

WIRE-TO-WIRE PRIDE (P. 21) AND PLENTY OF OTHER TOTALLY GAY TIDBITS INSIDE

SEATTLE WEEKLY

SPEAK
NO EVIL,



TWEET
NO EVIL

In the throes of a painful divorce, Seattle's most sarcastic scribe attempts to bite his tongue—and keyboard—for an entire month. **BY MICHAEL A. STUSSER**

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"If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all" is easier said than done. My sister called and wanted to know if I'd had any recent interactions with my wife. "No," I lied, "we're each working on our own shit and giving each other the space we need right now."

Truth was, over the past few months we'd had several screaming powwows, including a Please Take Me Back session followed by a My Therapist Says It Must Have Been Over Before the Affair discussion and the ultimate I'm Struggling with My Feelings conversation. And the chances of us getting back together were already slim (let's just say forgiveness isn't among my Top 10 qualities).

Given that my previous efforts at major life changes—losing 20 pounds, quitting weed, laying off the Jenna Jameson DVDs—have failed miserably, I knew I'd need an experienced sponsor to keep me on task: someone like Dr. Drew, only less egotistical and incompetent. So I called on the most dedicated and fierce influence in my life: my yoga teacher.

If the Dalai Lama and J.Lo had a love child, it would be Dawn Jansen. For 14 years now, this gorgeous and brilliant yoga instructor has twisted me into a pretzel, cured my sciatica, and gently placed positive mantras into my thick skull. Hearing about my grand experiment (and knowing my extensive weaknesses), Dawn understood the need for a game plan.

She arrived at my house with no fewer than a dozen books intended to impart some structure and words of wisdom. "You're not going to be perfect in your practice," Dawn noted in her nonjudgmental yet powerful way, "and there's going to be resistance. But if you ritualize how you go about it and proceed with compassion, you should be all right."

As we reviewed the various scriptures and guidelines, the Buddhist concept of "Right Speech" came into focus. "The first element is abstaining from false speech—basically lies and deceitful speech," Dawn said. I don't do a whole lot of lying (anymore), so I think avoiding flat-out fabrications this month shouldn't be a problem. "The second notion is abstaining from hateful or slanderous speech," she added. Slander: making false and malicious statements about others. Sounded fair enough. "Third element is avoiding harsh words that hurt or offend other people," she continued.

I must have looked dumbfounded. "It's not like you can't say anything negative," Dawn explained. "There is room for straight shooting so long as it's truthful." OK, I'm down. "And finally," Dawn added, "there's abstaining from idle chatter." But idle chatter's my specialty! "You just don't want to get involved in conversations that have no purpose or depth," she clarified. "So, no bullshitting?" I replied. So much for small talk.

My 16-year-old son is a kid of few words and a good example to learn from. After Vanessa moved out and took Riley with her, he and I started spending more quality time together—less of my yelling at him to pick up the towels on the floor or turn off the Xbox, and more shopping at Upper Playground. Today Riley was particularly quiet, and I felt the need to ask if he was enjoying our newfound time together, or if it was pure torture. "No," he replied with a shy smile. "It's not torture." We proceeded to enjoy our giant pile of hot wings in noble silence.

I ended the week having cocktails with a buddy who needed to vent about the on-again, off-again relationship with his gal-pal. I thought it would be difficult to stay silent, but it turns out most of the time no one's really paying any attention to the listener anyway. My friend went on ad nauseam about petty grievances, breaches of privacy, and major philosophical differences without taking a breath. I smiled and tried to find constructive places for my two cents. ("Well, everyone's on their own journey" and "You really feel passionate about this!") Fact is, I

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In the throes of a painful divorce, Seattle's most sarcastic scribe attempts to bite his tongue—and keyboard—for an entire month.

BY MICHAEL A. STUSSER

Perhaps it was the corrosive nature of the websites I frequented. Maybe it was the inebriated pack of bullshitters I hung out with and our constant blasphemous banter, or the incessant cable-news cycle where frenzied and extreme viewpoints crowd out reasoned deliberation. Then again, it could have been the naked photos I found of my wife with another man that finally sent me over the edge. Regardless of the last straw, an omnipresent cloud of negativity was slowly but surely poisoning my future—and I aimed to do something about it.

