a lot of advertising on our clothes, including shoes, shirts, jackets, and hats. It's rare to find a plain white shirt anymore or some article of clothing that doesn't have some sort of corporate logo on it. Not only have our cars

become rolling billboards, but we have become walking ones. To take it even further, I find it amazing when I see someone who tattoos a corporate logo on themselves. Talk about taking advertising to the sublime!

Frankly, I think we've got it all backwards. If companies really want us to advertise their products and services, they should pay for our clothes and automobiles, not the other way around. Personally, I wouldn't have a problem driving a Budweiser automobile while wearing Warner Brothers shoes, a Cialis shirt and an NBC baseball cap, as long as I don't have to pay for them, but for me to pay for such things, forget it!

THINK

PERSONAL HYGIENE

First published - 12/23/2008

I recently had a strange experience in a restaurant over lunch. While sitting at the counter, an older gentleman came in and sat down next to me. On the surface he looked pleasant, but suddenly I was overcome by the strong pungent scent of his body odor, something that smelled like a cross between an open sewer and a dead carcass on the Serengeti (I wondered if vultures were circling overhead). His hair was slicked back and he was shaved, but I don't think he had taken a bath in quite some time. I used to know guys who believed a little body odor was a "manly" thing that attracted the ladies. However, the only thing this guy at the counter attracted was flies. The smell was so overpowering that I had to move to a table on the other side of the restaurant, much to the bewilderment of the man I was escaping from.

I don't understand why people deliberately avoid good personal hygiene. I know it seems rather insignificant, but it sure can be irritating to the other people you come in contact with. This is true for both men and women, but I think it is predominantly men who are the greatest offenders of personal hygiene, and not just older men, but younger men as well. I certainly hope this isn't a new fashion trend (I must have missed the memo). Actually there is no real excuse for poor personal hygiene. The last time I looked, a bar of soap was still pretty cheap.

I never was a fan of unkempt hair either, particularly in the workplace, but that doesn't bother me half as much as a guy who has long hair growing out of his ears or nose. Actually, I think nose/ear hair is one of the Lord's favorite practical jokes he ever pulled on us.

Fingernails is another one to watch for. I don't know what is more gross, excessively long nails, ragged nails from biting them, or just plain dirty. Then of course there are the people who constantly pick at themselves, be it their nose, ears, eyebrows, or seat, not to mention those who belch and fart. If you've got to do it, please do it in private. If I wanted a show like that, I would go down to see the monkeys at the zoo.

Personal hygiene is an important part of our appearance which defines who we are to the people around us. Actually, it's a sign of respect for others and represents a form of discipline which some people abhor. There are those people who are very cognizant of their image and cultivate it accordingly, but there are also a lot of people who unknowingly operate in the dark. Then there are those who deliberately ignore the status quo in order to attract attention to themselves. You have to feel sorry for this last group as they use personal hygiene to differentiate themselves as opposed to their intellect.

Just as a tip though, if you start to notice people starting to avoid you or moving away from you to the other end of the restaurant, perhaps it is time to invest in a bar of soap.

THINK

POLITICAL CORRECTNESS - LET US BE BLAND

First published - 2/3/2009

I recently read an article that listed the most obnoxious politically correct offenses for 2008 in our educational institutions.

After reading a few of the case studies, your head begins to spin in terms of the stupidity involved. Evidently, our educators do not want to be accused of offending anyone, and as a result are shaping our youth into perhaps the most bland generation to come down the pike. It appears political correctness begins in the classroom and cascades into the corporate world and our daily lives.

This got me thinking how something becomes politically incorrect. First, the Media picks up on something meant to be humorous or avant-garde and, depending on their interpretation, determines if it is suitable for public consumption. Consideration is given to whether it offends a handicap, a sexual gender (except heterosexual men), race (except whites), religion (except Christians), or politics (except conservative Republicans). If it affects anyone in this regard, then it is condemned by the Media and labeled "politically incorrect." The exceptions are, of course, fair game for attack as they are perceived as the suppressive superiors causing all of the problems. In other words, it is no longer acceptable...

- to celebrate your Christian faith (Christmas, Easter, etc.).
- to respect the sanctity of marriage between men and women.
- to exercise authority as it might be perceived as a master/slave relationship.

- to ridicule or attack liberal Democrats.

Instead, you are meant to feel guilty or embarrassed for who you are. By doing so, the Media is trying to turn the majority into a minority. Make no mistake, political correctness is nothing more than social engineering in sheep's clothing, whereby our attitudes, perceptions, and moral values are being constantly tweaked by the Media.

Interestingly, some people still refuse to believe in the notion of political correctness, that it is not a valid concept. I don't think such people have visited our schools or the corporate world lately. If they did, they would see substantial changes in our speech, customs, fashion, work habits, and socialization skills, all because the Media is telling us what is acceptable and what isn't. Consequently, the Media has replaced our religious institutions as the social conscious of the nation.

Frankly, I sense a backlash to political correctness in the offing. As a small example, last December I noticed a lot more Christians saying "Merry Christmas" as opposed to "Happy Holidays." In other words, they were tired of being ashamed of their religion and want to celebrate it as opposed to watering it down. Basically, they have grown weary of being told how to think.

I guess what disturbs me about political correctness more than anything is that it attacks our identity. Instead of celebrating who and what we are, political correctness wants us to feel ashamed instead, which, as I alluded to earlier, leads to blandness. Just remember one of our Bryce's Laws, "*Never trust a person who doesn't have at least one known vice.*" If they do not either drink, smoke, or swear, then they are in all likelihood hiding something and are as interesting as a box of rocks.

THINK

POLLS

First published - 7/21/2008

As this is an election year we are again being bombarded by polls from the media telling us how everyone thinks about meaningless issues and who has already won the election. 63% of my readership agrees that the media has gone overboard in conducting polls; and 20% believe they should be horsewhipped for trying to influence the election. Interestingly, 5.6% of Lithuanian readers in the Southwest believe I am just being an alarmist.

People who own Shar-Pei puppies in eastern Wisconsin generally like the media's news coverage, but Pit Bull owners in Teaneck, New Jersey have stopped watching television altogether. I also found 78% of Catholics in Western New York mourned the passing of NBC's Tim Russert, while 20% of those surveyed preferred green chilies with their eggs in the morning.

34% of the people polled thought Sen. John McCain was too old to serve as President while another 36% thought Sen. Barack Obama was too black to serve. Remarkably, a whopping 60% didn't know who Senators McCain and Obama were and thought Ronald Reagan should whip incumbent Jimmy Carter in the Fall.

There has been an 8% rise of young voters registered to vote in the election this year, 12% of which speak Ebonics, 23% speak Spanish, and 65% were incapable of comprehending the English language. There has also been a 15% rise in voter registration around Chicago cemeteries.

36% of the readership thought the Wall Street Journal was excellent for wrapping fish, but 25% preferred the New York Times for lining bird cages. The rest are undecided.

THINK

THE POPE'S VISIT

First published - 6/24/2008

As most of you know, the Pope visited the United States last April. This was mostly a public relations event aimed at mending fences with American Catholics who have become disillusioned due to the recent priest sex abuse scandals. These scandals have caused considerable damage to the image and credibility of the Church and, as such, the Pope made it a priority to visit his flock in the States. To his credit, he offered a public apology regarding the indiscretions and, as I understand it, he met with a few of the victims. From what I can see though, the Church is not getting at the root of the problem; namely, clinging to customs from a bygone era. For example, not allowing priests to wed and maintain normal sexual relations with a member of the opposite sex. Now before you say "heresy" please hear me out.

I never did understand how someone who is single and theoretically celibate could offer advice to a couple regarding marriage and sex. Yet, this is commonplace in the Catholic Church. I don't know how you can offer practical advice in delicate subjects like this with only an academic knowledge. It's kind of like driving an automobile; you can read all the books you want on the subject, but unless you actually get behind the wheel and experience the physical sensation yourself, you have no idea what you are talking about.

I also believe the Church is behind the times in terms of birth control and divorce, which does a disservice not only to their congregation but the world at large. Most of the Catholics I know I refer to as "Cafeteria Catholics" where they pick and choose what rulings they want to follow. For example, regardless of Church doctrine, many practice birth

control. They are all good and respectable Catholics in most regards, but they draw the line on the Church telling them they should have a house full of kids. Divorce is another area Catholics are not afraid to violate the Church's position on. Not only do I know Catholic friends who have been divorced, but how about Ted Kennedy who got a much publicized divorce in 1982? Or was that an annulment? Nope, a divorce.

In other words, the Catholic Church is another institution that is not changing with the times and the recent sexual abuse scandals are a byproduct of this. When you think about it, they're clinging to ancient customs is essentially no different than the attitudes of Muslim hard-liners of whom we sharply criticize.

I don't believe Catholics have a problem with the fundamental dogma of the Church, they just want it to be more contemporary to the way we live in the 21st century. Regardless of what the Church says, Catholics will continue to practice birth control and seek divorce. They just don't want to be excommunicated for it or made to feel ashamed. They also want to believe in and respect those that lead and govern the Church, that they understand the parishioner's problems and can help them in times of personal crisis. Academics may be fine for some things, but not for the trying times we currently live in.

THINK

PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES

First published - 5/27/2008

Question: Of the candidates currently running for our country's highest office, the Presidency of the United States, do they represent the best people our country has to offer? Think about it for a second before answering. Are the candidates the best we have to offer? I know a lot of you want to say, "No, of course not, so-and-so should be running." But surprisingly, the answer is Yes, absolutely.

We would all like to believe we select Presidents based on such attributes as experience, vision, and administrative skills, but unfortunately that has nothing to do with it anymore. Now, it is all about charisma, political correctness, and media spin. This means Madison Avenue has more to do with selling the candidates than we realize. It also means the cream doesn't always rise to the top.

I don't think most of our past Presidents could survive in today's electoral process, but you have to wonder how some of our more prominent Presidents would do today...

I think George Washington would probably do well. His sheer character alone would carry him well and thwart any attacks from the press. His credentials as Commander-in-Chief of the Revolutionary Army were impeccable. In other words, it would be difficult for anyone to dig up any dirt on George.

Then of course there is Thomas Jefferson, the principal author of the Declaration of Independence and one of our most influential founding fathers. Despite his brilliance, he wouldn't last a minute in today's world. Most likely the press would paint him as an egotistical egghead with secret allegiances to other groups and organizations. Then

of course there is the sex/slave issue. In other words, the press would eat Jefferson for lunch.

As much as we have great respect for Abraham Lincoln, he would also do poorly in today's electoral process. First, he would be depicted as a country bumpkin, rough around the edges, with radical inclinations. Even though he could spin a yarn, Lincoln lacks the charisma for the cameras, and this whole bit of "Honest Abe"...well, forget it. His words would be twisted by the press.

I was always a big fan of Teddy Roosevelt's, a no-nonsense type of guy who accomplished a lot, but as a candidate today, forget it. Roosevelt would be painted as a hothead and advocate of the NRA. His dislike of wealthy businessmen and corruption would prevent him from building an adequate war chest for advertising. Plus the media would inevitably make fun of his voice (SNL and just about every comic would be doing unflattering impersonations of him).

