

TALES WITH A KICKER

Older but wiser . . . that's how we seniors like to see ourselves. No doubt the aging process has decimated a number of our affirmative qualities, but the maturity and experience that has come with the years surely enhanced our good judgment.

This proposition might be debatable, but friends who subscribe to the trade-off do sometimes seek out our views on problems they're facing. In other cases, we become aware of situations friends are encountering, or decisions they're about to take, that appear headed in the wrong direction; and we may itch to offer some input regarding the risks.

Much of the time, the advice we're about to give runs counter to what the recipient is contemplating. As a result, it's not always well-received, and frequently isn't followed. Thus you may find yourself wishing there were some way to handle the interaction, so as to heighten your clout with the recipient.

I was thinking about this recently when I came across a piece I'd written many years ago, concerning effective ways for a lawyer to proffer advice to a client. My emphasis was on the value of anecdotes in verbal communication –making a point more memorable by telling a true story (albeit, somewhat over the top) to support the view expressed.

So I decided to try this out on a half-dozen more general advisory situations we oldsters might encounter. In each case, assume you're dealing with a close friend, so you're not chary about wading in with your tale of woe. All the grisly tales here (including the extra one seeking your input) consist of true incidents that didn't work out well, and are borrowed from David Frost's book, "The World's Worst Decisions" (Crown Publishers, Inc. New York, 1983).

Knowing When to Stop

Your friend Andrew has been very successful in the real estate development business. Following his latest triumphal project, the local newspaper crowned him as king of the area's developers.

In your view, Andrew would be wise to rest on his laurels at this point, directing his energies toward the smooth functioning of his completed projects. But Andrew isn't about to take a breather – in fact, he's contemplating a giant new development that you view as presenting a real risk to his realty empire.

When you hinted at this over lunch with Andrew recently, he pooh-poohed your fears as groundless. It's time, you realize, for one of your prize yarns.

"That may be so, Andrew, but are you acquainted with the saga of a Frenchman named Marc Quinquendon?"

"Can't say I am. Who's he?"

"He's a man who in 1979 set a snail-eating record – 144 snails in 11 minutes."

"Good for him. What's that got to do with me?"

"You'd think that Marc would have been satisfied with his achievement, but no – he wanted to set a record that would be unbeatable for all time. So he underwent a rigorous training regime, and four months later he consumed 72 snails in only three minutes, a fantastic achievement."

"Fantastic achievement – hey, that sounds like my new project – is that what you're getting at?"

"Take it as you will, but as far as Marc goes, his new record proved to be posthumous, since he died in his hour of triumph – of snail poisoning."

Beware Blind Obedience

Your friend Ben takes you into his confidence about a worrisome situation he's facing. As the chief financial officer of Consolidated Inc., Ben has become aware that Consolidated needs to recognize a big loss on worthless inventory. But Honcho, the company's chief executive officer, won't hear of it.

Relying on an erroneous reading of the accounting rule in question (and overly conscious of the negative effect the write-off would have on Consolidated's stock price), Honcho has forbidden Ben from taking that step, on peril of being fired. In addition to wanting to do the right thing, Ben is worried that if he accedes to Honcho's edict and the discrepancy in the books is discovered, he (as CFO of Consolidated) may face severe penalties – maybe even criminal prosecution.

“What should I do?” Ben asks in a plaintive voice.

Now, you know damn well what Ben ought to do, but perhaps the best way to proceed is through an anecdote – this time involving the British.

“It's a nasty situation, Ben, but perhaps the following true story will point you in the right direction.”

“I sure hope so.”

“It's 1893 and a British battle fleet under Admiral Sir George Tryon is engaged in sea maneuvers off Tripoli. The admiral, on the bridge of his flagship, orders the ship to turn to port.

“His flag captain realizes that the admiral has confused port and starboard, since a turn to port would put the flagship on a collision course with one of his cruisers. So the captain speaks up, questioning the admiral's order.

“ ‘Do as I say,’ bellows the admiral, ‘or I'll have you court-martialed!’

“Orders being orders, the captain and the other officers stand at attention, while the flagship and the cruiser collide – and both sink.”

“Ouch!” says Ben.

“And Ben, when you go tell Honcho that you’re resigning from Consolidated unless he agrees to do the right thing, why not relate this Tryon story – concluding it with these words: ‘And the admiral went down with his ship’.”

A Pox on the Grand Gesture

A heartwarming trait of your friend Connie is that she’s magnanimous, always thinking about how she can benefit someone else. It’s a rare quality nowadays, and much to her credit.

