

Mblem

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On the Arts: Silence

David Ridgeway

Writing, an art itself, about the arts is something I've never done before. Mind you I've spent many a hour talking about the arts and many a dollar supporting the arts but writing about the arts escaped my notice until this very moment. I think I can do it to my and your satisfaction. My hope is that you will enjoy these occasional columns in the light hearted way they were written.

By this I mean that there are certain rules I will prescribe for writing this column. Rules that I will quickly break to further my purpose. Rule #1, for instance if I say that walking to the mailbox is an art ... then it is for the immediate duration of the column. Should you take issue with that assertion and write to me expressing displeasure, you may receive a repudiation of the entire column and my reasons for writing it or you may receive a reminder that it is my column and anything is an art if the column defines it as such. Another rule, Rule #2, is that I will not bother with fact checking or other concerns about accuracy. I guarantee that my opinions are always accurate and the column will be a showcase for my opinion. This will be a "fun" column not only for its' esteemed readers but for its' author as well. I will slip seamlessly from first to third person and back again. This is due to a multiple personality condition for which we do not apologize. Were it within our power to temper this condition, I would gladly do so. Rule #3 will be that I can end sentences with consonants and begin them with ands and buts. By golly when I'm finished with a column it looks and reads like art. And finally Rule #4 is that my columns will be considered art themselves (see Rule #1).

Now that we understand us, let's get started.

Today's subject will be one of the basics for appreciating the arts. The art of silence.

I am reminded of the young man who was sworn to silence in preparation for the priesthood. Aspiring priests were allowed two words every two years. At the end of two years, this particular young man said, "Bed hard."

Another two years went by and the same young man said, "I quit."

To which Father replied, "I'm not surprised. You've done nothing but complain ever since you started."

I would never suggest that you observe two years of silence for every art function you attend but you must be quiet when you are in the chute or the gallery when the performers or works of art are on display as in "on stage."

One cannot learn if one is talking. As a musician and performer of many undistinguished years standing, I have long observed that in the presence of art, many people begin to talk out of plain nervousness. They are overwhelmed by the closeness of live music or the sight of paintings they have only seen in books. This manifestation of nervousness is as understandable as it is unforgiveable.

When one talks at a concert or art exhibit, not everyone can hear you but the people next to you can hear you and it is memories of your comments, inane or otherwise, that they will carry home with them. What a waste of admission monies! What a waste of art!! Why you should have made yourself available for a conference call and seen how many strangers jumped at the chance to take part. And I want to be sure that all are aware that this stricture for silence applies to all venues, regardless of ambient and performer generated volume.

This means if you are attending an AC/DC concert at an outdoor venue, you may not speak while the band is playing. Remember ... not everyone can hear you but your neighbors can. This is true everywhere you go in pursuit of the arts.

And with that said, I beg your leave until next we meet.

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SPECIAL POINTS OF INTEREST:

- *Really nothing interesting in this issue*
- *Well, if you insist, How about doing it right, —here*
- *Or knowing important people? Page 5*
- *Or Tidewater RG Report, Page 6*
- *Find your local contact? Page 7*

If You're Going to Do It, Do It Right

David Skaar

It's a new year, and I haven't changed my ways, I'm writing this at the last possible minute, as usual. Either I haven't learned anything, or I've learned that I can get away with my slacker ways. Speaking of learning (or not) from experience, I just decided on the topic of this article (or at least the beginning of the article, until I get distracted and change my mind).

I haven't used my kids as fodder for this column yet, so I'm going to use them as the easy way out. Kids are always the easy topic for people to talk about, to avoid actual conversational engagement. The participants are sympathetic to each other, and it doesn't require much thought, since most of the stories have similar plots. I however, will not be telling any kid stories (unless they're really, really good, like the one about knocking down the Christmas tree, or standing on the patio table without pants). I will be using my kids more as examples of human behavior.