The only other President who might have a shot at doing well in our political arena of today is Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Regardless of how you felt about his politics, FDR had a way of stroking the press and getting adequate funding for his campaigns, but his problem with polio would become a major liability to him in today's world. Whereas the press kept this undercover years ago, the paparazzi today would be chasing after him to take pictures of his leg braces and wheelchairs.

I can't say I'm a big fan of any of the candidates running for President today, but I don't try to kid myself either, they are what the American electoral system has produced, and I have come to realize the American people will no longer tolerate men (or women) with experience and character, and instead accept glitz, facade, and political correctness.

I remember Sam Rayburn, the legendary Speaker of the House from Texas, who made the following observation in one of his earliest runs for Congress; he said, "*I will not deny that there are men in the district better qualified than I to go to Congress, but gentlemen, these men are not in the race.*"

THINK

PRINT JOURNALISM

First published - 9/2/2008

I recently heard that print journalism is in trouble. Newspapers which have long been familiar to us have been shaken to their foundations. You hear stories about the major newspapers teetering on financial ruin. As a small example, years ago in the computer industry there were numerous publications aimed at reporting news and discussing issues pertaining to technology. Today, the industry is totally devoid of such publications. Instead, everything is done by web sites and e-mail blasts.

Unlike my generation which was accustomed to reading the newspaper over a cup of coffee, the young generation is now trained to get their news through television or their BlackBerry, iPhone or some other electronic device. People like to blame technology for the demise of print journalism, but I believe it goes much deeper than that. I say it is simply content.

The caliber of writing has slowly deteriorated over the years. For example, if you look at the average news story in the local newspaper you'll notice it takes them forever to get to the point. Further, news reporting has become less objective and more slanted towards a particular political agenda. Whereas I used to enjoy devouring the morning paper, I now frequently cast it aside and put on the television instead. I can't say I am particularly fond of television news either, but at least they try to get to the point and I have a remote control to change the channel.

In addition to basic news reporting, newspapers seem to be having difficulty with simple layout. People generally don't like to constantly search for their favorite sections. They want standard sections where they know they can

find things easily and comfortably. I don't believe people have problems with advertisements, after all they realize it supports production costs. They just want more content. I've seen instances where you might get one column of news and everything else is advertising. There should be some sort of rule prohibiting no more than 50% advertising on any given page unless the whole page is devoted to advertising. There should also be no advertising whatsoever on the cover page of a newspaper. Instead, I always liked the "What's News" section of the Wall Street Journal which gives me a summary of both world and business news along with a page reference if I want to read the story in more depth.

No, I don't blame technology at all for the demise of the newspaper. What is needed are some unbiased news reporters who know how to produce an honest and newsworthy story, and editors and publishers who know something about layout. Years ago, people were proud to be called a newspaper man or woman, it meant something, like integrity. Lately though it has evolved into nothing more than a glorified blog. No wonder newspapers are on the way out.

THINK

PUSSYFOOTING

First published - 4/24/2009

Every now and then the English language produces an interesting word filled with imagery. One of my favorites is "pussyfooting" as it describes how someone or something behaves cautiously or timidly like a cat before making a commitment to action. It's also a great way of describing American diplomacy in the 21st century, representing politicians who are afraid of committing themselves to a course of action.

The poster child for this expression was former Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain of the United Kingdom who pussyfooted around Hitler in 1938 and declared "Peace for our time" which turned into an embarrassing joke. Had Hitler been properly challenged early on, World War II may have been averted.

The world is a lot more dangerous than it was in 1938, particularly when you consider the weapons now available. We are not at a loss for antagonists either. There is, of course, the "Axis of Evil" including North Korea, Cuba and Iran, most of which are headed by tinhorn dictators, and let us not forget our old buddies the Taliban and Somalian pirates. I am simply at a loss as to why we accept the shenanigans of the comedy team of Kim Jong-il, Fidel Castro, and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The only thing these clods understand is strength, and all of them can be handled easily if we wanted to, but that's a big "if."

North Korea is perhaps the most dangerous of the lot as they like to rattle sabers. They are also the easiest to take out, simply by full economic sanctions coupled with surgical strikes to take out any nuclear program they are working on. If a military and economic buildup could bring

down the Soviet Union, it should also bring down the nut jobs in the North, or doesn't anybody remember Ronald Reagan? The same is true for Iran and Cuba.

The Taliban is a little more difficult to handle as they are elusive and hide up in the hills of Afghanistan with their tails between their legs. Bin Laden is probably hiding up there as well. Digging them out shouldn't really be that difficult. If they do not want to change their ways or surrender, just sprinkle a layer of Napalm on the hills, add salt and pepper and serve at room temperature. Why should we be restrained with an enemy who is hell-bent on our destruction?

For some reason people think the Somalian Pirate attacks are difficult to prevent. Maybe so, but has anyone heard of escorted convoys or secured maritime lanes, or did this go out with the 1940's?

Aside from military intervention, which nobody really wants, the secret is economic sanctions, but I mean "real" sanctions, not the half-assed measures currently in place. For example, other countries typically try to fill in where America drops out. If America declares a trade embargo against a country, like Cuba, any other country trading with them should be penalized in our country accordingly. As much as I love our neighbors to the north, under this scenario Canada would be penalized for trading with Cuba.

Currently, our government is looking to loosen Cuban economic sanctions, not to tighten them. In exchange for allowing more US dollars and tourism to flow into the country, Castro promises nothing in return. I somehow fail to see the logic in this. There is a big difference between appealing to someone's intellect in the hopes they will do the *right thing, versus negotiating from a position of strength.* "*Speak softly and carry a big stick,*" was Theodore Roosevelt's for-

eign policy which he described as, "*the exercise of intelligent forethought and of decisive action sufficiently far in advance of any likely crisis.*"

Our problem is not so much a matter of a specific enemy, as it is on how we tend to pussyfoot around diplomatically in the fear our adversaries might react negatively and do something foolish. I tend to believe such an approach is interpreted as a sign of weakness and only emboldens our enemies. If we can show we are serious about maintaining our interests, that we can demonstrate strong determination and resolve, then they will think twice before crossing us.

Let's put it in simpler terms; when you were a kid in school, which teacher did you take more seriously, the one who simply scolded you or the teacher who put you in detention or paddled you? A little "Big stick" diplomacy can go a long way.

THINK

REALITY MANAGEMENT

First published - 9/11/2006

As we all know, Reality TV shows rule the airwaves these days. What interests me lately are the shows aimed at applying basic management to our homes and pets, such as Fox's "Nanny 911," ABC's "The Supernanny," ABC's "Wife Swap," and National Geographic's "Dog Whisperer." These types of shows are getting some very good ratings. I guess our fascination with them is based on seeing what appears to be some rather simple household problems being corrected by some rather logical and commonsense management principles. We all laugh at kids running amok, a disorganized household, different lifestyles, and pets that lack discipline. The viewer watches these antics and chuckles at the ineptitude of the parents or owners. Specialists are then called in to advise the people how to bring control and harmony back into the household. Laugh as we might at these shows, they say a lot about ourselves.

I fail to see how these scenarios are much different than what is found in the workplace. For example, cluttered offices, project delays, budget overruns, and worker behavior problems are essentially no different than what is addressed by the nannies and the dog whisperer. "Wife Swap" is a thinly veiled analogy to implementing changes in the corporate culture. Whereas we laugh at the families in these TV shows over their incompetencies, we should probably take a closer look at our own offices and perhaps bring in a specialist to address the problems we are experiencing. From my perspective, its no different.

The common problems experienced in the office have not gone unobserved. For example, Scott Adams' "Dilbert" comic strip and NBC's "The Office" frequently portray the common incompetencies in offices today. The reason we

laugh at them is because they hit so close to home.

Maybe we need a new TV show, such as "The Office Whisperer 911" who comes in, establishes the dominant worker, organizes the office, and sends socially dysfunctional workers to "time out." I wonder what kind of ratings this type of "Reality Management" program could get?

THINK

REPAIRING BARBECUE GRILLS

First published - 4/15/2008

I think it was President Eisenhower who popularized the idea of cooking on charcoal grills. Since then, grilling has gone from an art to a science. In the early days you had a simple Weber grill, a bag of charcoal, some lighter fluid, a match, and "voila," you've got a burned piece of meat on your plate. The grills of today though have come a long way since then and are rather sophisticated (and expensive).

There's nothing wrong with the basic charcoal grill (in fact, purists prefer the charcoal taste), but the lion's share of grills today are propane driven simply due to the convenience. I believe a good basic propane grill goes for a little over \$100, but they have models that are priced easily into the thousands of dollars. Some are behemoth cooking machines that can do just about anything, but it kind of makes me wonder if the owners are missing the point of outdoor cooking. Basically, all they have done is brought their kitchen outside with them.

Regardless of how much you've paid for a grill, they all will eventually breakdown over time and fixing them can try anyone's patience. In its simplest form the propane grill has the burner, the grill, and the lava rocks. Sounds pretty easy so far; that is until you decide to clean out the grill and replace a broken part.

The first thing that strikes you as you take your grill apart is the food gunk left over from the last couple of years cooking. I call it the "Cockroach Riviera" as God only knows what critters have crawled into the bowels of your grill after you have shut it off. The lava rocks look more like chunks of Alpo by this time rather than something from a

volcano.

The two items though that usually need repair are the burner or the grill, both of which, conceptually, should be easy to replace, but not so fast. Unless you have the precise specifications of the grill or burner, you will undoubtedly buy the wrong replacement part, thereby causing you to return it to where you bought it which is probably Home Depot or Lowes (which usually has ample parking, and attentive sales people to answer your questions.....right?).

Assuming you have the right replacement parts, installing them is a relatively simple task. The real headache though is to clean the grill and find the right parts. In other words, a simple five minute job has again been turned into a laborious and ugly task.

Inevitably the time comes when you simply want to get rid of your propane grill and purchase a new one. This is no easy task. First, nobody wants to put a disgustingly foul grill in their car. Then comes the problem of finding a place to dump it as you will inevitably need a permit from the EPA to dispose of it. Instead, I've seen people in my neck of the woods deposit old grills on the bottom of the ocean as part of the artificial reef program (but God only knows what is growing down there now, probably "Grillzilla").

The sophistication of the propane grills may be appealing, but I now understand why the people at Weber keep banging out their charcoal grills year after year. Not only does the food taste better, but cleanup is a lot simpler (not to mention disposal of the unit when you are done with it).

THINK

RESUMES

First published - 1/19/2009

I've read a lot of resumes in my day. Coming from the Information Technology sector I have seen some pretty crazy ones filled with a lot of gobbledygook involving technical acronyms and programming jargon. Here's an example, "Proficient in the following languages and operating platforms: C, C++, DOS, MVS, CICS, ISPF/VS, DB2, OS/2, OS/400, AIX, UNIX, Java, JavaScript, Perl, Basic, HTML, DHTML, XHTML, XML, PHP, PDP, JCL, SQL, George 3, Win95/98/Me/XP/VISTA, etc." Sounds pretty impressive doesn't it? The problem is verifying that the person does, in fact, know these things. Most of the time I've found they might have nothing more than a rudimentary knowledge of the subject which is why we recommend testing the applicant as opposed to just taking his/her word for it.