For the past 25 years, I've made my living as a humor columnist, hired to rant wildly about fat-ass Southerners, rabid vegans, sell-out politicians, and closeted Christian fundamentalists. Apparently some of my smart-ass satire was creeping into my personal life, as I recently heard the following words come out of my mouth: "Did you see Tommy last night? Guy was hammered! Though I'd drink heavily if I was married to Sandy, that's for damn sure. I can't fucking believe their marriage lasted longer than mine! Did you check her out? She's lookin' like a combo of William Shatner and Chaz Bono with Down syndrome."

As my pal silently picked at his blackened salmon Caesar, dumbfounded and losing his appetite for my company, it became clear that an internal intervention was needed. I'd become a poor man's Don Rickles, but more vicious. Queen of Mean Lisa Lampanelli had nothing on me: At least she picks on public figures like the Kardashian sisters and Trump. Meanwhile, I was tearing apart my own loved ones.

In an effort to reprogram my brain toward a less foul-mouthed future, I decided to take

the radical step of removing all trash talk, mud-slinging, rude riffing, and taunting Tweets from my everyday existence for an entire month. There'd be no more sarcastic smack talk, gossip, pissy texting, or coarse language of any kind.

In my case, trying to simply "be more positive" or some crap wouldn't fly. I was too far gone; it would be like letting Charlie Sheen do in-house rehab. (Wait . . .) This was serious business, and would require a SEAL Team 6 approach: tactical advisors, military discipline, and, with any luck, one of those really cool invisible helicopters.

WEEK #1

For the first few days I shied away from conversations, not wanting to launch into my customary overly opinionated hyperbole on any one of a thousand subjects, and blow the whole gig right off the bat. Pleasantries with cashiers are easy enough, until someone approaches with a chance for hate-speak: "Did you hear what Sarah Palin said last night about teachers' unions?" I bit my tongue. Literally.

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could have been a blow-up doll—which, come to think of it, is what he really needs. Mainly I was simply present, a listener among the chaos. And simply present I can do.

WEEK #2

After e-mailing my wife a lovely poem entitled “When Did You Give Up on Us?”—as well as forwarding the lewd photos I’d unearthed to her over and over again—I realized any attempt at uplifting my communication would also require effort on the electronic end of things. So my tendency to hit the “Like” button on YouTube videos where rednecks shoot themselves in the face, or e-mailing attachments of Dorothy Hamill to mock a friend’s haircut, needed to be curbed ASAP.

Facebook and Twitter seem to be aiding revolutionaries all over the Arab world in their march toward democracy, and that’s great. But for the rest of us, social networks are a massive waste of time. I got online and realized that I have seen the Cyber-Bully up close and personal, and he is me. Within 15 minutes of perusing my Facebook account, I’d been a complete tool to no less than four virtual amigos.

I then moused over to Twitter to do a little more damage. I scanned the feeds, clicking on a link of Keith Olbermann dryly reading James Thurber’s “Recollections of the Gas Buggy.” It was the most boring thing I’d ever seen, and I shot Olbermann the following Tweet: “@keitholbermann I need you reading to me like I need car advice from Pam Anderson. Stick to what you do best, and let us read on our iPads.”

This remark was clever, mean, and most likely emanated from my own embarrassment about wasting so much time on Twitter. Within seconds, I got an actual reply from Olbermann: “@michaelstusser Then don’t watch it. This is difficult for you to game-plan?” On one hand, I was thrilled to get a reply from a famous motormouth. On the other, it’s no fun realizing one of your role models is as much of a prick as you are.

With more opportunities for the anonymous everyman to enter the digital conversation via online news forums, comment sections, and blog posts, there are also more chances for these Internet communities to vent their pent-up anger. To wit, no fewer than 84 individuals felt inspired to reply to an opinion piece I wrote for seattlepi.com about cleaning up Pike Place Market. (Negative: 81. Positive: 3.) In addition to being called a pussy and an “annoying YUPPIE whiner” and repeatedly told to “go back to Los Angeles or wherever you came from” (Mercer Island, if the truth must be told), the majority of comments had very little to do with the point of my piece. While I suggested that we spend some money and time finding housing for the homeless who were turning the Market into a public urinal, the masses jumped to their own erroneous conclusion: Some out-of-town snob didn’t like the true grit of our wonderful market.