One day, after watching my son hit his head for the third time in two minutes, I started wondering about how much permanent brain damage he might be doing to himself, and how much smarter he might be as an adult if he were prevented from repeatedly hitting himself in the head. I myself took at least six good hard hits to the head (that I can remember, I may have forgotten a few) from childhood to teenage years: ladder, baseball, falling rock, hard packed snow, softball, and nerf ball saturated in water. These weren't concussion level hits, but they were pretty solid, and I don't know what kind of long-term effects those have had on me. I do know that the brain of a child is still quite plastic, forming and eliminating connections, and is theoretically capable of rerouting around damage so that there is no permanent effect. Still, if the brain never had to repair and reroute, wouldn't it be better?

But, then I thought, what overall good would it do to pad my childrens' world and prevent brain damage if they

never learned how not to hit their heads. They might have optimized intelligence, but they might have no judgement and control. Which is better? Theoretically, they could learn not to ever hit their hits through lectures and visual aids, but that wouldn't really get the point across in the same way that the pain would. The same as touching the hot wood stove handles. I stopped them every time they headed towards the handle, but eventually, they snuck past me and grabbed the handle. Then I didn't have to stop them anymore.

That seems to be the pattern of behavior for children and adults. Ability always precedes control and competence. First they learn to walk, and after all the falling down, they learn to watch where they put their feet. Teenagers learn how to drive, but they probably only know how to operate a car under ideal circumstances. Theoretically, they know that in the event of a skid, they should turn in the direction of the skid in order to regain control. But when they go into a skid on black ice with oncoming headlights in their eyes, a reflex action is going to come out, and they've only got one chance for it to be correct. If they get the chance to do it again, the experience they've gained may serve them well the next time. I've done the same kinds of DNA manipulations thousands of times now. I knew how to do them from reading a protocol once. I could actually do them right after a few hundred times. I knew how not to do them wrong after a few more hundred times. And now, sometimes, I know how to change things to make a reaction work after it fails.

I've heard professional writers talk about how much bad writing they had to do before they started to get good. One in particular says he wrote about 500,000 words of garbage when he was getting started. These are not dumb people, and I'm sure they knew grammar, spelling, and punctuation when they started, but apparently, that wasn't enough. (My thinking is that after a few

hundred of these articles, I might actually start writing well).

Well, I've been hoping that as I wrote this piece, that some fundamental truth about experience and competence would reveal itself to me, so that I could have a deep and meaningful summation. However, nothing has occurred to me, and I'm out of time to get this submitted. One interesting thing did happen today, my children, while wrestling, broke the power adapter for the laptop I use for writing, delaying my completion even more. Now that I've got a new adapter, and am back to work, I think I have learned a fundamental truth. The incompetence and mistakes of others makes a convenient excuse for my failure.

Probably also the other thing I could close with is the fact that the most defining characteristic of the incompetent is that they have absolute self confidence in their own competence. As someone once said (and I'm paraphrasing badly), 'the path to wisdom begins with the recognition of your own ignorance.' I guess that means that I should remind myself that even though I think I've become very good at something, I'm not perfect.

And now some questions about failures, successes, and perhaps, learning from experience.

- 1) What was U.S. Grant's military rank when he resigned his army commission in 1854, to start 7 years of failing at just about everything he did.
- 2) How many poems did Emily Dickinson get published during her lifetime?
- 3) How many points did Jim Kelly and the Buffalo Bills score in 6 minutes 52 seconds on January 3, 1993 to start their comeback to win a playoff game?
- 4) Who originally started his high-tech company in Albuquerque, but moved it to its more famous location at the insistence of his father, who loaned him money?
- 5) What member of a prominent British family with a long and impressive history had mixed success in the military and politics, not making his greatest contributions until the age of 66 (and then being unceremoniously replaced a few years later). He also won the Nobel Prize at the age of 78.

(See answers to "Do It Right" on Page 6)

Sorry, My Mistake, and Related Random Thoughts

Shiangtai Tuan

David said to do it right if you want to do it. Well, 30 years ago, I made a mistake. So I want to make it right. Well, maybe too late.

In the 70's, a group of us from the Duke University International Club used to do some camping trips together. One year, we went to Statesville a tent outlet to check out. A graduate student from India, a research fellow from the US and I each bought a tent. Mine was an 8 by 10 canvas tent. It was not as easy to use as the modern nylon tent nowadays but it was amazingly easy to raise. I could set it up or take it down in ten minutes. For a few years, I kept my tent and a camping guide in the car, ready to set up if it became late where ever I travel. With these several tents of our, this group made good use of the claim: "NC is a vacation land with both mountains and beaches." We went to each side of the state just about once a year. Lynnvilleville Falls was a good place in the mountains and we used to go to the Emerald Isle for the coast. Back then there was a camping ground in Emerald Isle. I assume that place is under some high rise condos now.