I also find it irritating when a person uses verbose language to describe himself. For example, whenever someone says they are a "Senior Software Engineer," this simply means he is nothing more than a programmer with two or more jobs under his belt. Some people add so many adjectives to describe their credentials and boast of their successes (not their failures) that you would think he is the second coming of Christ. Whenever I see this, I ask myself, "If this person is so great, why isn't he running his own company; why does he need a job from me?" Touting ones' successes is natural, but a little humility in the presentation of the resume would sure be refreshing.

I may not be an expert in preparing resumes, but I think the ones that appeal to me most are those that are simple and to the point. Frankly, if they cannot keep it to one page that isn't too busy looking, I think people will lose interest.

I know I do. If I want additional detail, I'll ask for it. Tell me plain and simple: What are you interested in doing? What's your background? (your employment history) and What do you know? (your skill set). I don't want to know how you conquered neuro-electronic fusion systems based on a hashing algorithm you invented; do not try to baffle me with your brilliance. Just tell me how you can do a job for me and blend into the corporate culture. I think team accomplishments are still valued over individual achievement by most employers today.

THINK

ROADSIDE MEMORIALS

First published - 7/22/2008

I remember when I took my first driver's license test in Ohio when I was 16. On the test they had a section where you had to identify traffic signs using multiple choice answers. For the yellow "crossroads" sign they had the following: 1-Church ahead, 2-Crossroads, and, 3-Someone died on this spot. I thought this was particularly funny and wondered how anyone could fail the test. Well, we may not use the crossroads sign much but you sure see a lot of roadside traffic death markers out there, usually in the form of a small cross with lots of flowers around it and perhaps other things related to the deceased, such as stuffed toys.

Roadside memorials are actually not new. They've been around for years and are normally built by the deceased's loved ones. Some states allow them, others do not. Some are temporary, some are permanent. Some are plain and simple, others are a bit more lavish (and an eyesore). If you scan the Internet you'll see numerous examples of them.

Although they've been around for a long time, I've noticed these road memorials have become more prolific lately, popping up just about everywhere. Down here in Florida it is not unusual to see them on major thoroughfares, such as US19 and the legendary Alligator Alley. Offhand, I don't have a problem with such markers on quiet roads but they are becoming a bit distracting on the major roads and highways, often leading to additional traffic problems. I would find it sadly ironic if one roadside memorial would lead to the death of another person, but I'm sure it has already happened.

For the loved ones left behind, I'm sure you mean well and I'm sorry for your loss, and I don't want to appear insensi-

tive, but you are doing a disservice to the memory of your dearly departed by creating a traffic safety hazard. If these roadside memorials go unchecked, highways will eventually look more like Arlington Cemetery than the road to Miami.

THINK

SCREAMERS

First published - 8/27/2007

This is one I think just about everyone will relate to. I sat down in a restaurant recently to enjoy my lunch. As I was about to lift the first forkful of my meal to my mouth, a blood curdling scream from a child erupted causing me to drop my fork and snap my head around to see a three year old throwing a temper tantrum two tables away from me. The kid was upset about something, I'm not sure what, and kept bellowing. Interestingly, the parents kept eating their meal like nothing was wrong, even though the whole restaurant had come to a complete standstill.

I also happened to be visiting the Department of Motor Vehicles not long ago to renew my license. As I was getting ready to pay my bill, the room exploded with the screaming of another toddler. Again, the parents simply went about their business like nothing was wrong.

Frankly, I don't know which is worse, kids screaming or the indifference of their parents. When my kids were little I would be embarrassed if they acted up in public. More than once I would pick my child up and take him outside to the car so the other patrons wouldn't be disturbed, but I guess that's not how it's done anymore. I suppose I am really showing my age now.

Since the parents today won't discipline the kids, I think I've come up with something that might turn the trick. How about a pocket aerosol sprayer with knockout drops in it, kind of like the pocket mace sprayers you see. The kid starts acting up, you give him or her a spritz of the knockout drops, and out they go. Somehow seeing a little mop top drop to the floor during a temper tantrum appeals to me. Maybe we can also create an adult version to spritz

the indifferent parents. Then, when they wake up, they find themselves outside of the store or restaurant. I can just image the orders I would receive from restaurant owners alone.

Years ago I never understood why there would be special communities that were restricted to older adults, children were simply not allowed. It took me a while, but I think I now grasp the concept. It's not that I have anything against kids, I just have a problem with adults who don't know how to parent.

THINK

THE SECRET TO SUCCESS

First published - 10/8/2007

I think I finally figured out the secret to success. It came to me as an epiphany one night as I was driving home from work. Frankly, it was so simple and obvious, I can't believe it took me years to figure it out. It came to me as I was thinking about some of the key people I've met over the years in the Information Technology field, and I found their attributes were essentially no different than other successful businessmen I've met. I guess we should begin by asking ourselves what we consider to be a "success." To me, this is not just making a comfortable living. Instead, I'm talking about those people who dominate an industry or company, primarily through their personalities. I do not wish to portray this concept of success in a cynical light, but rather as a realistic perspective of the captains of industry.

In order to become a success in any industry or business, I have discovered it is not necessary to produce a good work product, nor do you have to be conscientious about your craft. No, it's much simpler than that; you just have to be an asshole, and I say this with the utmost sincerity. All of the "movers and shakers" I have met over the years, particularly in the I.T. industry, fall into this category and you would be hard pressed to find anyone that doesn't possess these simple attributes as described herein.

First, you have to find a cause for you to pitch. It really doesn't matter what it is, just something you are comfortable with, and something that appeals to the masses, particularly if it relates to a human weakness such as greed, violence or sex. Or it might be that you have invented a new mousetrap. In this event, you need to portray it as "state of the art." Either way, you want to go well beyond

simply peddling your offering, you want it to dominate market share.

Next, you have to cultivate a certain physical image, something that distinguishes you, usually by not conforming to current standards. This could be something as simple as a new hair style, facial hair, clothes, hats, jewelry, etc. The more outlandish, the better as you will inevitably be falsely mistaken for a genius and it becomes your unique logo which people remember. For example, I remember one guy who loved to wear a cape. You may not remember exactly what he said, but you remembered him because of that stupid cape.

Next, you have to master the art of communications as well as miscommunications. Very important: you do not have to be right in your message, just entertaining. This means you can be loud, obnoxious, even insulting in order to get noticed, and the more verbose your vocabulary is, the better, as people will misunderstand what you say yet regard you as a genius. This means you always try to speak above your audience, and most definitely not at their level. By doing so, you are endeavoring to dominate your audience through intimidation. You must also be a master politician as you have to be acutely aware of the hot buttons needed to motivate or coerce people to do what you want them to do.

This fixation on physical image and communications obviously means you realize the importance of facade as opposed to substance. It also means you understand the need to keep moving along before somebody understands what you are truly about. This requires you to be able to move politically faster than your opponents and undermine them as required. I am reminded of one CEO in the I.T. field who during the work week would make the life of everybody in the office miserable, but always made it a point to

attend his church each week to be absolved of any wrong doing.

All of this highlights two points: first, morality and ethics have nothing whatsoever to do with becoming a success, and second; you must be self-centered with a huge ego. You see workers more as servants as opposed to employees. It also means your word is not your bond. In fact, honesty and integrity have absolutely nothing do with becoming a success. To illustrate, I remember when Hitler wrote that preposterous Munich Agreement for Neville Chamberlain promising he would never invade the Sudetenland: what a classic!

To be a success your behavior is perhaps best characterized as "pompous" and you enjoy a highly visible profile. I am reminded of a customer of ours in the Midwest who was developing new information systems for the business. Whereas most of the project teams quietly went about their business and delivered quality systems on-time and within budget, there was one Project Manager who never delivered anything of substance on time or within budget, but because of the nature of the projects he was working on, whereby he was applauded for his skills for putting out fires, he enjoyed much higher visibility than everyone else and was promoted more rapidly than others. In other words, he capitalized on "the squeaky wheel gets the oil" phenomenon. As an aside, we advised our client that their chief firefighter was also their chief arsonist (which never quite set well with management or the subject in question).

Successful people are certainly not afraid of stepping on toes and making enemies as they already know how to combat them. Show me someone who is successful without making any enemies and I'll show you a fraud. If they're not pissing someone off, they're not doing their job. In fact, they've discovered employees generally work better when

they're pissed off. This sense of ruthlessness may make his confidants squirm a bit, but not to the point of creating a mutiny.

To offset their unscrupulous tactics, successful people will support high profile causes, such as charity, which is designed more to improve the person's image as opposed to helping a worthy cause (besides, it's a handy tax write-off). Another earmark of the successful person is his/her infatuation with toys. They have to have the most expensive car, the largest boat, or their house has to be wired with the latest technological gizmos. All of this is aimed at projecting a certain "winning" image to impress others. It's one thing not to be apologetic for your success, quite another to flaunt it like P.T. Barnum.

Now for the big question: Do you have the strength and temerity to be a success? Just remember, you have to look at yourself in the mirror every day. Frankly, most of us do not have the intestinal fortitude for it, and quite often our moral convictions prohibit us from acting accordingly.

Please understand, I do not present this thesis to be insulting, cynical or even humorous, but to consider the subject very objectively. We certainly do not like to believe these attributes for success are valid, but are they? The idea of someone working their way from the mailroom to the boardroom in this day and age is simply a ludicrous fantasy. It requires taking some rather unscrupulous tactics in order to succeed.

But interestingly, the masses are enamored with successful people, even in the face of some of their practices. For example, on one hand we are appalled by executives who are generously rewarded with hefty bonuses even if the company is floundering, but on the other hand we envy their success.

There is only one drawback to being a success, it is very lonely as you have no true friends to confide in. In fact, you are closer to your attorneys and accountants than you are to your friends and neighbors. Nonetheless, you trust nobody but yourself. However, if you have supreme confidence in yourself this may be a small price to pay.

I guess the point of all of this is that there is nothing fair in business, a message I often convey to young people entering the work force. If you want something, you are going to have to earn it, which will inevitably require you to compromise your principles.

A lot of people confuse the quirky mannerisms described herein as "entrepreneurial" or mistake them as signs of brilliance. In reality, it is nothing more than a charade. To paraphrase an old expression, "You don't have to be a brain to be a success, just an asshole."