But then one day she tells you about something she intends to do that’s really over the top. In the negotiations over the sale of her house, Connie is about to make a major concession to the buyer – a grand gesture that’s not necessary and could end up being very costly to her. You’d like to talk her out of it, but she’s stubborn about such matters. Presto! – it’s time for a tale.

“You know, Connie, what you’re proposing to do reminds me of the Battle of Fontenoy in 1745. Opposing regiments of the French and British found themselves unexpectedly face to face at the crest of a hill. The British commander, in the best traditions of British sportsmanship, offered the enemy the first shot.

“The French commander, refusing to be outdone in courtesy, doffed his hat and replied: *Messieurs les Anglais, tirez le premier*’.

“The British volley that followed decimated the French formation.”

You Can't Take it with You

Your friend Don is okay in most respects, but one quirk of his makes no sense at all. He has become convinced that everyone is out to get his money. Trusting no one, not even a bank, he keeps his entire stash in the house, under the proverbial mattress. All attempts to urge him to follow more traditional paths – banks, bonds, stocks, investment real estate – have fallen on deaf ears.

So, you decide to give it one more shot. “Don, you remind me of the famous Turkish wrestler.”

“The Turkish wrestler? Who’s that?”

“A Turkish wrestler toured America around 1900 with great commercial success. His manager and others urged him to put his winnings in a bank, but he didn’t trust the banking system. Instead, he converted the money into gold ingots that he carried in a belt around his waist wherever he went.”

“So, what’s the story?”

“On the way back to Turkey, his vessel struck a reef and sank. The other passengers survived, but the wrestler and his bullion cummerbund went down with the ship.”

Don't Sell Your Foe Short

Your friend Ernie has been telling you about the election contest he’s in, opposing a guy named Walter for president of their country club.

“What are you doing to win?” you ask him.

“Nothing,” says Ernie. “Walter is a lightweight – I don’t have to do a thing, and the presidency will fall right into my lap.”

Your hubris detector having been activated, you wonder how to get across to Ernie the lesson of preparing for the worst, not the best. Try this tale.

“Well, Ernie, that may be the case, but I suggest you keep in mind the story of the British troops who engaged the Zulus in 1879.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Just listen. So confident were the British of defeating the ignorant savages that they decided it wasn’t worth opening in advance the iron-bound wooden boxes that held their ammunition. In fact, they even neglected to bring along any tools capable of opening the chests.”

“Are you saying . . . ?”

“Let me finish. When the ammunition they carried on their persons was exhausted, the British stopped firing. The Zulus massacred every one of them.”

“Oh, come on,” says Ernie, but you think he gets the point.

If you sense the need for more, here’s a gruesome touch you can add for emphasis. “By the way, many of the corpses were found with their fingernails torn off in frantic efforts to claw open the boxes.”

Heed Warnings

You’ve watched with sadness over the years as your friend Frank has imbibed too much alcohol and devoured too many sweet desserts. He’s gotten very fat, and his mind has been dulled by drink.

Frank has received a lot of advice about the danger to his health and the need to straighten himself out. But his constant response to these warnings is negative – he says “*I don’t give a damn*,” whenever anyone tries to change his ways. Just a minute ago, he repeated the phrase when you took your turn cautioning him. So now it’s tale time.

“Frank, do you have a few minutes for a story.”

“Go ahead.”

“ Back during the First World War, a party of French soldiers sailed an armored tugboat on the Congo River. Come noon, however, they disembarked to take a siesta.”

“Where are you going with this?”

“You’ll see. As they picnicked on the riverbank, their African sailors came running up to warn them that a German gunboat was getting close. But the French, flush with good wine and food, decided not to move. Many of them responded to the sailors with the words, “Je m’en fous!”

“What does that mean?”

“In a minute. Well, the native sailors fled from the premises. The Germans landed, crept up through the jungle, and slew the entire French contingent.”

“I don’t get the point.”

“Perhaps this might help. To this day, on that stretch of riverbank, there’s a monument that the locals call, “Le monument de je m’en fous” – which translates as, “I don’t give a damn!”

* * *

Okay, you get the picture. Now, here’s a true story about another terrible decision made in the past. Try to come up with a situation a friend might face in today’s world that has these characteristics – so that when you’re called upon to offer advice, you’ll tell this tale.

Easy on the ESP

It occurred back in 1857, involving a primitive tribe in South Africa. A 14-year-old prophetess appears, stating that, she has seen the faces of the tribe's dead elders staring up at her from the depths of the nearby river.

Here's how she interprets her vision. If the tribe wants to regain its dead leaders, then they must slaughter all their livestock on or before February 18 of that year.

The tribe follows her advice, as a result of which, the entire tribe starves to death.

Any takers?

Alternatively, if there's a good story you know along these lines, match it to a potential advisory situation.