Our kerosene camping stove made it easy for breakfast. Eggs, bacon, and toasts were the favorites. There was even running water but of course it was cold. One of the members used to bring dish washing detergent because she claimed that the cold water was not good enough to kill germs but the detergent would. As far as I know, bacteria could survive that easily. Only hot water could kill them, at least in the process of dish washing. We used to argue about it and neither would back out. One day recently when I was washing dishes in my kitchen sink I remembered those days again. Suddenly, I came to the realization that she was right. Well, not exactly the way she put it though. Now, the way soap, or for that matter, detergent, works, it breaks oil or grease into tiny droplets that suspend in water. These droplets get washed away in the form of "suspended solution" in rinse.

(By the way, a real solution is one where the material dissolves into the solvent into individual molecules and becomes part of the liquid, not droplets floating around in the liquid.) In the meanwhile, bacteria grow fast when temperature is right and there are nutrients. Otherwise, they grow a thick shell and turn into spores waiting for the environment to improve. You cannot kill them unless you boil them for ten minutes or soak them in very strong agents, things like sulphuric acid or chlorine bleach. That is why when you wash anything with cold water, even with soap or detergent, bacteria do not die. They stay put in the clothing you wash or in the droplets you wash away, waiting for the environment to improve. That is probably where the word "sleeping cell" came from. That is why I could say that cold water wash did not kill germs. Why was I wrong then? Well, washing dishes is a special case. Pots, pans, glassware, and silverware (stainless, in fact) have smooth surfaces. Bacteria stay in food particles, sauce, and grease. Rinsing with water will leave a film of grease where bacteria stay. Washing with detergent will wash away this layer of grease and be rid of bacteria altogether, dead or life.

That's why this friend was right in cleaning though her reason, detergent kills germs, was wrong. I was wrong though my statement that detergent could not kill bacteria was right. We (in fact, I) merely argued on minor details but did not see the whole picture.

This reflection on washing also reminded me of a few lines of poetry written by Chu Yuan (or Qu Yuan in PinYin phonetic aid, 340? – 278 BC). He praised the beautiful Lotus flower as something that comes from the dirtiest mud but not stained. I think the same can be said about wash water. Wash water or even bath water may look so dirty but what comes out of it is so clean. Just to keep you awake, let me give you a little quiz. Suppose you were given a pint of water to rinse a bottle, would you use the whole amount at once because it feels so good or would you divide the rinse water into two part and rinse twice even each time it felt so pitiful with so little water? Well, I would divide the water in parts. This is why:

Suppose you have pour out the content and there is a layer of some water soluble "thing" left on the wall of the bottle. Say it is about half a teaspoonful. If you use the whole amount at a time, the solution will be half tsp (.085 oz) into a pint (16 oz) or a 5 part in 1000 solution. After you pour the rinse water out, the half teaspoonful wetness let on the bottle wall contain 0.00003 oz of the original material (5/1000 of the original). If you use half a pint of water but twice, the first time will reduce the residual to 10 in 1000 but you can do it twice. The second time will reduce it 10 to 1000 again and you get only 1/10000 of the original material left on the bottle in the end, much better.

Of course, this was not what Chu Yuan talked about. (You may google* Qu Yuan or Chu Yuan and find many hits) He was using that to describe characters of some people. One may grow up in a less than desirable environment. Some people are like the plants grow in nature or things come out of rinse water – clean and beautiful. Unfortunately, not like in the nature, people like this are rare. It takes integrity and willingness to be responsible to resist blaming everything on environment. People become lazy, corrupted or even criminal because, as they say, they had a hard childhood, abused when young, or grew up in the wrong environment (too rich, too poor, with soft parents, with touch parents ...). When you go to a gym for exercise you pick up a towel and wipe the equipment after you use it. Expend the idea. Clean after you wherever you go. Cover your mouth when you sneeze. Go on from there.