THINK

SFB's

First published - 11/26/2007

Something that bothers me is what I call an "SFB" which I'll define in a moment. In a nutshell, an SFB is a type of person who doesn't want to cooperate with you and comes down with a bad case of the stupids to confound you. The first case of an SFB that I can recall is a guidance counselor I had in High School. She disliked my family for some reason and seemed to work overtime to screw up my older brother who was trying to apply for college. When my turn finally came around, I was summoned into her office where she greeted me cheerily as if we were long lost friends. I said to her frankly, *"Look, let's not kid each other, you have no use for me and my family, and I frankly have no use for you. I am going to work through the principal instead of you."*

She looked at me coyly and said, *"Well, I don't know what you mean."* She knew exactly what I meant, she just came down with a bad case of the stupids to cloak her dislike of me. I've come across this same type of scenario time and again as I got older, especially from government bureaucrats and people participating in nonprofit volunteer groups. They just look at you seemingly dumbfounded and say, *"Gee, I don't know what you mean,"* or *"Whatever gave you that idea?"* This really bugs me. Instead of saying, *"Look, I'm having a bad day, why don't you go away until I'm in the mood,"* or *"Quit bothering me and talk to someone else."* Even when you articulate your problem carefully, they pretend ignorance instead of trying to help you.

This SFB phenomenon is really disturbing in business, particularly in a Customer Service situation. Instead of looking for ways to help you, people look for ways to confound you so that you will take your problem elsewhere. I think

this is why voice mail was invented, so people can pick and chose who they want to talk to.

I recognize there are times where it is necessary to practice tact and diplomacy when dealing with people, but pretending to be brainless is certainly not a good practice particularly when interacting with people on a regular basis is an inherent part of your job.

As I've mentioned in the past, I have a letter carrier who delivers mail to my office only when he is in the mood (which seems to be twice a week). When I confronted him about why he wasn't delivering our mail regularly, he became an SFB and feigned ignorance about what I was talking about. Even when I complained to his superior at the post office, he also became an SFB and pretended not to understand what I was talking about. I guess being an SFB is contagious.

So what exactly is an SFB? Actually, it's quite simple; it's three little letters representing: Shit for Brains.

THINK

THE SFB QUOTIENT

First published - 9/8/2008

Anyone who has ever taken an IQ test knows you have to endure a battery of multiple choice questions aimed at measuring your intelligence. Some are simple and common sense, others are a little tricky. This got me thinking whether we could devise a similar program aimed at determining if a person suffers from SFB (Shit for Brains) which you may recall me commenting on not long ago. As a result, I have devised the following set of questions:

1. During a business meeting you disagree with a coworker, and your boss sides with the coworker; What do you do?

A. Send a blind text message to everyone else in the department that your boss and the coworker are lovers (regardless what sex they are).

B. Change the coworker's time sheet to show he/she is goofing off more than yourself.

C. Using Adobe Photoshop, you manufacture compromising photos of your boss and e-mail it anonymously throughout the company.

2. Your boss asks you to work overtime in order to complete a key project; What do you do?

A. File a grievance with HR.

B. Change the office clocks (including those on the server) so everyone else has to stay late with you.

C. Manufacture an excuse, preferably the death of a loved one.

3. You have been asked to return your neighbor's chain saw after having it for six months; What do you do?

A. Before you return it, you hack away on a tree bordering your properties, particularly your neighbor's side.

B. Anonymously report him to the homeowners association that his lawn is a mess.

C. Pretend you didn't get the message and keep it for six more months.

4. It's 4:55pm on Friday, a customer calls desperately in need of one of your products; What do you do?

A. Send his message to voice mail and answer him on Monday.

B. Send him the wrong product (or an insufficient quantity of the right product).

C. Send a text message to him that you are on the golf course and wish him a good weekend.

5. The office temperature satisfies everyone in the office but you; What do you do?

A. Adjust the thermostat to suit your needs.

B. Open the windows.

C. While the boss is away, issue an e-mail memo that only you can adjust the thermostat.

6. While in the midst of a critical project assignment, your boss calls for another boring meeting; What do you do?

A. Briefly attend the meeting, but then excuse yourself leaving behind a notepad, pen and coffee cup indicating you will return (you don't).

B. You record the meeting with your cell phone, and e-mail it anonymously to your boss' boss.

C. You have someone call your cell phone every few minutes so that it disrupts the meeting and the boss asks you to leave.

7. You're traveling on company business and spend a tidy sum at a local Exotic Dance club; what do you do?

A. Report it on your expense account as "entertainment" of a client.

B. Doctor your receipts with a graphics package to make them look legitimate.

C. Tell your boss you were conducting some market research.

8. A shipping company is trying to make an urgent delivery to one of your rivals at work who is currently off-site; What do you do?

A. Refuse to sign and accept the package.

B. Forward the shipment to your Scranton office.

C. Forge his name on the delivery and hide the package in the building.

9. It is rush-hour and you want to get home in the most expeditious means possible; What do you do?

A. While driving, call a loved one on your cell phone and ask what's for dinner.

B. At a stop light, you roll down your window and ask your neighbor for directions, but since he can't speak English you flip him the bird.

C. Using your GPS, you plot a course that takes you through Las Vegas.

10. The new technology you've installed in the company is not living up to your promise of improving productivity and is actually a financial drain instead; What do you do?

A. Blame the end-users for incompetence in the use of the technology.

B. Blame the vendors for inferior products.

C. Blame the programmers for lousy software.

Now, for your score. Actually, it's rather simple. If you answered any one of these questions, give yourself a score of 100 as you are a bona fide SFB.

THINK

SOCIETY PAGES

First published - 4/14/2009

The society pages in the newspapers and magazines are one of my favorite sections, and I actually think they're funnier than the comic strips. I particularly like it when they report on a big ball or some innocuous charity gala of some kind. There is normally a lot of pictures taken at such events where you see people trying to act and pose like movie stars, but actually look a lot worse for wear. I don't know why people find it important to have their names and faces in the society pages, probably to feed some starving egos, but this nonsense has been going on for a long time now.

In the photos, I've noticed the women generally look better than the men, but that's not too hard to do in this age of the grunge look. The women are well coiffed the best they can, but underneath the umpteen layers of makeup are still some pretty nasty looking three-baggers. It's really scary when you consider this is the best they are ever going to look. It gives me the willies imagining what they look like first thing in the morning. Ugh!!

Then there are the simple announcements in the paper telling us such things as, "*Josephine just returned home from a trip to the south of Timbuktu.*" I don't know what all of the hubbub is about, after all, only the rich and famous go to northern Timbuktu, the rest are considered riffraff from the other side of the tracks.

Wedding anniversary announcements are nice and represent significant milestones in our lives, but there ought to be a law that only silver, golden, or diamond anniversaries be reported, not paper, wood, tin, or any other such nonsense.

Wedding announcements are good for trumpeting news about nuptials, but there should only be a basic line item describing the event, kind of like birth announcements. I'm really not interested in who the caterer was or who attended an event I wasn't invited to. Actually, I would be more interested in the juicy details of a good divorce, but we tend to sweep such news under the carpet. However, I can visualize something like, "*Smith-Jones Divorced on grounds of mental cruelty and sexual incompatibility. Neighbors claimed she didn't like his friends and he couldn't stand her parents. He was a dropout from salon school and she received a dishonorable discharge from the Marines. Their four children will be placed in Foster homes until the parents return from the Betty Ford Clinic.*"

At least with a divorce, we would really have something to talk about.

Bottom-line, who are we trying to impress by the society pages? Surely, we are not being so childish as to try and make others jealous are we? Actually, I believe the society pages were created only to feed our vanity and try to jockey for position in society. Just remember, no matter how good you think you've got it, there is undoubtedly someone out there who can do you one better. As for me, I couldn't care less.

THINK

SPRING CLEANING

First published - 5/7/2007

Whenever someone brings up the idea of "Spring Cleaning" it conjures up an image of people stuck in cabins during the winter and need to clean out their shack after hibernating inside for several months, but basically, Spring Cleaning is used to force us to get organized. There are a lot of us who are just plain slobs who tend to act like pack-rats and collect a lot of debris, be it at home or in the office. Spring Cleaning, therefore, is intended to clean up the flotsam and jetsam around us. I think this is important, particularly in offices.

There are those who believe a sloppy desk is indicative of a brilliant mind. Baloney. A sloppy desk is indicative of a pigpen and the person is disorganized and undisciplined. Too often people use a cluttered desk to give the illusion they are being overworked and use it as an excuse for being late on a project. For managers who have been around the block a couple of times, a cluttered desk doesn't fool anybody anymore. In our office, we would tell our programmers to subscribe to the military concept whereby you either work on something, file it, or throw it away. If we need more file cabinets, we'll get them, but let's not let our desks become pigpens. To enforce this rule, we would periodically go through the office at night and throw all of the debris on the desks into the garbage. You do this a couple of times and people finally take you seriously. Keeping a clean and orderly workplace can have a dramatic and positive effect on the demeanor of your office workers and they will start to behave more professionally.

People still practice Spring Cleaning at home as well. You see signs of it by the many garage sales in the Spring where people circulate their junk to other people who recycle it

around the neighborhood. I tend to believe there is a certain amount of junk we simply rotate from one household to another, so why bother with the garage sales? Let's just play musical chairs with it. Better yet, why don't we just dispose of it once and for all?

I remember my Scottish grandmother in Buffalo, New York was a big believer in Spring Cleaning. Every year she would lead the family in cleaning the house like Atilla the Hun. Beds would be turned, rugs taken out and beaten, windows washed inside and out, silverware polished, kitchen and bathroom floors and fixtures scrubbed, etc. You get the picture; she was very thorough, but she wouldn't stop with inanimate objects, to her way of thinking "Spring Cleaning" also meant cleaning up the family. To this end, once a year she would brew a pot of tea made from Senna Leaves, a very powerful herbal stimulant laxative. I guess she figured it was needed to clean out the toxins in our system, and as anyone in our family can testify, it works, perhaps too well. Not long after drinking a cup of this tea, your system would be flushed of impurities right down the toilet, perhaps hours at a time. It was rather brutal. This stuff was so strong, it would even clean the dirt from behind your fingernails and the wax from your ears. Small wonder Spring Cleaning conjures us a bad image in my mind.

As a result, I tend to keep things orderly and tidy all the time as opposed to waiting for a Spring Cleaning. Maybe that is what my grandmother was trying to teach us all along. Nonetheless, I haven't had a cup of tea in years.

THINK

STRESS

First published - 2/19/2008

There are a lot of things that causes stress in our lives, such as finances, our family relationships, our work, medical conditions, driving, sex, competition, politics and world events; and I guess this is something that hasn't really changed over the years, but there sure seems to be a lot of people consumed with stress these days and believe it to be a natural part of their lives. They walk around uptight all of the time and find it difficult to relax. Often times they complain about migraine headaches, ulcers, tightness in their backs, and other body ailments. If you were to touch them, they would probably jump out of their skin. A lot of the stress such people possess is self-imposed. Many fear making a mistake, which might lead to their demise or cause people to think less of them. Consequently, we are seeing a generation of uptight perfectionists emerge who sweat over innocuous detail. Such people tend to drive the rest of us crazy.

To relieve stress, most of us do some sort of physical therapy, talk to people, perhaps a change of scenery or a good stiff drink. Not to be outdone, the drug companies have invented a whole new generation of chill-pills to get people to calm down and cope with their lives. Years ago "downers" were considered illegal substances, but I guess you have to hand it to the drug companies to legitimize them and make them legal. Such drugs have become so prevalent in society that you have to wonder how our grandparents and great-grandparents ever got along without them, but remarkably, they did.

