

Is Being Reasonable a Failed Strategy?

By Carl Nelson

I always liked the sales admonition that “reasonable people always agree”. What a wonderful, harmonious existence that prefigures!

But existence – especially, at present – is neither wonderful, nor harmonious, unless you would count a Tom Cat’s fractious caterwaul from among a clowder of assorted ferals – as a rebellious melody soaring within a discordant symphony. Why is this so?

I don’t know which I dislike more, being told what to do, or telling someone what to do – with this caveat: that I don’t mind following another’s lead if we’re in agreement that it’s for the best. But being bossed and bossing just doesn’t sit well with me. So, it’s within my nature to try and coordinate my movements with others on the basis of reasonable conversation. Why is this so hard? So much so, that I’ve had to resort to many work-a-rounds, so far, in life.



For example, while working in the theatre as a playwright, I might have inadvertently had my greatest success as a director. I just seemed to understand the business. I felt as if there weren't a play script I wasn't able to take on and push to some sort of success. In fact, I tried never to argue a change to a mote of the text – just to gild the challenge. Some days I felt so confident, I felt I could take on the phone book – and I'd make it work.

I had certainly never felt that way about the practice of medicine. In fact, I had felt quite the opposite. It seemed nearly incomprehensible that I could actually do something which would make anyone better. The gulf between knowledge and action just seemed too great. If medicine were golf, I had the confidence to hit 75, well, maybe 39 yard drives, at best. Later, working with my wife who was a salesperson, I could not imagine selling anyone anything. But I could imagine my getting them to speak with my wife (setting an appointment over the phone), that is, passing the buck. So, some limited success – as my wife was a 'closer'. (And way beyond that level of winning the steak knives and coffee.)

As for the playwriting, I would wrestle and wrestle with material – rather like Jacob with the Angel. And I'd come up with something quite pleasing to myself – seemingly scriptural! Unfortunately, it rarely got great attention from others – generally just spotty traction.

But directing stage plays... for some reason, I just knew what to do. Or, rather, I didn't know right off what to do – but I could always find my way. And my fellow theatre practitioners were often amazed.

The big problem of directing, right off the bat, was like that of Moses – getting my cast to follow. We were going to wander about a bit before finding the Promised Land. They were going to have to live off a bit of manna from Heaven before quaffing that milk and honey.

Initially, I tried talking a bit about the play, what its perspective seemed to be and how I thought we might use that to get the thing “on its feet” as they say in the business. The actors’ minds wandered off... and that was the best part. The worst part was first their minds and then their tongues started wagging, also. Never open artists up to conversation! These are flakes, for goodness sakes. And on top of that these are performance artists – which mean they have very strong egos. You’ve got to put them to work right away, before they use their energies to hew out the wrong territory!

So, I adopted a very practical process. At the first meeting we did a script reading.

(You would be amazed how many actors would come to the first rehearsal without yet reading the script.)

Once I was certain we were all doing the same play, I’d begin rehearsing. I’d pick a portion of the play (it could be from any section), which looked most promising dramatically. We’d try it out, let the actors walk it around. They all liked this. Then after a bit I’d begin making suggestions with which to enlarge their performance. When a few suggestions caught their imaginations, they were onboard. Once they realized they might have a better role than they’d actually thought, and that I could help them to realize it, it was as good as a contractual signature. I had learned and made it a point never to discuss the meaning of anything. The script’s meaning was nothing more than a view out a window. There it was – our reality. How can we make it more interesting, was the problem.

Incentives, I realized, could rule the day. People will listen, as long as they feel they get something out of it. And this is reasonable.

I remember working as a part-time bus driver. If we had an issue which needed taking up with management, you had to speak with the window man. All of management was behind locked doors

and windows. You told the window man your request and he decided the next step. So one day I waited at the window for the window man to ask me what I wanted. He was busy, but knew I was there. (I'm big! You can't miss me – especially standing two feet away.) As I waited several others came up, interrupting his business and asked for this and that. He obliged. He saw me standing there but, not acknowledging me, he returned to his work. Finally, upset, I asked him what a person has to do to be (acknowledged) “seen around here?”

He looked at me as if I were someone with anger issues and sent me back to talk to my immediate shift supervisor. I told my supervisor my initial problem, but mostly he spent his time telling me how I needed to learn to flow with things without getting upset. ‘What the hell’, I thought. How do you flow with being disregarded?

This has been the defining conundrum of my life.

I was very far along in life before the cold, hard truth finally drilled its way through my hard head: most people do not want to know you. (Not me exclusively! Thank God. But everyone! generally.) There are things they want, and perhaps an idea of what you might do for them. Mostly, they are like people driving down the road looking straight ahead at the bumper of the fellow in their way.

Whereas I am interested in just about everybody: smart/stupid, slim/fat, beautiful/ugly... These categories are so much smaller – even insignificant – next to the fact that they exist, which is so interesting. And I naturally assumed that others felt the same. That to just stand, or be, pleasant should be enough to arouse interest. But...

It's not!

And, in fact, if you do so, you are often thought to be aloof, uptight, entitled, snobby, possibly arrogant and judgmental... rude! even. In fact, when I related my tale of the window man

to my wife, she noted that this was very likely the take from his perspective – and that he was likely ignoring me just for those reasons! And feeling good about it. It was rather a thunderclap to the head, to hear that the people who would come right up to the window man and interrupt his business so that they might go about theirs – were judged to be the correct social actors, and that this is how you “moved with the flow”.