The faceless and mostly anonymous nature of the web seems to have empowered the previously meek and pleasant. Unfortunately, this Tweeting, Yelping, Trip-Advising mob has turned into a pack of snarky dickwads. With a culture geared to any mental midget from Jersey willing to humiliate themselves to become a “star,” and a polarized cable-“news” lineup geared constantly to incite overly radical Tea Party/All Things Considered extremes, it’s no surprise that we’re all

becoming a bit “quippy.” It doesn’t help that networks like CNN and FOX go out of their way to encourage viewer involvement, begging audiences to tweet their opinions live during shows, participate in insta-polls, and send sound bites and videos of their own to be uploaded and aired. That’s fine for a show like *Tosh.O*, but CNN’s user-generated iReports are dragging the network into the gutter with “breaking stories” on everything from “Hilarious Yard Sales” to “Wheelchair Seniors Served at the Drive-Thru.”

“Right now, our culture really is perpetuating the notion that everyone’s a critic,” notes relationship guru Dr. John Gottman. “For some reason we have the idea that anyone who takes notice of what’s right must be an idiot. The skeptical mind, or cynical mind, is what’s approved in our society.”

Since 1972, Gottman’s been using couples as guinea pigs, observing them in what’s been dubbed The Love Lab at the University of Washington, and, most recently, The Gottman Relationship Institute. “What we’re seeing is a negative habit of mind,” he says. “Instead of being respectful, we’re tuned into people’s mistakes.”

My wife and I attended several of his workshops over the years, on everything from keeping marital love alive (oops) to limit-setting parenting. I told Dr. Gottman about my experiment—as well as my failed marriage, making sure to clarify it wasn’t his fault—and asked his expert opinion about the ornery, narcissistic tone of the Era of Twittering Ids.

“Think about it: In schools, we call critical thinking ‘logical’ thinking,” he replied. “That

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implies that, if you’re not critical, you’re uninformed! The mark of intelligence somehow is now to be critical. We fall into it. It’s a tough pattern to break out of.”

I wondered if he had any ideas on how we got to this crabby place in the first place. “I think we’re running on empty with negativity,” proffered Gottman. “People aren’t working out, not eating right. All these things are crowding out enjoyment, and it’s our own fault. We need to have some self-care to get back on track.”

For the past 25 years, part of my “self-care” plan have been pseudo-marathon therapy sessions with my best friend—and onetime best man—Doug Hamilton. Three or four times a year, each of us shows up with a laundry list of items for discussion, and we then head off to a remote campsite or cheap motel, eat crappy food, I get loaded (he’s been sober for 20 years), and we troubleshoot our lives until the other guy flies home. His trip up from San Fran this weekend for moral support presents a challenge, to say the least.

“I gave that fucking woman my dead grandmother’s wedding ring from 1921!” I screamed, as Doug loaded his backpack into my car. “What happened to the whole ‘positive speech’ deal you’ve been babbling about?” he replied, cracking a purple Monster energy drink.

I took a breath and put the car in gear. “Right. Sorry. Let me rephrase: I can’t believe I gave that woman my dead grandmother’s fucking wedding ring.”

I spent the weekend trying my best to curb my vindictive instincts and stick to the facts, which were plenty brutal. The better part of valor may be discretion, but everyone needs a confidant—someone you can riff with, uncensored, to get it all out. As Dr. Gottman observed, “When your heart is

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racing and you’re physiologically aroused, you need access to someone’s cerebral cortex—because you don’t have access to your own.”

Going through a divorce during the Speak No Evil experiment is challenging, to say the least. Mutual friends and family have plenty of nasty things to say about my wife—and for good reason. Not to gossip, but betrayal’s no fun, and rarely elicits positive language. I find myself conflicted on the subject. On the one hand, I’d like my ex and the unethical prick she slept with to die a slow, fiery death. When my better self emerges, however, I hope she someday finds her true bliss and lives happily ever after.