Plain and simply, stress results from the fact that we are human-beings and, as such, we are imperfect creatures who make wrong or bad decisions during our lifetimes. People

do not want to admit to making mistakes, but we do. We also wish we could turn the hands of time backwards and change things, but we cannot. It is convoluted thinking to become consumed by the mistakes we made in the past. We should, of course, learn from them, but we should always be looking forwards as opposed to backwards. Just remember, the last guy who was perfect, they hung on a cross.

Whether we like it or not, the sun will inevitably rise again tomorrow and we have to have the fortitude to deal with it. Yes, we will continue to screw up and make mistakes, but we have to pick ourselves back up, lick our wounds, and keep going forward. Perhaps the best way to cope with bedlam is to laugh now and then. I think my father put the best spin on it years ago when he said, "*I don't have ulcers, I give them.*"

THINK

THE STUPIDS

First published - 5/8/2009

Shortly after graduating from high school I went to work at a large amusement park in Cincinnati for a summer where I ran the cable car ride. I had a lot of smaller jobs while in school, but this was the first where I was exposed to the public on a grand scale. The amusement park provided instructional materials to try and prepare employees in dealing with the public, but I don't think anything truly prepares you for something like this other than to throw you right into it whereby you either sink or swim.

I have to admit, dealing with the masses for the first time is an eye-opening experience and definitely not for the faint of heart. The public's indiscretions and atrocities are truly mind-numbing as anyone who has ever worked at such a venue can tell you. While at the park, I saw motorcycle gangs, groups of transvestites, drunk hillbillies, etc., but it was Orphan Day at the park that finally pushed me over the edge. Basically, the park opened its doors to every orphan in the state of Ohio which, to me, seemed like releasing all of the animals from the zoo. The kids basically ran amok throughout the park un-chaperoned. In addition to just being pests, they endangered others on the rides, and frequently injured themselves. As I recall, the log-flume ride had more than its share of chopped off fingers from kids who wouldn't listen to instruction and keep their hands inside the ride. On more than one occasion they caused my cable-car ride to shut down by jumping up and down in the car during the ride. As an aside, seeing a cable car bounce up and down on a line like a pogo stick is a frightening sight. Bottom-line, Orphan Day was my last day of employment at the park.

Recently, I was asked to help out at a major community

event in my area. This was not just another rinky-dink arts and crafts festival, but rather a major outdoor event involving thousands of people. The particular group I was involved with was charged with directing parking and securing the entrances and exits to the event. As the human throngs invaded, I started to experience flashbacks to my amusement park days. Instead of dealing with orphans, motorcycle gangs, etc., I was dealing with basic families and retirees. Interestingly, I discovered they suffered from the same case of "the stupids" as the whackos I had in Ohio, It thereby occurred to me that "the stupids" know no boundary and can be found just about anywhere involving large groups of people.

Here are the earmarks of people suffering from "the stupids" in massive venues:

- Sensory impairment, particularly sight and sound. It seems people cannot see the largest of signs, even when it is blinking in front of them. Further, they seem to become deaf when you are trying to give them instruction; either that or they seem to forget the English language and look at you like you are from another planet.
- People become self-centered. Instead of trying to cooperate and wait their turn, they are more interested in pushing and shoving to the head of the line. When you try to correct them, they become belligerent, regardless of how polite you try to be.
- People develop a herd mentality whereby they follow anyone wherever they are going, right or wrong, kind of like lemmings.

Basically, I find people tend to lose consciousness in mass settings and prefer to have others do the thinking for them. If I have learned anything from this, it is:

1. People have no common sense in massive settings and need to be told what to do, not just once but repetitively until it sinks in.
2. People prefer to be led and told what to do. They are more content if they know someone is watching over them.
3. People are easily manipulated using simple commands. If the message is complicated, the less likely they will understand and obey it. Short, simple commands are all that is necessary (and all that John Q. Public understands).

If this all sounds like a cattle drive, it is, complete with park attendants who play the role of cowboys. Next time you visit an amusement park or political rally, observe how the masses are manipulated and you will see what I'm talking about. Just be careful not to spook the herd though, you might start a stampede. This is why you often hear soothing music at such venues, as it tends to calm people down (like the cowboy's harmonica).

"Get along little doggie!"

THINK

SUBURBAN NAZIS

First published - 8/6/2007

Ever since the end of World War II, many Americans have sought the peace and tranquility of suburbia, a place where we can have our own homes as opposed to urban apartments; a place where we can raise a family in friendly and neighborly settings. Such is the dream; such is the myth. In reality, suburban neighborhoods have become places for high anxiety and paranoia as everyone watches what you do and turns you in to the authorities for any infraction of the rules. I like to call such people "Suburban Nazis" as they like to exert their will ruthlessly.

Down in my neck of the woods, and I suspect elsewhere in the country, we have three types of Suburban Nazis. First, we have the "Condo Commandos" which are generally retirees with nothing better to do than patrol the complex looking for any infringement, such as an unauthorized decoration or some minor alteration out of step with the condominium complex. Next we have the Homeowner Associations (HOA) who often employ management companies to perform the tasks the Board of Directors are too lazy to do themselves. Such management companies are often overzealous in performing their duties as they want to prove their worth to the Board. They generate a considerable amount of reports and form letters notifying residents of infringements guaranteed to irritate residents, and if they do not respond, it is turned over to the Gestapo (the attorneys for the HOA) who like nothing better than to goose-step you to court.

Here in Florida we also have the "Water Nazis" who are employed by the government to patrol neighborhoods for violations of water restrictions. One time I received a violation notification for watering my lawn on the wrong day.

As it turned out, it was my next door neighbor watering his lawn next to my house. The Water Nazi found it easier to write me up as opposed to checking it out more closely. Of course I tried to refute the violation only to get lost in the Water Nazi's voice mail jail. I left a pretty terse message on the machine which, fortunately, led to them finally dropping the violation.

I've been a Past President of a HOA myself and understand the need for maintaining the appearance of a community. What I have a problem with is the coldness of how we enforce the rules. In most cases you are guilty until proven innocent. I also have a problem with the paper trail they create. Instead of calling you on the telephone, you are issued an impersonal form letter. During my day on the Board, we first tried to call or visit the homeowner to talk to them. I found that most people are embarrassed by the violation and promptly take care of it. A little friendly human contact goes a lot further than a cold form letter, but this is not how we handle things anymore.

Anytime I see a situation where the Homeowner or Condo Association doesn't openly communicate with the neighborhood, or comes forward with an accurate accounting of their finances or activities (such as published in minutes), an unhealthy situation inevitably ensues and the community loses faith in the Board of Directors, but then again, few people volunteer to serve on such Board of Directors, mostly because they see it as a thankless and futile effort (a kind of "You can't fight City Hall" type of phenomenon). Consequently, the Board of Directors typically consists of people who have some time on their hands, but do not have a clue as to how to run such an Association. Even worse is when participation on the Board is used as a means to settle an old score with a neighbor. I guess what troubles me most though is that Suburban Nazis are turning neighborhoods into concentration camps.

Yes, I love the peace and tranquility of suburbia, and the sound of jackboots in the Spring.

THINK

SUPERMARKETS

First published - 5/15/2009

You can learn a lot from a supermarket. For example, if you want to know what a community is really like, visit the local supermarket. To me, it is a microcosm of the community, complete with local cuisine, customs, speech patterns, fashion, and social stature. It also tells us a lot about our driving skills. That's right, driving. The similarities between how people push their shopping carts in the store and how they motor around town is truly remarkable. Think about it, here's what you typically find as you meander the store aisles:

Speeders - these are the people who know exactly what they want, and go in and out of the store as fast as possible. They have little time for chitchat and God forbid you get in their way, WHAM! Actually, I like to follow the speeders through the store as they tend to clear the aisles for me (kind of like following an ambulance or fire truck). Most people are put off by speeders though, particularly when they accidentally ram into other shopping carts.

Slow Pokes - obviously this group represents the antithesis of the speeders. These are the people who either go grocery shopping like it is a carefree social outing or the geriatric types who can barely see above the carts. Then of course there are the people talking on cell phones or the handicap wheel chairs the size of a Sherman Tank. All of these people move at a snail's pace and are totally oblivious to everyone else around them thereby causing traffic jams.

Road Hogs - these are the people who push their carts down the middle of the aisles making it difficult to pass from either direction, left or right. These are the same people who

like to double-park their carts in the most congested parts of the store and look offended if you ask them to move (which, of course, they do reluctantly).

Navigation through the supermarket is probably the biggest reason why people loathe going to them. Perhaps if they were designed more like highways it would be simpler, such as turning lanes, traffic signs, and lines painted down the middle of the aisle floors (actually, I think this would be a great idea as people are conditioned to follow painted lines on the road and would probably observe one side or the other).

Thank God nobody ever thought of adding a horn to a grocery cart as I suspect the sound would be deafening. Maybe what we need is a motorcycle cop driving a two wheel Segway up and down the aisles writing tickets or traffic cops strategically located around the store.

Actually, I think they should give driving tests in supermarkets as a precursor to getting your actual driver's license. Imagine kiosks in supermarkets like Kroger, Publix, and Safeway where you have to complete a written test and then be evaluated by Troopers with drill-sergeant hats and reflective glasses with clipboards judging shoppers on their driving skills. This should significantly cut down on the number of idiots on the road wouldn't it?

Yes, supermarkets tell a lot about ourselves, maybe too much.

THINK

SYMBOLISM

First published - 1/29/2008

Back in the 1960's, we saw a lot of people burn the American flag, as well as bras and draft cards. We don't see that much of it anymore, but every now and then you'll see it on the news. Whenever someone is arrested, particularly for burning the flag, they inevitably use the excuse, "*What's the big deal? It's only a symbol.*" Well, it is a big deal as it conjures up the same emotions today as it did back then. Interestingly, I don't think young people today appreciate the power of symbolism.

Frankly, we're a species that depends on symbols and I don't think we could live without them. As a small example, without symbols, there would be no alphabet and consequently we would be totally dependent on verbal communications, meaning there would be no literature, and no sense of history (as nothing would be documented). There would also be no math or music as they both depend on symbols to convey ideas as does the expression of time, and without math, you can forget about engineering and architecture. Do you see where I'm going with this? Basically, our standard of living would be rather primitive as we would have no way of recording ideas, and that's really what symbols are intended to do; to record and exchange ideas and to communicate.

Aside from character based symbols, we have several other graphical symbols as displayed on signs, flags, or whatever; even on the desktop of our computers (you know, icons). In addition to communications, symbols are used to express a wide range of emotions, everything from love to hate and everything else in between. :-) :-(

There are lots of symbols on the highway to instruct us

how to operate our vehicles; you know, stop/go, pass/don't pass, slow down, turn here, etc. Even though we use road signs, traffic lights, even lines on the road, a lot of people overlook the symbols and drive as they so desire. It sometimes makes you wonder why the Department of Transportation even bothers posting them.

Although most symbols are intended for human eyesight, there are many others intended for human hearing, such as school bells, ship horns, police sirens, telephone ring tones, and alarm clock buzzers.

