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Sociability requires coaching and practice

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—I think that I'm friendly as a pup.

This opinion, however, does not seem to be widely shared, particularly by those who know me.

I've had occasion during the last few weeks to be sociable—with people I've met for the first time, with those who knew me 50 years ago and even with my wife, Melissa, who suspects that Walt Disney used me as the model for Grumpy.

Blue Grass is not a revolving cocktail party, but it is one of the few remaining places in America where a driver is expected to wave to every car approaching from the opposite direction. It is assumed that drivers know each other, or should know each other, or should indicate some interest in knowing each other, or should at least acknowledge each other's vehicles, or, as a last resort, should be superficially friendly with each other even if we're not.

I take this friendliness etiquette seriously and believe that I have gained points far and wide for my efforts.

I don't, however, go in for irrationally exuberant, two-handed, flap-a-doodle waving displays, the kind that causes accidents on our local, modern one-lane roads. My wave is tasteful. I raise my index finger to vertical from where it's resting on the top of the steering wheel. Oncoming drivers always reciprocate with their own upraised finger.

Melissa has suggested that I sharpen one or two arrows in my quiver of "people skills." She used the word "lame" a lot in a recent discussion, which I thought was mostly about equine feet. She finally allowed that "you take to people like a duck takes to the Sahara." It's always nice to receive a compliment from one who knows you well.

Since I am involved in the dry world of business, give speeches and have other social opportunities at which I'm expected to do something more than stand around like an unplugged floor lamp, I bought a book by Leil Lowndes, *How To Talk To Anyone: 92 Little Tricks for Big Success in Relationships*. I figured that social talking was a big first step toward being friendlier, though I can think of several times when a successful passing relationship was built on not saying much of anything.

Ms. Lowndes is a gusher of advice on how to manipulate others for

WIIFM—What’s In It For Me. These techniques include learning to stand straight, smile, maintain eye contact, fake knowledgeableness (“Then change the subject ASAP!”), curry favor, become popular and advance your personal interests in every social situation. She promises that if I follow her 92 tricks, I will become in her words, a “big cat” in the jungle of life.

I figured that I’d start my new life as a big cat by demonstrating Ms. Lowndes’ techniques with Melissa, who can pull out a good snarl of her own when needed.

I walked into the living room as Ms. Lowndes directs. I stopped regally at the door to deploy The Entrance trick, during which I surveyed those of my subjects who I would choose to talk to in hope of getting what I wanted.

My posture was perfect. I stood with my palms out, which showed that I was willing to engage with one and all. I smiled my brightest. I cocked my head a bit and faced Melissa at a slight angle. I cleared my throat.

The Commonwealth Attorney glanced up from her evening newspaper. She asked: “What are you doing just standing there? Does your back hurt?”

“Hurt?” I asked, using the Parroting trick that Ms. Lowndes says is a conversation starter.

“You’re standing funny.”

“Funny?”

“Like you’re trying to disguise that you’re having stomach cramps.”

“Cramps?” (If I did any more of this parrot talk, I’d sprout wings.)

“Let’s talk about you,” I said, beaming my full male attention at her. “Did you have a fruitful and productive day providing legal services to those in need?”

“I hate being a lawyer.”

“But you’re so good at it,” I said, using the flagrant-flattery trick Ms. Lowndes recommends.

She gave me the old prosecutorial squint. “What did you break?”

“Ha, Ha,” I said, using tactical humor to gain leverage.

“Are we being sued?” she asked.

It was time to ramp up my sociability. I threw her the Big-Baby-Pivot trick, a total-body turn that Ms. Lowndes says will show my wife of 27 years that I think she is very special.

Melissa didn't fall for the Big-Baby Pivot. She suspected something was afoot. "Tell me! Have you been diagnosed with dementia?" She paused. "Bed bugs?"

"Small talk is not about facts or words; it's about music," I said, quoting Ms. Lowndes.

Melissa looked puzzled. "Have you gotten into the fermented milk again?"

"Eighty-five percent of one's success in life is directly due to communications skills," I said, quoting Ms. Lowndes. "You are, by the way, elegant, stunning and ravishing."

(Ms. Lowndes recommends using those three adjectives instead of the usual five-and-dimers like "pretty" or "great." Ms. Lowndes says "Words work on us women.")

"So that's it. Not tonight, big boy. I've been in court all day on my feet."

"You misunderstand. You don't get it. (Ms. Lowndes says that for many people, thinking is painful. So she recommends that I do the thinking for Melissa by starting as many sentences as I can with the "powerful little three-letter word, you.") "You missed the obvious point that I'm brushing up my social skills."

"Well," she said, "if this is your brush up, I'd hate to see what your total makeover looks like."

"Calling a spade a spade—that's one of Ms. Lowndes' 92 tricks."

Melissa took a deep breath. "Okay. Since I'm married to you, I will give you a magic feather just like Dumbo. Hold the feather, and you can fly with anybody. You'll be Mr. Sociable."

With that, she whispered two words into my waiting ear and said: "Keep it to yourself."

"That's it?" I asked.

"That's it," she said. "Shallow is not the new deep no matter how many tricks you have up your verbal sleeve."

“You are the smartest, most wonderful Rock Star of a wife I’ve ever known,” I said. (Ms. Lowndes says that “...compliments are the most widely used and thoroughly endorsed of all getting-what-you-want techniques.”)

“Well...,” she said, “Let’s eat supper, and then we’ll see.”

Look out people! My floor lamp is plugged in, and my bulb is burning bright.

My next book is titled, One Magic Feather Is Worth More Than 92 Tricks.

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