* Foot note: As all of you know, "to google ..." is not a good English word but gradually accepted to mean "to search ..." with the Google Search Engine on Internet." There are many such new colloquial phrases now in the twenty first century. One comes readily in my mind: "Nifong" as an intransitive verb: "to Nifong" means to take personal advantage by stirring up something such as racial sentiment. As a transitive verb, "to Nifong some one" means "to accuse someone of something knowingly without evidence". It can be used as a noun as in "to make a Nifong" or "to throw a Nifong on some one" respectively. Yes, have a good year. Be prosper and don't get Nifonged by anyone.

COORDINATOR'S CORNER- Greensboro

Ellen Muratori

Surprisingly, Tweaky Tuesday's Lunch in December at the cafeteria was not the mobbed scene that it has been in past years. Guess the shoppers were eating elsewhere.

December's Games Night, held at Melinda Kite's home, lasted until 3:00am! Thank you, Melinda for hosting a delightful evening.

Starting with Dominoes while waiting for others to arrive, were Melinda, Ellen Muratori, Bruce Ellington, Wendy Cousins, and Ray Burton. Wendy is a visiting member from Johannesburg, Union of South Africa. Ken Hinson, arriving from Charlotte, joined us in a game of Bones, featuring Paleontology in a card game. Margaret Roberts guided David Skaar, Ken, and Ellen, through the steps of Field Research, Museum preparation and identification of bones, and finally, the Analysis. You had to be there to experience it!

At the other table, David Roberts and Tom Zavist joined Ray, Melinda, Bruce and Wendy in an absorbing Carcassone. Since there was still so-o-o-o much time left, we played Trumpet at one table, and Perudo (that

noisy game!!) at the other. Four stalwart players remained glued to their seats, playing Hearts, Spades, and Ni-

agagra.

It was agreed, there's nothing like a FULL evening of exercising the brain.

Another Triad area well attended event in December was the Winston-Salem Thecond Thursday supper. Beguiled by Byron West's annct which read in part as follows: "Honoring the tradition of our annual Non-Holiday Gathering, we will have no caroling, no names drawn for impersonal exchanges of cheesy gifts, no visits from pillow-stuffed men in fake beards pretending to be jolly, no table decorations painstakingly constructed ... using styrofoam hedge clippings, candy canes and a hot glue gun. What there will be...etc." Apparently, the incantation summoned several regulars from W-S, and Brian Stumpfif, Lisa Muratori, Joan Kramer, Homer Holton, and Tom Tyson from points east. A refreshing time was had by all.

Last minute report: W-S Thecond Thursday to be held at a different location starting in February. TBA

See you soon, Ellen

Tip or Top Shiangtai Tuan

By "top", I mean the highest lower bound of wages, i.e., "minimum wage." I think it is very much related to tipping.

The minimum wage had not been "adjusted" for the change from standard of living. I am glad to see the congress made the incentive to make an increase which is spread out in several years.

Of course, wages and for that matter, minimum wages, are closely relate to the cost of living index. So, ideally, it would be nice if minimum wage is automatically adjusted from that index. Well, I suppose that is not practical. Well, why not. Salaries for many companies do. In fact, even Social Security pay check is adjusted every year.

Now, here is an interesting piece of information: historically, in China, salaries, especially those for government officials, were paid in

measures of rice. So a prime Minister might get a few thousands of bushels of rice a year. You may think that sounded terribly uncivilized. It sure sounded like something might happen in a tribal village in a rain forest. Well, the Chinese culture happens to be quite civilized. Ancient Chinese happened to be one of the few cultures that started to use coins and even paper currency. So, the "amount of rice per year" was only a measure. The prime Minister did not have to have a warehouse and no one ships rice into the warehouse. However, this measure was the "index" and was independent of inflation. We are now in a much more complex society. The price of rice cannot be the standard index any more. Even the price of gold or silver fluctuates with respect to other important prices. I propose the economists develop a solid "index" that is the result of considering all living necessities. It may be obtained from the price of cars, gas, apples, beef, orange ... and is a solid number of

dollars at any given time. Say, it maybe \$10.00 on January 1, 1990, \$20.95 on January 4, 2007, but \$21.5 today. I don't know economy and the economists may have a thing like this already. Of course, they know how to calculate this. They know what \$100 in Lincoln's time is worth today. However, I would like to have a "unit" that can be announced every day much like "Dow Jones Average" in the field of stock market. With this, salaries and minimum wage can be set to be a certain number of this unit the way "bushel of rice" was used in Tang Dynasty China.