A lot of people don't seem to grasp that even human-beings can become living symbols, such as politicians, coaches, teachers, sports figures, executives, etc. They become the personification of the institution they represent which can be a rather substantial burden to bear. As I tell young people, the higher you go up in the organizational structure, the more of a symbol you become requiring more responsibilities than what are printed in the job description.

Most of our symbols are instructional or operational in nature, meaning they are intended to direct us to do something, but we also have a lot of inspirational symbols that draws on human emotions and motivates us accordingly, such as religious and patriotic symbols, and these can be every bit as powerful as the others, if not more so. Take for example the Cross, the Star of David, or the American flag. All are intended to remind us of certain things, and it is the power of these inspirational symbols that the flag burners underestimate. Then again, maybe they understand it very well as burning the flag itself is a highly symbolic act and evokes considerable emotion from those who believe in the symbol being desecrated.

We are a nation that believes in the freedom on speech. Consequently, even the desecration of symbols is tolerated

but certainly not admired. The only thing we can do to preempt such actions is to promote our symbols accordingly. For example, back when I was coaching Little League, my signature as a coach was to have my kids stand on the line prior to the beginning of a game, take off our caps and pledge allegiance to the flag. I saw this as an important part of promoting sportsmanship and conveying a tribute to the country which fostered our national pastime. Although most of the opposing coaches and teams joined us in this ritual, there were a handful who adamantly opposed it and refused to stand for the flag. I never did understand this. Nonetheless, this simple act left an indelible impression on my teams and implanted an appreciation for a very powerful symbol which will hopefully carry forward in the years ahead.

THINK

TALKING WITH YOUR HANDS

First published - 5/29/2009

I find it interesting how people use their hands when they talk, kind of like a comedy routine. Just about everyone does it, yours truly included. We use our hands to emphasize a point, exemplify something, but more than anything we use them to command the attention of our audience. So much so, people tend to use hands as a second set of lips. Actually, I do not believe we can help ourselves as we tend to emulate everyone also suffering from the same affliction.

I find it difficult to talk without the use of hands, and it seems the people who can do so are few and far between (and generally tend to be quite boring). Comedians and politicians often use their hands to emphasize a point. In fact, some people are better remembered not for what they said, but how they said it instead. Comedian Jack Benny exemplifies the point of someone who is better remembered for his mannerisms than his jokes. Jack could get a laugh simply by looking at people or using his hands.

The occasional hand gesture is fine but it becomes somewhat distracting and annoying when you start using your hands excessively thereby taking on the appearance of an animated windmill. Those who are deaf have a legitimate excuse, but the rest of us do not want to suffer with someone who seems to be going through mime school.

I tend to believe there are three types of active uses of the hand for communications: what I call "the fencer," "the boxer," and "the punctuator." "The fencer" uses his hands to swirl, parry and thrust himself in a debate; in his mind, he is in the midst of a dual with an opponent, but with a lot of finesse. "The boxer" is similar as he sees himself in the

ring and is identified for his fancy footwork and flashes of movements. Make no mistake, such histrionics represent a contest to dominate or win over his opponent. On the other hand, the "punctuator" tends to be less threatening and more academic in nature. Here, hands are used to highlight a point, such as using two fingers on both hands to make the "quotes" sign. Do we tend to favor one form over another? Sometimes, but I tend to believe we use all three forms to suit our needs in a conversation.

What I find most interesting in our use of hands is that we are usually not cognizant we are using them in our daily discourse. Sometimes I will parody a friend when I notice they are speaking excessively with their hands. This usually results in a look of total surprise as they were unaware of the use of their hands. It's all very subliminal.

Using our hands is a natural part of the way we communicate. However, if you are worried you use your hands excessively, either ask your friends, or better yet, try sitting on your hands during a conversation. If one or both hands pop out, you probably use them to excess.

THINK

TATTOOS

First published - 5/14/2007

My wife and I were out for dinner the other night and our waitress was an attractive looking young woman who I judged to be in her early twenties. She was very personable and knowledgeable, but she was wearing a short blouse that revealed her midriff and showed a tattoo just above her rear end, and, on her front, there appeared to be something drawn from her belly down to her pubic area (sorry I couldn't verify this for you). I'm sure she thought this was all rather attractive and I must admit it caught my eye, but frankly I was disappointed that a charming young woman found it necessary to defile her body in order to get someone's attention.

I've never understood the need to paint the human body with tattoos, Some say its nothing more than an example of self-expression. Actually, I think its more of a cry for attention than anything else. Some people try to hide their tattoos, but more and more people today proudly display their body art, regardless of the symbolism or what is printed on them. To me, its kind of like sitting next to a kid at a traffic light with his music blaring. I don't know who he is trying to impress other than himself. It most certainly isn't me.

When I was growing up, I only knew two men who had tattoos on their arms, my uncle and my barber. Both got their tattoos while serving in the military, but spent several years thereafter trying to have them removed as they found them to be an embarrassment among their friends as they grew older. I've also met a couple of people who survived the concentration camps of World War II and now bear identification numbers tattooed on their arms. In other words, tattoos are not something my generation or those

that preceded me hold in high regard, but today's younger generation doesn't think this way and whimsically have their bodies painted at the drop of a hat. Recently, a group of underage girls from the local high school were caught trying to get tattooed at a local parlor (down here in Florida, minors cannot be tattooed without a parent's or guardian's permission).

Years ago, tattoo artists struggled to make ends meet, but with the recent wave of tattoo popularity, they have been elevated to near celebrity status. Heck, there has even been a reality show featuring tattoo artists on A&E. I find interviewing people painted with a lot of tattoos and body pierced like a porcupine to be rather amusing. They certainly do not command any credibility with me, but the kids sure seem to love them.

I guess I have always equated tattoos to a person's intelligence level. The more tattoos they have, the lower the IQ they appear to have. I don't know where I get this image from; maybe it was from watching a few prison documentaries where the inmates are interviewed, all of which are covered in tattoos. Somehow I don't find such people rather credible, nor are they anyone I want to be associated with, which is probably why I'll never get a tattoo, but then again, I guess I'm showing my age.

THINK

TIPPING

First published - 2/26/2007

I started going to Japan on business in the late 1970's. When I first started going there I noticed a lot of cultural differences than the United States. For example, I saw beer and whiskey vending machines right next to Coke and Pepsi machines. Kids don't bother the alcohol related machines as they might cause their family to lose face. Another custom I observed was tipping for service, or should I say the lack thereof. When you visit Japan, you simply don't tip anyone, be it a bell man, a waiter or a taxi driver. Nonetheless, you get excellent service. You would be amazed how clean taxi drivers keep their cabs, not for tips but to get more business, which I consider rather smart.

I think we treat tipping rather badly in this country, a horrible custom we picked up from the French. A lot of people seem to forget that a tip is a reward for good service and pay a standard rate regardless of the service rendered. For example, how many times have you seen people pay a generous tip even when the service was bad? Probably more than you care to imagine.

I also find it interesting to see how much we tip. Back in the 1960's, 10% was considered the normal rate, then it was 12%, then 15% for many years, but now people readily reward a 20% tip which I personally consider inflationary. To me that is like paying for a family of five when only four people are served.

I don't mind paying a generous tip for good service, if it is indeed good service, but I normally give just 15% for average service. My friends think I'm being cheap. I think I'm just being honest with the server.

I remember Jack Benny, the famous comedian, had a problem with tipping years ago. Jack's persona in public was that of being cheap (he preferred the word "thrifty") and, as such, he would have to over-tip to overcome his public persona. I would use the term "penurious" but I don't think anyone would know what I'm talking about.

I know of a consultant in Toronto who probably taught me the best lesson in tipping. When we would go out to a restaurant, we would sit down and before we even got started he would present the waiter with a \$10 bill and would say, "*This will either be half of your tip or all of it, it all depends on you.*" Needless to say, we were afforded excellent service and the waiter got a generous tip. I thought this was rather smart and drove home the point of the necessity of earning the tip through good service. My consultant friend said by using this approach, he has never had bad service.

I also find it interesting how other service related workers now expect a tip, particularly at Christmas time. This includes newspaper delivery people, garbage men, and postal workers. As you may recall, I have had difficulty getting mail from our local letter carrier. As far as I'm concerned, I'm going to treat him like the Japanese. I don't reward for lousy service.

THINK

TRUST

First published - 1/6/2009

Have you ever noticed there doesn't seem to be a lot of trust anymore? We tend not to trust our government, our companies, our coworkers, the media, our neighbors. Heck, we're even suspicious about the motives of our own relatives. It wasn't always like this. We used to openly trust people and never feared political back stabbing. Alas, no more. We used to leave our house and cars unlocked; even going so far as to loan a friend a car with no questions asked. Again, no more. When we delegated a task or responsibility to someone, we knew it would be completed properly. No more.

It is natural to gravitate to people we trust, and it's understandable as to why:

- We respect their judgment.
- We value their opinion.
- We feel free to exchange ideas and thoughts with them, including secrets.

Think about it, aren't these the attributes of a true friend or business colleague? In other words, they exhibit the same moral values we do, if not better, but when a trust is broken, it is difficult if not impossible to repair, and our interpersonal relationships rapidly deteriorate.

The decline of trust denotes a change in our culture and not necessarily for the better. I believe it indicates a more permissive and immoral society whereby a person's word is no longer his/her bond and people become more concerned with self-preservation as opposed to the welfare of

others around them. In other words, the decline of trust represents a splintering of people. As an example, instead of delegating responsibility and empowering people to do their job, we tend to micromanage their activities, which is an open admission we do not trust their judgment. This leads to discontent among the workforce and promotes individualism over teamwork.

As indicated earlier, building trust is a difficult task, particularly if it is broken. The best thing is not to break it in the first place. To build or restore trust it is necessary to offer some visible demonstration of trust, be it something as simple as delivering on a promise, maintaining a confidence, or lending a helping hand when push comes to shove. Speaking from experience, it is always comforting to know that someone is watching your backside as opposed to your wallet.

Regarding the diminishing role of our national motto, "*In God We Trust*," some would say this is simply an issue regarding the separation of church and state. As for me, I see it as another sign of the decline of our culture. If we cannot trust God, regardless of our religious denomination, who can we trust?

THINK

VACATIONS

First published - 3/25/2008

Something I think Americans have a problem with is vacations. Although most of us feel lucky to take a week off or a few days here and there, it's rare for Americans to take vacations like our European or Australian counterparts who may take as much as a month off at a time. Sure, we enjoy some time off to recoup from work, but I think the problem here is that Americans don't know how to relax. Whereas others take the time to study the culture of a different locale, Americans rush from one spot to another snapping photos along the way. If you've ever seen the movie, *"If it's Tuesday, this must be Belgium,"* you know what I mean. Our frenetic pace is puzzling to outsiders who do not understand why we don't take the time to truly enjoy the local scenery.