As they say, it has taken me quite a lifetime to “get my head around this”.

As my wife had further noted, I tend to “stand back and be soft-spoken”. This would seem a pleasant attribute, to me. But, according to her, it is the cause of many of my complaints. And here, might be one reason why:

In retrospect, my experience has shown that even people who are close friends, (wives and husbands! even), don’t particularly want to know each other (better). For example, my uncle was a very successful lawyer, even the Bar Association President for his state. And I asked my aunt (out of curiosity) if she had ever gone to see him perform in court. She said “no”, and looked a bit mystified as to why she would ever have done that? Another friend was surprised to attend an event with her husband – only to find he was one of the selected speakers, because he was one of the leading national experts in his field. It still boggles me.

But one of the reasons (among many) that I didn’t see any success for myself in the medical field – while still in medical school – was that it seemed no one would listen to me. They would talk about what they were learning and I listened. And when I would talk, they wouldn’t. ‘How will I ever get anywhere in this business, if knowing the stuff won’t help?’ I had to ask.

I was at a retirement banquet years ago for a friend, where I

was seated at a round table with many others, including a very loud and brash high end yacht salesperson sitting on the far side. I made a quiet joke following some statement which had been made, and got a bit of a titter from the woman beside me. The brash fellow across the way, immediately picked up my words and made the same joke – and the whole table erupted in laughter. I looked at him. And he looked at me – with a slight smile, as if to say: “You see? No matter what you do – I win.”

I saw the same phenomena in the sales pit. When chatting with my quiet friends I always hear how much they prefer a quiet, reasoned sales approach. But these are people who never buy anything, and never will! In the sales pit I would hear salespeople who would yell at their customers, toss the phone across the room, swear, say the damndest things... and these were some top-sellers! They made big money.

What in the hell is it that people want?

There seems something about being reasonable that people are genetically wired to not respect; that they are genetically wired to respect the unreasonable actor – that person who doesn't give a damn who you are, or want to know, but just wants what they want (and part of that is to tell others what to do). This is a person who they will give their attention to. The reasonable person is the one they might turn to in a time of need. When then need him, they might indulge him, make him feel he matters. Otherwise, for them there's other hay to turn, I'd guess.

Here's a snatch from a movie, “. In this scene Robert Duvall, the Paper's Editor-in-Chief is drinking at the bar after having received word from his doctor about a malignant prostate and bemoaning the fact that his grown daughter won't speak with him. (He will find out later (by the way) that she's also gotten married.) He's talking to the bartender:

Duvall: Yeah, the percentage of your time and effort... goes

into three basic things: your house, your work, your family. – Well? – Women in general... if you don't have a family, or men or sheep or whatever.

Bartender: I made the leap, Bern.

Duval: If you put them all together...the three of them want more than you gotta give, so what do you do?

Bartender: That's a tough one.

Duval: Now... your family, they're people... so you figure you can get a little human leeway there. You figure they'll bend. – But–

Bartender: – So you crap all over them.

Duval: Yeah, you do. You do.

The operative words above would be: "you can get a little human leeway there. You figure they'll bend." Just replace those words, "human leeway" with "reasonable", turn the crank and you'll always arrive where the end of this scene ends... crapped all over.

While working in the theatre it was the same. (Probably because it's the same all over the world.) We were given a fixed amount of time for technical directions prior to the evenings event: the Playwrights Showcase. (I was directing a piece for another playwright.) A bluff playwright came on. Shouted, yelled, took more time than his allotment and no one protested but jumped to do his bidding. The elapsed time, of course, came out of our allotment, while the Manager walked back and forth, through our preparations, interrupting while barking, "That's it. Can't give you any more time. (But we haven't gotten the time promised, I'd protest.) We've got to clear."

The upshot was that our play blew his out of the water. In fact, of all the short plays presented during the near ten

year run of our playwrights group – this small piece is probably the one most mentioned when past showcases are remembered.

One reason for that is possibly because all the while I was rehearsing this piece for the Showcase, (I was told later), unbeknownst to us, the other group members had met about having the piece eliminated from the line-up. They apparently felt it was of such poor quality, that it's presence in the evening's entertainment would cast a bad light upon them all. Fortunately for us though, one of the understandings about being a member of the group, was that you would receive the opportunity to present a piece of your choice in the annual showcase. ...And the tradition held.

And this might be one reason it is so prominently recalled.

Afterwards, I was granted more attention when I spoke, as if I had a bit of a nimbus surrounding me. But this fellow continued to dominate and get his demands attended to. Years after the group ended, he managed to move north to wrangle command of another theatre play reading series. Some are just born to boss, I eventually supposed, for good or ill, and people just fall in line.

On the political stage I'm a big Trump supporter. I think he made a great President. But in the first debate of his I witnessed, I was aghast. I couldn't believe it. Most of what he managed to do was to belittle his opponents, call them derogatory names, and swagger as he belloyed his successes. And then he won!

And then he went on to begin a clean-up of much of the mess the Progressives had made. He had the illegal immigration problem nearly solved. Our foreign adversaries pulled in their horns. He literally pulled the carpet off the top of the Deep State for all to see... he revived the economy, and much more.

Clearly, there is a lot I have to learn about getting things

done in this life.