Without a "unit" that is automatically adjusted with the standard of living, the congress was forced to pass a law to make this long overdue adjustment. Now a two dollar change (from 5.15 to 7.25) doesn't seem big. However, it is an increase of 20%.

(Conti. To P. 5, Tip or Top)

People I have known:- Eduardo Jiménez de Aréchaga
President of the International Court of Justice
Ed Williams

I was stationed at the U.S. Embassy at Montevideo, Uruguay, from mid-1963 through early 1966. As a young bachelor diplomat, I got around quite a lot and met many interesting people. I started dating a lovely young lady from a well-known family with the double surname Jiménez de Aréchaga. She had several older brothers, whom I got to know casually. I didn't spend much time with them. She had other interesting relatives, including the then Minister of Agriculture. I was particularly glad to have contact with him because my job in the Embassy centered around international trade, and agriculture was a large element of that trade. But her brother, Eduardo - a lawyer - was an interesting person. He was well thought of by the American business community, since he very competently represented several major American companies. He was also a professor of international law at the University of Montevideo Law School. He had other distinctions that I did not know about until later, such as having been a member of the U.N. Secretariat, and a member of the Uruguayan delegation to the U.N. General Assembly.

The Ambassador and other senior Embassy officers knew that I was dating Eduardo's sister, since I took her to several Embassy receptions. In fact, we weren't just dating. After a couple of months, it was made clear to me that, if we were to continue seeing each other, we would have to at least semi-formalize our relationship. We would have to become "novios" - or "engaged to be engaged". So I asked her to be my "novia" and she consented. One day in late 1964, the Ambassador summoned me to his office and asked me to approach Eduardo to determine whether he would be willing to be nominated by the U.S. to a seat on the International Court of Justice (ICJ). So I invited him to lunch and put the question to him. He said he would indeed be willing to accept such a nomination. It was not to be an immediate thing, but when the next vacancy arose for which a Latin American would be eligible. In our lunch conversation, I learned more about his already distinguished career. Among other things, he had been Uruguay's Under Secretary for Foreign Affairs, and had published a book on voting and dispute settlement in the U.N. Security Council. The Ambassador was quite happy with the result.

Shortly after this, I broke up with Eduardo's sister and did not see him again. I left Montevideo, re-assigned to the Department of State in Washington, in early 1966. As it turned out, Eduardo was not elected to the ICJ until 1970. He served a term of nine years, and in 1976 he was elected President of the ICJ. His years on the ICJ, and particularly his term as President, were served with great distinction. When his term ended, he returned to Uruguay and resumed his legal activities. Sadly, he was killed in an automobile accident at the beach resort of Punta del Este in 1994. He was truly one of the greatest international lawyers Latin America has produced, and it was a great privilege for me to know him.

(Conti. From P. 4, Tip or Top)

It is not only for those who are getting minimum wage now. Those who get paid at 5.20 or 7.20 would need to be adjusted too. If you are paid at 7.25 now would you settle to be paid at "minimum wage" after the adjustment? How about those who are paid \$10/hour now? Their salary is about twice the minimum wage. Would they settle for a wage only a couple of dollars over minimum wage? Any way, you get the point. There is going to have an over the board increase of wages, probably not 20% for everybody and hopefully not for the CEOs.

With any disturbance from the norm there will be a ripple and will be adjustment so a new equilibrium

will be reached. The disturbance can be a tsunami, a hurricane, an increase in crude oil price. The shock will first hit some people, then more and eventually absorbed by all. For an increase of minimum wage, the first affected will be the employers (companies, government agencies, universities and schools ...) who hire those who draw "lower wages". They will redo the budget, lay off some people, increase some price, etc. Some companies will go out of business. Some colleges will increase the tuition. Some people will lose their jobs. You know, the usual stuff. Eventually, equilibrium will be reached. However, why should we suffer this type of disturbance to start with? Isn't it more civilized if

we operate from a "unit" as described above? If the minimum wage, or any other wage, were fixed on this unit, nobody needs to suffer periodically.