Part of our problem is our multicultural society which has made us a bit more competitive than most. We are always trying to stay one step ahead of our competition, our co-workers, and our neighbors. When we take time off, we're never too far from a telephone and the Internet. I'm just as guilty as anyone in this regards; I don't think I've been unplugged from e-mail since the 1980's. Being in Florida, I always chuckle when I see someone on the beach working diligently on their laptop. I'm sure they are not appreciating the scenery and for all intents and purposes they might as well be back in the office. I think the reason why we're like this is we're afraid that something might go wrong if we cannot be contacted to answer questions or solve a problem.

Americans rarely take a two week vacation. The last one I took was years ago on my honeymoon with my wife. The first week was fine, but by the second week I was becom-

ing itchy to get back to work. We even start to feel guilty for taking so much time off. Small wonder that Americans are past masters of the long weekend as opposed to taking true vacations.

When we do decide to take a vacation we either want to see something new or something familiar which we rarely get a chance to appreciate. As for me, it's fly fishing in Montana. Regardless of where we really want to go, we inevitably have to deal with family commitments. For those of you who have moved far from home, you know exactly what I mean. You are expected to return with the kids year after year thereby eating up your precious vacation days. Instead of visiting Vegas or the Caribbean, you find yourself in Chillicothe, Ohio. Such is the price for moving out of town.

The concept of the vacation is to relax, broaden our horizons, and refocus, thereby making us better workers. Because of our obsession with staying connected to work and our competitiveness, I don't believe we know how to relax and often consider vacations a waste of time. As an aside, have you ever met someone who proudly proclaims he hasn't taken a vacation in a number of years? Somehow I am reminded of the proverb, "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy."

Instead of taking a real vacation, I know a lot of people who would rather not waste their time and use a virtual reality simulator like the one used in the Schwarzenegger Movie, "*Total Recall*." This might be nice, but then again I don't think anything can truly simulate catching a cutthroat trout in the chilly waters of the Flathead River in Montana.

THINK

VOICE MAIL

First published - 12/25/2006

I was hesitant to write an article on the evils of Voice Mail; so much has already been written over the last few years, but I decided to give my spin on it after trying to contact a variety of shopping cart vendors to ask them questions about their products. I literally contacted dozens of companies and except for one, all used some sort of Voice Mail. The one exception had a pleasant and personable receptionist who answered the phone and routed me to the right person to talk to. The others put me in Voice Mail jail and rarely did anyone return my calls. I find this all rather ironic; whereas people love to yak on cell phones in heavy traffic, they refuse to answer the phone in their own office. Who knows? Maybe people are all stuck in traffic and not in the office. Voice Mail vendors call this productivity; I call it stupidity. It seems the only way to effectively communicate at the corporate level these days is by text messaging or e-mail, and even then, its questionable whether you will ever get a prompt and intelligent response. This has all led to some rather bad work habits and contributed to making our work force socially dysfunctional. Even worse, it frustrates the consumers who cannot get the answers they need.

The other thing that gets me is when you reach an automated Voice Mail answer that says, "*You have reached Joe Blow of the ABC company. I can't come to the phone right now, but if you leave a message after the beep I'll be sure to call you back.*" Come on, don't insult my intelligence; I haven't reached Joe Blow, I've reached some idiot machine; and don't expect me to be happy about it either. Instead, how about a more honest response like, "*Sorry, I don't want to take your message right now and even if you leave something on my machine I won't be answering it anytime soon. You'll have*

better luck contacting me by going outside of your front door and screaming my name at the top of your lungs. Have a nice day."

I believe we have taken Voice Mail too far and have developed an aversion to talking to human beings. In my office we still answer the phone, regardless if it is a legitimate inquiry or some huckster trying to sell us something. As for the latter, you can't imagine the satisfaction I get of slamming a phone down on a caller. I don't need Voice Mail to chase people away for me.

THINK

WALMART

First published - 6/9/2008

I think we all have some sort of love/hate relationship with Walmart. Nobody WANTS to go there, yet you are inevitably seduced by their low prices. I guess this is why you see all walks of mankind sauntering down their aisles like zombies looking for the best deals.

As you approach any Walmart, the first thing that catches your eye are the beggars outside panhandling for a variety of causes, mostly local charities such as school programs. Once you get past the gauntlet of beggars you are greeted by a Walmart employee who is more than happy to give you a shopping cart. Next you notice wafts of food odors emanating from the local food court near the entrance, usually popcorn or whatever special they have that day. Frankly, I don't think there's anything better to put you in the mood for shopping like the smell of burning popcorn or corned dogs.

Following this, you start down the conveyor belt of narrow aisles that circle the store. Now it becomes a game of bumper cars as you weave in and out of aisles to avoid the unthinking clods who either stop without warning to examine some 29 cent item for sale or who lean heavily on the cart and move as if they have polio and are learning to walk for the first time. Wouldn't it be great if the carts every once and awhile discharged an electrical jolt to prod the people along a little faster, or at least to wake them up?

As I said, you see just about anybody at your local Walmart, representing every social strata imaginable. This means you also see some of the most avant-garde clothing worn by people, everything from pajamas, to suit and tie, with everything in-between, but most people dress incognito so

they cannot be easily recognized. You also see a lot of people wearing sunglasses inside for the same reason. Yes, we love the low prices, but we don't want to admit to being a patron which I consider rather odd.

Frankly, I see the local Walmart as a sort of Statue of Liberty with a similar inscription:

*"Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to shop cheaply,
The wretched refuse of our teeming shelves.
Send these, the desperate buyers to me.
I lift my hand out just beyond the exit door."*

What is perhaps most interesting about the Walmart phenomenon is that regardless of what we say about it, we keep coming back for more, which is all the company really cares about. Kind of sounds like an addictive drug doesn't it?

THINK

WEARING TIES

First published - 7/7/2008

The Wall Street Journal recently ran an article on the decline of men wearing dress ties to work. They quoted a Gallup Poll that said the number of men who wear ties every day to work last year dropped to a record low of 6%. I'm not sure I agree with this number but there is no doubt ties have greatly diminished in the business world. I still put one on when I'm dealing with a customer and I do so as a sign of respect for the other party. Today it seems the only people who wear ties are politicians, newscasters, attorneys, doctors, and corporate executives, all of which do so as a sign of authority, and maybe they're right.

Historically, learning to tie a tie marked a young man's passage to manhood, but I don't think there are a lot of men in the workforce who know how to tie a tie anymore, which I consider a little strange. Most newscasters know how to properly tie a tie, as do attorneys. However, I'm starting to see politicians with sloppy looking ties, and will someone please show Sen. Obama how to tie his tie; it looks like a lousy clip-on.

In addition to how a tie is tied, I learned a long time ago the length of the tie and its relation to the belt buckle is important. In theory, long ties represent excessive behavior, and short ties infer personal inadequacies. Every once in awhile you see a bow tie or a western string tie, but I think they are worn more for a giggle than anything serious.

The tie used to be the perfect present for holidays such as Father's Day or Christmas, but most of the time we got a tie we wouldn't be caught dead in. This resulted in closets full of ties we never threw away in fear we might offend someone. For example, I probably have a couple dozen

ties in my closet, but I only have three that I regularly wear. I also have ties for special occasions, such as the Christmas holidays. I also have one representing my family's Scottish Clan, but my favorite is one my father gave me years ago; It shows a series of small jackass' sitting down with the following small letters underneath each one, "Y.C.D.B.S.O.Y.A." Translation: "You Can't Do Business Sitting On Your Ass." It makes a great conversation piece.

As I said, I don't know if I agree with the Gallup Poll's 6% figure as I am starting to see people starting to wear ties again, particularly salesmen who use them to spruce up their image in front of customers. Frankly, they look much more professional than the typical corporate Polo shirt.

Now I know a lot of young men will read this and still be adamantly opposed to wearing ties but as I said earlier, it is a sign of respect. If this is of no interest to you, I'm sure you'll continue to wear whatever you want, but for those of you who are interested in making a positive and professional impression, perhaps its time to go into the closet and pull out a couple of ties.

THINK

WEB PAGE DESIGN

First published - 12/18/2006

I've been surfing the Internet for many years now and have seen a lot of things, everything from simple static web pages to some very sophisticated and dynamic web sites. Recently I have been helping to startup a new VoIP company (Voice over IP). This new project has caused me to look at Internet shopping carts and there are some very slick ones out there. What I found interesting was the company web pages themselves, and I have to admit they look very elegant from a web design perspective, but I've noticed its no longer easy to find the answers to the questions I had. For example, I want to see a description of the product, its technical specifications, pricing, a sample demo, perhaps some user endorsements, a price list, and contact information. Unfortunately, I found I had to dig rather hard to find all of this, particularly price lists and contact information. Further, most web pages today include some rather small sized fonts which are difficult to read. I realize I can expand the font sizes by adjusting some settings on my web browser, but very few people do this. Between the small font sizes and the difficult navigation, a consumer can become easily exhausted and frustrated simply by surfing the Net. In other words, these web pages may be technically elegant but they are missing the boat in terms of being able to sell their product. I found this rather ironic, particularly for shopping cart packages.

I am often kidded by younger web designers about the web pages I design; they consider it old-fashioned and definitely not state of the art, and perhaps they are correct. I try to keep things up to date, but you know what? People have no problem navigating my pages, finding what they want, and have no problem reading the content. In other words, by keeping it simple, I'm not trying to wear out my audience. My web pages may not be state of the art, but at least they work and I've received no complaints. **THINK**

WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE WANT & NEED

First published - 5/15/2008

*"Most children are raised by amateurs, not professionals."
- Bryce's Law*

I've been watching with great interest the ten part series on PBS entitled, "Carrier," which provides a rare glimpse into life aboard an American aircraft carrier, the USS Nimitz. There are approximately 5,000 people aboard this floating four acres of military weaponry, and although the ship and technology are interesting, it is the ship's crew who are the real stars of the show.

Crewmen, both male and female, from all levels of the ship's military hierarchy were profiled. Many were interviewed as to what their background was and why they joined the Navy. To me personally, I found the interviews with the younger members of the crew (ages 18-22) to be particularly enlightening. Many came from middle class broken homes where the other members of the family were socially dysfunctional, suffering from alcoholism and drug addiction, and consequently becoming pimps, prostitutes, thieves, and wife/child beaters. Time and again, crewmen spoke of how the Navy gave them structure and purpose in life. They found such things as discipline, organization, and accountability, to be some very powerful and beneficial concepts. They also thrived in an environment of teamwork where it was necessary to put aside differences and work towards the common good. As a result, they felt less like aloof individuals and more like a real family with a sense of belonging. They would frequently use the expression, "Work hard - play hard," representing their philosophy to teamwork. With this foundation in place, the crewmen found confidence in themselves, assumed responsibility for their actions, and confidently responded to challenges. Instead of drifting through life aimlessly, the Navy

gave them the ability to chart a course in their personal lives, something their parents failed to instill in them. In other words, the military forced them to grow up by teaching them the meaning of adulthood.

Some time ago I discussed the need in business for "Parenting Management," that due to a decline in parenting skills at home, teachers, coaches, and managers were being forced to play surrogate mothers and fathers. We may not like it, but unfortunately it has become a fact of life as many misfit parents have abdicated their responsibilities. Not surprising, I find "Carrier" as an endorsement of my thesis that we have to do much more in the business world to help young people grow up and take their proper place in society. Since their biological parents have dropped the ball, it now defaults to the manager.