One thing I’m absolutely sure of: Regardless of what I think, how much lingerie I burn, or how many voodoo dolls I gouge the eyes out of, it’s not gonna change a damn thing. Her growth or misery doesn’t affect my life, and the world continues to turn. Perhaps her period of sorrow will come in time. Perhaps the new dude will rock her world for eternity. Perhaps karma will sort it all out.

It’s quite possible my truth-telling regarding my wife’s affair does not come from a desire for full disclosure, but instead to hurt her as she did me. Yoga has “four gates of speech”: Ask if something is true, if it’s kind, if it’s necessary, and if it’s the right moment to say it. Using this barometer, I should usually keep my mouth shut. I don’t need to speak just for the sake of being “right,” or to make myself look better. Given enough time, anyone can justify anything. If I want to be emotionally honest, I’ll have to look at my own piece of how things fell apart. The truth, it seems, isn’t just factual, but can reveal a far deeper state in the heart. And I can tell you this: My truth hurts.

WEEK #3

Co-hosting my friend Marty Riemer’s popular morning podcast, I fell off the salubrious yakkin’ wagon. Before the show was even five minutes old, I’d threatened to kill one listener, declared how our previous episode sucked, then called the majority of Metro riders “smelly pedophiles.”

In a segment about my Speak No Evil experiment, Marty pointed out the fact I was failing miserably. There are all kinds of ways to speak truthfully without threatening others, maligning creative efforts, or going for the child-molester joke. And I was spending far too much of my time looking for a punch line, which, by the way, has the word “punch” in it. Frankly, Marty had done me a favor: I needed someone to tell me to sober up and fly right. Eliminating decades of public smack-talk is going to take some time.

To help get me back on track, my spiritual mentor Dawn decided to bring in the big Buddhist guns, introducing me to Tulku Yeshe Gyatso, a Tibetan monk who lives at the Sakya Monastery in Greenwood. As we sat over tea, I began to understand the much bigger picture that loomed over my Speak No Evil experiment. “Words not like horse,” Tulku noted. “Horse you can catch once it is out and gone. Words, you can’t catch. Mouth make trouble.”

I have been worrying about slips of the tongue, when apparently the key is not to stifle words when they’re in your mouth, but long before. As we sat, Tulku used one word over and over: silence. “When upset, silence is best. Just . . . silence. Smile. Enjoy. Be happy. Silence. Gives time to think. Silence!” Whereas I was struggling with the concept of not sticking my foot in my mouth, if you look before you leap, there won’t be a time when something “just slips out.”

Tulku also suggested wearing something that would remind me of my right-speech journey—a ring or bracelet that might reinforce thinking before talking. So I’m now wearing a ring set with a blue agate. It looks

kind of like a mood ring, and the mood is not “lovestruck” or “adventurous,” but “less talkative.” “In public, check your mouth,” Tulku intoned. “When you are alone, check your mind.”

Inspired, I decided to go quiet for a day to see how that changed my outlook. For me, arranging a day of silence was a whole lot easier than it would be for most folks: no job, no boss to report to, no water cooler, no spouse, no live-in kids, no problem. I turned off the ringers on my phones and explored the sounds of silence.

I don’t know about golden, but silence is quite pleasant. The day was peaceful, even oddly energizing. Tulku had told me a fable about a man who was screaming at the Buddha for five straight hours. As the Buddha sat quietly, the man returned and yelled at him for another five hours! Buddha said nothing. “To the Buddha,” Tulku explained, “it was as if this man was running up and stacking giant stones at his feet saying, ‘Take care of these!’ Then he run off for more rocks. At the end of day, man is exhausted. Not Buddha. He is refreshed!” Talking, it turns out, is very demanding.

I ventured away from the homestead only twice: once for coffee (it figures my barista would become Mr. Chatty on my Silent Day), and later to Metropolitan Market for dinner. It took me a while to realize that blaring my iPod and bombarding my brain with instant messaging doesn’t exactly count as quiet time. As soon as I set aside the multimedia, I began to hear the world around me. Birds were singing, seaplanes soared overhead, sounds of the city floated by, the pack of toddlers next door punctured recycle bins down the alley. I had to ignore several urges to make phone calls, and, in a pantomime that would have made Marcel Marceau proud, somehow managed to get the neighborhood gardener to mow my lawn.

