

January 2, 2003

New Year Letter

I am writing to you at the beginning of a New Year, a time when it is useful to reflect on the past, as well as look forward to the future. While this past year has been a good one for me, I am concerned about the state of the economy and the impending war with Iraq. And I am especially upset with the business leaders who have contaminated the national business climate by misleading their customers and shareholders and by offering the kind of advice that can only be viewed as self serving. I can understand the pressure to deliver good news and protect one's holdings, but great damage is done to the integrity of any enterprise when the only answer that works is the one that everybody wants to hear.

I am no stranger to hearing false reports. I worked for the Vietnam Bureau of the Agency for International Development in Washington after I returned from Vietnam as a soldier in 1967. I attended special briefings in November of '67 delivered by Westmoreland's top brass in an effort to gain more support from Congress to proceed with their military strategy and pacification initiatives. They showed us a map of Vietnam that represented the state of security 'incountry,' and the map identified only two small sections in red, areas considered to be "hot" and not in the firm grip of American hands.

I viewed the map with great skepticism, even though the Generals said that the one of the largest computers in the world at that time crunched the numbers in Saigon to back up their contention that we were getting the job done. The massaged data was generated from field reports supplied by pacification workers and other military officials who knew good reports made them look good in the eyes of their superiors. It is not so much that they lied outright about the relative state of security in the countryside of Vietnam, they just didn't bother to inquire too deeply into the matter. They probably looked out the window of their office in broad daylight, and seeing nobody in black pajamas on the street, they declared their village safe and the people therein loyal to the Government of the South.

It was scarcely two months later that the whole of Vietnam blew up like a bomb.

I am sure that the intensity of the Tet offensive had a serious destabilizing effect on our own internal affairs because you will remember that Martin Luther King was assassinated in March of '68 and Bobby Kennedy was cut down in June.

I might say those false reports shaped my life. Even though I had prepared for a career in government service, I knew I needed to leave Washington.

More importantly, I think my disillusionment drove me deeper into my own search for the meaning and motive of my own work. I remember reading a terrific article in the Harvard Business Review, entitled the *Management of Disappointment*, by Abraham Zaleznik, a psychiatrist, who taught at the Harvard Business School.* The point of his piece is that men of power and responsibility can benefit from their disappointments if they are willing to look inward to see how they may have contributed to missing their targets.

Introspection does not come easy for some men of action, especially for the big- company C.E.O's, who have taken this economy for a ride. Zaleznik said that he did not receive one comment from anybody about his article. He interpreted the silence as an indication that he had touched a very sensitive spot in the psychic life of top decision-makers. Introspection calls up the past and invites the C.E.O to investigate personal blindspots, and as a recent self-assured cartoon character in the New Yorker says: "Introspection, J.B., is for losers."

Well, I don't buy that line, and the people I work with are accustomed to looking within themselves to reveal latent strengths and hidden motives. To be successful in small business today, one must see oneself as another and one must communicate a message that resonates with the rest of humanity. A certain amount of emotional intelligence is required, and this knowledge is not effectively acquired unless reflection is built into one's personal life and the company schedule. A client of mine devoted a series of staff meetings to one question: what do I (we) know to be true? When questions like that are asked, it generates deep thinking, and it discourages knee jerk responses.

My consulting work is dedicated to fostering this inclination to think deeper about the business of being in business and the business of life. It is not easy to function effectively in a global system that is dominated by giant corporations. We are fortunate in Maine to still have the ability to know each other, and to apply a "smell test" to propositions and proposals. I am not interested in a system that depends on delivering good reports and telling the "right people" what they want to hear. I know how those things go.

Have a Good Year,
Christos J. Gianopoulos

*Zalesnik, Abraham, *Management of Disappointment*, Harvard Business Review, November-December 1967.