In a nutshell, the lessons from "Carrier" are simple; with rare exception, young people both want and need direction, organization, discipline, and accountability. Although they would never admit such going into the Navy, these simple parental skills are what the young crewmen actually respond positively to.

In the final chapter of the show, the producers interviewed a young crewman who told a story of going back and visiting his recruiter following Boot Camp. "What did you get me into?" he asked the recruiter who, in turn, raised his hand and said "Where would you be right now if you weren't in the Navy?" The crewman blurted out he would be hanging out with his friends getting high ("Did I just say that?" he said). He glanced back into the eyes of the recruiter who simply said, "You see?" And, of course, the crewman did.

Maybe there is something to the concept of having all young people serve in the military for a few years following high school.

THINK

WHAT'S WRONG WITH A LITTLE DISCIPLINE?

First published - 12/29/2008

Caroline Haynes is my new hero. A lot of you may be saying "*Who the heck is Caroline Haynes?*", particularly those of you outside of the United Kingdom, but Ms. Haynes is a school principal who recently caught the attention of the press when she started to implement strict discipline in the classroom. I've never had the pleasure of actually meeting Ms. Haynes, but I have been doing a lot of reading about her recently. She is with the Tendring Technology College in Clacton-on-Sea, Essex, UK, a secondary school which, when translated to the American equivalent, is a private school for children ages 11-19.

What makes her story interesting is that she adopted a zero-tolerance policy on student discipline at her school under the premise that bad behavior effects the culture of learning. She is quoted as saying, "*It stands to reason that a lax policy on discipline will result in increased bad behaviour.*"

Whereas government policy encourages more tolerance in terms of youth discipline, Ms. Haynes has adopted an opposing policy that has resulted in 478 suspensions in one year at a school with 1,880 pupils (25%). Currently, she is averaging two suspensions every day for bad behavior. Swearing at teachers, classroom disruptions, drugs, fighting, and bad attitudes are simply not tolerated. Her tactics may sound somewhat radical in a permissive society, but you cannot deny her results. Since cracking down on discipline, student passing rates jumped from 48% to 74%, a substantial increase. Ms. Haynes said, "*Our policy immediately bore fruit. Exam results have soared. I'm very proud.*"

Now, instead of adversarial relationships and tension in

the classroom, students are free to concentrate on their studies and are improving noticeably. Now for the kicker; I'm told students like the discipline and prefer it over chaos. This is consistent with what I have been saying that people tend to thrive in a structured environment that is well organized and leadership is strong, whether it is in school or in business. It eliminates distractions thereby allowing people to focus and be more productive. Further, it brings consistency to work products and promotes craftsmanship. People not only need a little discipline, they actually prefer operating in such a manner which improves communications and gives them a sense of direction.

You have heard me say we need some real heroes these days, people to be emulated. Well, Ms. Haynes is one that gets my vote. In an age where discipline is spurned, she offers tangible proof of the benefits that can be derived from a little law and order in our daily lives.

THINK

WHY DO WE TRUST POLITICIANS?

First published - 4/7/2009

I was looking over some political polls recently and noticed the approval ratings of Congress are dismally low, 13-37% depending on the poll you read. Offhand, this would indicate we do not believe they are doing the job we elected them to do, and a violation of our trust, but America is not alone in this regards; in the reports I read, politicians around the world are generally not trusted. In one report I read, used car salesmen were judged to have better integrity than politicians, and they may very well be on to something here.

We may like to grumble about politicians but I tend to believe we trust them a lot more than we think. After all, how were they elected to office to begin with and why do we keep reelecting them term after term? Is it because there are no other qualified candidates to do the job? Is the pay and benefits bad? I don't think so. Actually, I think the public's outrage is gone and, knowing this, our government officials feel free to do whatever they want.

We elect government officials to uphold the interests of their constituents and for the common good. Hopefully, the politicians will have the same interests and moral values as the people they represent, but somewhere along the way the politicians inevitably get their priorities mixed up and forget what they were elected to do. After a politician has promised the voter the world on a platter, he is basically free to make decisions and vote as he sees fit, regardless of pertinent opinion polls. In fact, politicians are probably more interested in what the lobbyists have to say than their own constituents. This means accountability is really what is at the core of the issue here.

It has been my experience that voters tend to gloss over the politician's record while in office. As an employer, I tend to keep track of employee punctuality, absenteeism, and decisions and mistakes made. Conversely, voters should be made aware of their elected official's actions in office, such as attendance at meetings, and voting record. Since we periodically prepare evaluation reports for employees, what's wrong with producing a similar report for our officials on a routine basis, such as annually? After all, who works for who here? Aside from implanting electrodes in the politician's head, I know of no other way to rebuild trust than to routinely review the official's work. If it works in business, why not in government?

Perhaps the biggest fear we have as voters is political corruption, and the temptation to become such can be irresistible to even the best of us. Far too many politicians have become exceedingly rich and powerful due to kickbacks in support of lobbyists. Interestingly, I cannot seem to find this in the job description for any government official.

Years ago, Milton Eisenhower pointed out the President of the United States has the power to call for a Continental Congress whereby our governing rules can be reexamined and amended accordingly. Such a Congress has not been held for over 200 years. Think about it, this would be a golden opportunity to revise our electoral process, rethink the role of lobbyists, and determine performance evaluations for our officials, among other things. Regrettably, there is nobody on the horizon with the political fortitude to do this. Only the American people can put forth the necessary political pressure to call for such a Congress, but unfortunately, the public isn't that strong or sophisticated, consequently, the politicians will continue on their merry way and the taxpayers will continue to distrust their officials.

Next time you find yourself upset about politicians violating the public trust, ask yourself how outraged you are and what you are willing to do about it.

THINK

WRISTWATCHES

First published - 8/4/2008

My wristwatch recently broke and I had it taken in for repair. At first I kind of felt like a dog who had lost his collar, like an important part of me was missing, but after awhile, I got used to it and felt somewhat unshackled. I think the last time I was without a watch was back when I was in high school. Surprisingly, I discovered I didn't miss the watch that much and may go on without wearing one. I have no problem knowing the time as I can find it just about everywhere, including my PC, in my automobiles, on television and radio, and general wall clocks. Cell phones and other personal electronic devices also maintain the time. So much so that young people imbued with the new technologies are less likely to wear a watch than their elders.

One of the reasons we wear wristwatches is as a status symbol, a sort of "coming of age" thing and is an expression of our personality. Gaudy and gold watches are worn by wannabe power brokers. Sleek watches are worn by people who want to appear hip and contemporary. The super-gadget watches are worn by the techno-geeks, and the basic sports watches are worn by the jocks and naturalists.

As watch wearing declines, watch makers are scrambling to make new models that will appeal to the younger generation and include such things as temperature readings, GPS, Internet access, multimedia or whatever. In a way, it will be reminiscent of Dick Tracy's 2-Way Wrist Radio/TV.

But I think the days of wristwatches as a status symbol are winding down. Young people do not seem to look upon the prestige of watches like my generation did or my predecessors. Basically, the watch has been replaced by the

cell phone with its many different features, everything from simple phones to sophisticated devices that can be used for just about anything, e.g., camera, recording device, radio/television, dictation machine, etc. As for me, I'm waiting for a model that comes with either an electric razor or a phaser.

I see many friends and business contacts constantly trying to do one-upmanship over their cell phones. This doesn't impress me, but then again neither did an expensive watch. Nonetheless, the transfer of status from watches to cell phones is a phenomenon that should not go unnoticed, as it is marking the end of an era, the start of another, and a change in our culture.

THINK

YES MEN

First published - 8/21/2006

We've all seen instances where subordinates mindlessly agree with everything the boss has to say; we call these people "Yes Men." I'm not really sure why we have such people. Maybe its because the boss wants to surround himself with clods to bolster his self-esteem. Maybe its because people are afraid of disagreeing with the boss in fear of losing their job. Or maybe its as simple as people no longer know how to engage their brains and allows others to make decisions for them. I tend to think its the latter.

Let me ask you something, what is wrong with a little critical thinking? I get involved with a lot of discussion groups on the Internet, both professional and nonprofit groups and am not afraid to put in my two cents. I'm not always looking for everyone to agree with me; a lot don't. Instead, I thrive on the discourse and find such discussions as fruitful for bringing forth new ideas and finding solutions for problems. Some people are scared to participate in such groups and either remain quiet or simply maintain the party line. I call these types of people "cowards" or "sheep."

One of my favorite movies is "Twelve Angry Men," an old black-and-white courtroom story starring Henry Fonda, Lee J. Cobb, Jack Klugman, and others. The story centers on the dynamics of a jury who must decide the fate of a teenager in the murder of his father. At first, the jury consists of mostly "Yes Men" who simply want to prosecute the teenager and move on with their lives. Fonda wants to discuss the case in more detail before making a snap decision, and is castigated by the others for slowing them down. By discussing the evidence in more detail, the jurors, one by one, determine the teenager is innocent. In particular, there is an interesting scene where one of the jurors changes his

vote from guilty to innocent more as a whim as opposed to any specific evidence. This infuriates another jurist who challenges the other to explain why he changed his vote. This is an excellent example of how "Yes Men" can get into trouble, simply because they refuse to engage their brain.

What we need in business today are fewer "Yes Men" and more people who can use their heads, but I guess that requires work.

THINK

YOU CAN PUT YOUR EYE OUT THAT WAY

First published - 7/23/2007

A couple of weeks ago we celebrated Independence Day in America, complete with fireworks. This reminded me of when I was a youth and enjoyed setting off fireworks myself. I always found the instructions printed on fireworks rather amusing which said simply, "*Put on ground, light fuse, run away.*" I didn't know exactly where they wanted me to run away to, I had already been to the circus, so I just stood back a few feet and watched the firecracker explode.

Fireworks drives mothers crazy, and I wish I had a nickel for every time I heard my mother warn me, "*You can put your eye out that way.*" I think this was the standard warning for just about anything I did, be it riding a bicycle, playing baseball, swimming, running, or breathing. It is the first cardinal rule each mother must learn in order to bear children. I wasn't alone either, all of my friends' mothers admonished them with this same expression regularly. So much so, that we thought our mothers had formed a conspiracy or some secret society for the sole purpose of maintaining our eyesight.

The power of mothers is rather interesting. Years ago, Jay Leno commented that mothers had the uncanny ability to sniff out just about anything, even better than a bloodhound, such as your secret copy of Playboy you kept stashed away in your bedroom. Back before the Iraq war started, he said we should not have wasted time sending in a team of UN delegates to look for weapons of mass destruction since they never found anything. Instead, they should have sent in a team of mothers who would have pulled Saddam Hussein out by the ear and cleaned up the situation right away. It would have probably saved us all

a lot of grief.

Mothers are full of little axioms they use to keep us in line, but I have to think, "*You can put your eye out that way,*" has to be their favorite with "*Stop it or you'll go blind*" coming in a close second.

THINK

END