Regardless of what I think, how much lingerie I burn, or how many voodoo dolls I gouge the eyes out of, it’s not gonna change a damn thing.

I always have plenty of conversations going on in my head, so there was no lack of “expression,” but the imposed silence slowed the pace and, though not sending me full-time to the ashram, centered me in a nice way. Everyone should try it, starting with Piers Morgan.

My parents are amazing examples of the Speak No Evil philosophy. Maybe it’s generational, or maybe it’s that Herb and Isabel are from an ethically superior age bracket, but over the years I have rarely heard either of them speak negatively about anyone. I’ve even tested their limits by talking badly of individuals, trying to provoke the parental units into a little reputation-bashing. The most I could ever get out of my father was, “He does tend to get quite animated after a few pops.”

I knew at some point I’d have to give them the details of my wife’s affair, otherwise they’d wonder why we weren’t in couples counseling, or if it was their son who had screwed up a marriage with a wonderful JEWISH woman whom they had grown to love. “She made a few bad decisions” was all I could get out before choking back tears. No dummies, they read between the lines. Stoic and supportive as always, my dad told me to let them know if I needed anything.

“OK,” my mother said, “now let’s have a drink.”

WEEK #4

With a week to go, my main problem is no longer being a mindless smart-ass (now I’m a mindful one), but staying away from the plethora of mean-spirited websites I troll for hours on end. The trouble with being able to pick and choose our news from so many

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VIDEO »

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FOR A VIDEO OF THE AUTHOR DISCUSSING HIS MONTH-LONG EXPERIMENT, VISIT SEATTLEWEEKLY.COM/DAILYWEEKLY.

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places online is that each of us becomes our own editor-in-chief. My daily rags clearly lean toward yellow journalism:

“Steven Tyler: Gay Sex Doesn’t Do It for Me, But I Did Like Heroin in My Butt” (*Gawker*). “Lohan Probation Report: Lindsay’s an Addict!” (*TMZ*). “Grobe Claim Against Donald Duck” (*The Smoking Gun*). “New Princess Di Death Pics!” (*National Enquirer*). “Can Weiner Keep It Up?” (*Gawker*). “Sarah Palin Buys Arizona Home: Will Keep Bristol from Becoming Slutty Liberal?” (*Jezebel*).

To help curb my paparazzic instincts, I had a second meeting with Tulku. For a guy who lives in a monastery, he has an amazing understanding of all the crap out there. “It is very difficult to control the mind, even without the distractions you speak of,” he said, smiling at the sad flea-brain before him. Just when I thought he was going to forbid me from watching cable, Tulku surprised me. “I also watch TV, the news, BBC. It allows me to have compassion for the people struggling with addiction, the disasters, the wars and murders. I pray for them. Must know their suffering to be able to help them.”

But what about the hours I was losing to *The Soup*, *Celebrity Rehab*, and *The Drudge Report*? “If you need information, make a list of what you want, go to your computer, find this, and turn it off,” Tulku replied. “Look for what you need. KCTS 9! Beautiful programs. Animals! NASA! Share with your son this science and culture. KCTS is very good!”

The man was starting to sound like a PBS telemarketer, but I got the picture: Focus! Use the media for tasks, but don’t aimlessly surf without purpose or it’ll suck the life out of you. To curb my cruel tabloid urges, I went home and deleted all my bookmarks. Next time I needed to hit the web, I’d have a

particular question in mind, and my Google search wouldn’t be “Before and after pictures of Angelina Jolie’s plastic surgery,” but “Fixing Running Toilet” or “Symptoms of Gout.”

