

“Have a Pleasant New Year”

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By Mark Lindquist

“Years ago, my mother used to say to me, she'd say, ‘In this world, Elwood, you must be,’ – she always called me Elwood – ‘In this world, you must be oh so smart, or oh so pleasant.’ Well, for years I was smart. I recommend pleasant. You may quote me.”

I’m quoting Elwood P. Dowd, as played by Jimmy Stewart in “Harvey.” This classic movie is about a dipsomaniac and an imaginary six-foot, three-and-a-half-inch rabbit, so I would not expect to see it cited on any candidate’s Facebook site, let alone a candidate for County Prosecutor, but I did.

The candidate, Mark Roe, is a friend of mine from college. He became Snohomish County Prosecutor by appointment and ran for election this year. Prior to his appointment, he barely tolerated politics, so he turned to friends and professionals for counsel after he stepped into the arena.

In prior campaign seasons, I would have advised him against associating himself with an eccentric tippler and a giant rabbit. This year, I didn’t. I thought the quote was so original for a political site, and so refreshing in a nasty campaign season, and so authentic for Roe, that it was perfect.

Roe’s commitment to pleasantness wavered only once that I know of during his campaign. He called to say, “My opponent keeps lying about me.” Roe is smart enough never to refer to his opponent by name.

*Welcome to the club*, I almost said. Instead, thinking of Elwood P. Dowd, I advised him to ignore the unpleasant fellow. To make it sound more like political counsel, and less like dialogue from an old Hollywood movie, I framed this philosophy as a strategy, “My campaign calls it Operation Ignore.” Roe embraced this, and found campaign Zen. He won easily.

In Roe’s younger years, he was concerned with demonstrating how smart he was. Unlike most people who want to impress you with how smart they are,

Roe truly is smart. He is so smart he figured out that pleasant is more important.

I had this minor epiphany later in life than Roe. Timing is everything, as they say, and I was open to the concept this year. The death of my brother in June and the birth of my daughter in August was a yin-yang wake-up call. "Good morning, Mr. Lindquist, life is short."

Marcus Aurelius, my favorite stoic, expressed a similar sentiment in *Meditations*. "Begin each day by telling yourself: Today I shall be meeting interference, ingratitude, insolence, disloyalty, ill-will, and selfishness – all of them due to the offenders' ignorance of what is good and evil." Aurelius goes on to more charitably note that none of these things can injure him because we are all brothers and he cannot be angry with his brethren.

I incorporated all this into my PowerPoint on "How to Communicate to the Public through the Media." When in the alliterative spirit, I call it the four Ps: the Public Prefers Pleasant People. We tune out unpleasant people, remembering only that they made us cringe or maybe feel sorry for them. I also added the concept into my New Year's resolutions.

I have long been into New Year's resolutions. On New Year's Day, I religiously review my previous year's resolutions, and write out new commitments. Historically, my resolutions were a combination of the practical and the philosophical: read more books, appreciate beauty, avoid caffeine, live with integrity, quit watching really dumb movies, be grateful, use sunscreen, and so on.

In my thirties my resolutions were about the length of *The Great Gatsby*, which is short for a novel but long for a to-do list, so I began honing them down to essentials. The list became more one of guiding principles than resolutions.

A few years ago, I thinned it down to three: live with integrity, live with gratitude, live like a writer. For the record, by aspiring to live like a writer I was embracing the Henry James ethos, "A writer is a person upon whom nothing is lost," rather than the Hunter S. Thompson ethos espoused by El Presidente Scott Candoo, "When the going gets weird, the weird turn pro."

Thanks to Elwood P. Dowd, Mark Roe, and Marcus Aurelius, I am expanding my New Year's resolutions this year to include live with pleasantness. Pleasantness is a good policy for anyone, but especially for those of us who work in competitive and combative arenas like the campaign trail or the courtroom. For lawyers, people who make a living by communicating, it's smart to be pleasant.

You may quote me.

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