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by Steve Krulick, Village of Ellenville Trustee

Straightening the Pictures

"You see things; and you say, 'Why?' But I dream things that never were; and I say, 'Why not?'" ~ George Bernard Shaw

Are you compelled to straighten crooked pictures? Do you take crumpled paper, left on the sidewalk by litterbugs, to the nearest trashcan? Have you "fixed" something that "ain't broke" so it works even better?

If so, you may be an *ameliorator*.

No, this isn't a Jeff Foxworthy joke. But, it may be what saves us from chaos and social collapse. Really.

"A-mel-io-rate: to make or become better, more bearable, or more satisfactory; improve; meliorate."

"Mel-io-rism: the doctrine that the world tends to become better or may be made better by human effort."

Sure, human effort can makes things worse, even hellish. But outside of outright sociopaths (or those merely selfish and inconsiderate), sins of omission – simple inertia rather than sins of commission – are more likely what drags us downward. "All that is required for evil to prevail is for good men to do nothing."

(Attributed to 18th century British statesman Edmund Burke, though not precisely how he said it.)

I'm not saying tamper with everything, willy-nilly. The lily needs no gilding; Michaelangelo's David needs no figleaf (his Sistine Chapel ceiling *did* need a thorough cleaning!). Nor am I encouraging a sour, curmudgeonly approach to life that finds fault with everything, and "can't get no satisfaction" from anything. No, many natural and man-made things are just terrific as they are, and, if anything, need to be preserved and protected for future humans to enjoy.

What I *am* suggesting is, first, to become more observant. Really see things as they are and *then* ask "Why?" Why is such-and-such the way it is? By chance or design? What problem or distress results from the current situation continuing? Is it worth the bother to fix it? Could a cure be worse than the disease? Is there a vested interest in things staying as they are?

The answers to these questions might start *you* dreaming of the "Why not?" and how to get there.

Many successful yet simple inventions resulted from someone getting annoyed with things as they were. Bessie Nesmith (mother of Monkee Mike Nesmith) was a single mom working as a secretary in Texas after WWII. Taking pride in her work, she wondered about a better way to correct typing errors (some of us still remember those disk-shaped eraser/brush combos and all the rubber crumbs and smudged/torn papers they caused). An artist, she mixed up some tempura in a bottle and, with a watercolor brush, painted over the mistakes; her boss never noticed. Soon, other secretaries were asking her for the stuff, which she named "Mistake Out." In 1956, she started a company in her kitchen to improve and market the product, later called "Liquid

Paper." She was selling a million bottles a year by 1968. Six months before she died, in 1980, she sold her company for \$47.5 million.

I like inventor stories, because – having a few patents with my name on them – I know what it can take to go from seeing a problem, brainstorming, exploring hunches, making trial-and-error prototypes, and convincing investors to back your work or customers to buy your product.

In my case, I was looking for ways to save and improve the environment, and how alternatives to fossil fuels could be made practical and appealing. My partners and I (Bio-Energy Systems, later Besicorp) pursued methane generation from chicken manure, high-efficiency wood stoves, and, eventually, solar energy. But existing solar collectors were expensive, fragile, clunky things. How could we do it better?

First, we looked for better materials. We found a synthetic rubber (EPDM) tubing that could stand up to sunlight and heat for years, but was cheaper than silicone or metals, and could be made in any length. But what made it durable and flexible also meant it couldn't stick to things. Either it had to be embedded in messy tar, or nailed down. Because I'd been fixing up a 1930s cabin cruiser (making it eco-friendly and self-sufficient), I was familiar with caulking wooden boats; it works because the seam is narrower outside than inside. Applying this idea to the rubber, I developed a multi-tube extrusion with dovetail-like flanges on the bottom: when pressed onto mastic, the mastic oozed up into the grooves, hardened, and formed a grip that was permanent, unless you chose to pull the flexible mat away from the base. A simple but significant breakthrough.

Other challenges emerged, of course: attaching the rubber to metal or plastic manifolds; making smooth bends that didn't restrict flow; keeping temperatures even over the whole collector. Each involved, first, observing the problem, but, second, *dreaming up* new ways to do things, or adapting existing methods in new ways. All these things were different enough from existing practice to earn us our several patents, awards, and a multi-million-dollar public company.

What I hope to do in future columns is show how these and other principles can be applied to problem-solving (or, better yet, problem-prevention) in our communities, so that we all become better at observing what is, and, then, coming up with ways to make things better.

Let's make this a collaborative effort; as I start sharing some of my ideas, please start sending in some of your own, or, at least, some "crooked pictures" you've noticed that we can try to straighten together.

To be continued.

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