Having positive interactions with people—getting along—isn’t brain surgery, but it does take effort. After probing, monitoring, and recording couples in his Love Lab for decades, Dr. Gottman found that the key to marital stability is as simple as a compliment. Couples who succeed—the Masters—have a 5–1 ratio: five positive statements and interactions for every negative one, even during an argument. The Disasters, on the other hand, get caught up in what Gottman calls the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling. With this Positivity Playbook in mind, I decided to give each person I encountered today a compliment: the waitress at Macrina, the mailman, my mom, the random dude at the gas station, and so on.

With each compliment delivered, each and every individual lit up. I found myself in surprising, affirmative conversations: A pregnant lady, whom I told looked radiant, shared her struggle with getting knocked up and how happy she was inside, and a teenager wanted to give me a demonstration of his skateboarding skills after I told him his deck was rad.

At the end of the day I ran into an elderly homeless gentleman down by Flying Fish. I approached him and extended my hand, not sure what kind word I’d lay down. After a crushing shake, I had little option but to tell him what a warm and firm handshake he had. Thirty minutes later, I’d learned about his recently deceased wife (the love of his life) and our mutual passion for the blues, and scheduled a walking date at Lake Union the following Thursday. Not to be too Oprah about it, but cultivating the habit of being positive is contagious.

The ongoing struggle in my mind regarding the failure of my marriage is not that it

ended, but that it did not end on my terms. I am quite happy to have my freedom once again: I’m not at all opposed to living alone, doing my own laundry, eating takeout 24/7, or having sex with a variety of women. But for it all to have come to a crashing end with the discovery of an affair is the unpleasant part.

I think of honor and respect, and often of payback. To this end, the best guidance came from a man who does his damndest to keep people together. “I heard something great about betrayal the other day: The best revenge in a betrayal is letting that other person have her,” Dr. Gottman said. “That allows you to put away all those thoughts of revenge. You’re a young guy; you have your whole life ahead of you. Do you really want to be with someone who hurts you like that when you’re older?”

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Turns out the woman I waited 41 years to marry just wasn’t the right girl for me. Separate out all the unpleasant lies, parental stress, diminishing sex life, and nasty exit strategy, and you’ve still got two people who loved one another for a spell and couldn’t find a way to work things out. News flash: Successful, long-term, committed relationships are a difficult proposition. It wasn’t that we didn’t have solid role models to observe: My folks have been married for 56 years, hers almost 40. During those decades, issues arose and times got tough. They made the effort, stayed dedicated and faithful. Not us.

On the last day of my Speak No Evil experiment, with Tulku’s mantras echoing in my head, I got online with new intentions. To get in the mood, I’d set my browser’s homepage to Gimundo.com (“Good News . . . Served

daily”). I visited the West Seattle Blog for traffic and local burglary updates, then Facebook to see if anyone had “Poked” me. (What the hell does that mean?) Stifling the urge to ridicule several friends, I managed to “Like” three or four posts, including one from an acquaintance who’d successfully run a marathon, as well as a photo of a friend’s dog. “He’s a GOOD BOY!” I commented. “And is that a new collar? So handsome!”

My (far more successful) fellow scribe A.J. Jacobs posted a note about how the TV show they were making out of his book, *The Guinea Pig Diaries*, didn’t get picked up by NBC. I looked over my initial comment (“They’re all bitches!”), revising it to: “The writer-crowd is damn proud of you, young man. It’s an amazing accomplishment for your project to have been taken this far, and will no doubt lead to even better things: I heard they’re auditioning Mel Gibson for [Jacobs’ book] *The Year of Living Biblically*! Anyway, way to go, pal.”

I then logged on to Twitter to post a quote from football legend Knute Rockne: “One man practicing sportsmanship is far better than a hundred teaching it.” My modus was simple: Comment if necessary, be nice, have some fun, then get the hell off-line.

I picked up my son for brunch, and he handed me a Tupperware container full of cookies from my ex. Dozens of thoughts ran through my head: Were they poisoned? Was this supposed to make up for her abandoning our marriage? Did she give the other half of the batch to the man she’d betrayed me with?

I looked down at the banded blue agate where my wedding ring used to be, took a deep breath, and thought about all I’d learned over the past month. What, if anything, did I really have to say about the matter?

“Thank Mom for the cookies, will you?” I told Riley. “It was a thoughtful thing to do.”

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