There is the suggestion that those employers should be given tax advantages. I think it is a great idea because the government is the cushion and should come to the rescue to any segment of the country. However, I think this specific method is not only against the principle of taxes but also impractical. I don't think it is fair to tax the employers differently according to their employees' religion, race, or the income level. In practice, how do you figure

(Conti. To P. 7, Tip or Top)

(Conti. From P. 5, Tip or Top)

the amount an employer loses because of the minimum wage change, especially if the employer is not a manufacturer but a school or a college, say? I assume the tax advantage is temporary. How long should be the period in which the tax advantage should apply?

While we are talking about fixing the system and designing a better system, I think the "tipping" system, or, even the concept of it should be fixed too. Originally, to tip is to give thank to those who "help" us. In this society, every one helps every one else. Tip was started by those people in the "upper crest" gives favors to the lower class as a charity. The modern justification is to say it is an award to those who work "better". Well, does it take more effort to carry a \$20 dish to the table than a \$5 dish? Does a waiter who carries a plate to the table work harder than the bus boy who washes it? OK, in some restaurants the tips are put in a pool for all the "waiting staff". Does the one who works more gets more? Some people say if they get bad service they tip less. What difference does it make if the tip is pooled? The tipping system only provides the reason for the employers (restaurant, hotel ...) to pay their service staff less. I think it would be much simpler if the restaurant owners pay the waiting staff more and charge more, say by 15 or 20%* if necessary. With this arrangement, nobody needs to tip any more and everything is fair. In fact, this is the usual practice in many European and South American countries. Funny thing, in the United States, we claim to be democratic but we have the most class-conscious practice of the rich throwing money to the little people.

* Many people told me to give no more than 15% tip and it should be calculated from the price before tax. However, I often give 20% or at least somewhere between 15 and 20% from the final number. Why? When I first came to this country from Taiwan, my sister, who had been here a couple of years before me, gave me some good advices. She said: "we are here as their guests. We should win their respect. Besides, we look different already. Anything you do will be considered to be what a typical Chinese would do. You don't want people say we Chinese are dirty people. Even though we are not rich, we should wear things proper though not expensive. Be sure to give about 20% tip so people don't think we are stingy. Besides, when we are fortunate enough to buy dinner at the restaurants, don't forget there are those who wait tables to earn their tuition."

75% more or 43% less, at the same price , Useful Trivial

I went grocery shopping for some toilet paper. I found two stacks of "Quilted Northern" both at the same price, both 12 rolls per package, both the same size but one red and one blue. Both said 12 Double Rolls = 24 Regular rolls. Upon closer inspection, the red one read: "300 sq/ft, 200 2-ply sheets per roll" and the blue package read: "528 sq/ft, 352 2-ply sheets per roll". Curious. — Shiangtai Tuan

In celebration of **Chinese New Years Day**, You are invited to a pot luck party at my house on February 24, 2007 starting 6:30 PM. RSVP
Shiangtai Tuan

Where and Contact info: Check my name at the "contact Info" page inside back cover of printed Mblem.

Tidewater RG Experience

A Letter to the Editor

Margaret Fowler

Dear Editor:

The Tidewater Mensa RG in Williamsburg was great. They had a good mix of serious subjects and fun. The food was much better than the RG in Florida. Mensa-lot was funny and punny as expected. The weather was reasonable until after the Sunday morning walk through historic Williamsburg. I love the media swap. I can exchange my book for new-to-me books. Also, there is always some good conversation about books authors, science fiction, and real science. I am glad I went. It was well worth the drive.

I know it will be two years until the next one, but I plan to attend. I hope to see some of you there.

Live long and prosper,
Margaret

(Editor's note: This letter was dated November 23, 2006. However, I did not receive it in time to forward to Nina who edited Mblem last month. My apologies.)

Answers to "Do It Right" on Page 2.

- 1) Captain
- 2) 10. She wrote more than 1700
- 3) 28 (four touchdowns). They wound up scoring another 10 to beat the Houston Oilers in overtime.
- 4) Bill Gates
- 5) Winston Churchill