

## My Two Cents

By Ben H. Merens

As I write this month's column, it is the first Thursday of March Madness – my favorite sporting event of the year. And, two of the 33 games of the first weekend have already begun.

I love the NCAA men's basketball tournament because it produces great moments of sport and it is all about one and done. If you lose, you're gone. There are no second chances. There is no tomorrow.

However, I'm glad that life usually is not like this. Sure, there are moments we never get back but life is full of second chances -- as it should be.

We teach our children that if they have a bad day at school, tomorrow can be a better day. Bad tests can be forgotten when good ones replace them. And a troubled afternoon on the playground is easily forgotten when the next day brings about a better experience.

This is true with adults too.

There would be no successful marriages if couples relationships were ruled by one and done. People make mistakes and forgiveness is essential to successful marriages, friendships and working relationships. Parents and teenagers would never speak again if one and done was the rule. They need the chance to fail and then forgive and succeed together.

History is full of stories of fortunes made, lost and made again. Failure gives people a great opportunity to succeed. It allows them to learn from their mistakes.

My favorite basketball player of all time, Michael Jordan, frequently has said that for every winning shot he hit, there were shots too numerous to count that he missed.

Failure is acceptable. Not only is it acceptable, it is a way of life. Without failure, we wouldn't be able to appreciate the victories that do come our way.

Our lives would be miserable, if we faced one and done every day.

But fortunately, life is all about learning from our mistakes and trying to do better next time.

For every talk show that I host that doesn't seem to flow, there is always tomorrow for me to produce and host a better hour of discussion. And for every speech that I give where I lose my audience's rapt attention, (I hope) there will be another opportunity to discuss the art of listening, coping with failure, or how to lose and then succeed despite the failure.

We are preached at to be winners. Sports heroes, movie stars, celebrity-type politicians. It is all about winning. But when you take a closer look, it isn't all about winning at all. It is about trying. It is about trying and failing and trying and winning and failing some more.

Thank goodness life isn't about one and done. It's great for a basketball tournament, but what fun would it be in real life?

***People Are Dying To Be Heard***  
***By Ben Merens for Boomers***

People are dying to be heard but no one seems to want to listen anymore. I know a lot about listening. I make my living listening. I am a public radio talk show host. Commercial radio talk show hosts make their livings talking. They don't listen very well.

I've written a book called, "Uni-Tasking: 25 Tips for Better Listening." I want people to stop and think about how to listen more attentively to their spouses, kids, parents, co-workers, bosses, employees – well, you get the picture.

As a professional journalist and talk show host, I've learned one real important lesson.

**PEOPLE ARE DYING TO BE HEARD.**

I've taken tens of thousands of phone calls over the years while hosting at Wisconsin Public Radio. People will wait on hold 15 to 20 minutes for the chance to be heard for two to three minutes. And the audience I offer them is probably 15-thousand to 20-thousand listeners at any one time. While these aren't national talk numbers, having their ears for two to three minutes can be pretty effective.

So, how can I help you to listen better? First, stay in the moment with the person talking to you. Force yourself not to mentally leave a conversation. This takes practice but it is achievable if you work at it.

Second, UNI-TASK! "Uni-Tasking" is the opposite of multi-tasking – the skill that we're supposed to all have developed and mastered in this 21<sup>st</sup> century. "Uni-Tasking" is putting focus to our daily toil and being better off for it.

This means turning off the computer or blackberry. This means not looking at e-mails or printed materials while talking to someone on the phone. Don't fool yourself into thinking that you can multi-task as effectively as you can Uni-Task. I know you can read a book and watch television at the same time but you can't do both well.

And here's a third and final tip. Interrupting can facilitate good listening. Don't look at interrupting as being rude. It is a way to tell the other person, "I'm listening, but I didn't understand you." Interrupt for clarification not because you spaced out and really didn't hear what the other person said.

Uni-Tasking as a listening philosophy works as an effective business tool. It also can make your marriage. It certainly is a gift parents must give their kids today. And, when you take the time to ask a stranger, "How are you?" and really mean it – there's no telling where that conversation will take you.

Remember that giving someone your undivided attention may be the greatest gift you can offer. And, it may be the greatest gift its recipient receives all day, week or sadly enough, all month.

Time is money. We've all heard this phrase enough. Well, giving the gift of time – of your undivided attention – truly is priceless.

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## ***My Two Cents***

### ***By Ben Merens for Boomers***

It's the end of the year and the beginning of a new one. And as I sit at my computer trying to find something poignant to say, I am at a loss for words.

How do we reflect back on a year and conclude if it was a "good one" or a "bad one?"

Why do we place so much emphasis on our time by what happened between January 1<sup>st</sup> and December 31<sup>st</sup>?

I mark my time more by accomplishments as they occur or dreams that I allow to move on – whether I achieved them or decided they were no longer a primary focus anymore.

So much of how we reflect back on a year's time depends on goals we set. Did I lose weight, earn more money, take that trip to (fill in the blank) that I've always wanted to take?

Sometimes we just thank G-d that in this past year none of our loved ones suffered a severe illness or passed away.

As we age, time seems to move faster. Ironic, isn't it? As we slow down, time speeds up. Perhaps there is a connection here, but I'm not sure what it is.

I admire older people who have learned that the joys of life center on being here. They center on a good meal, a conversation with a loved one that isn't rushed through and on living a life one day at a time.

I find that those of us in our middle ages tend to worry the most. We are too old to know that we won't live forever and too young to feel we've accomplished enough so we can now just appreciate our being here.

I feel sorry for us.

We probably are the ones who will make the most resolutions this year and try to stick to the list. What a shame if we don't have a list or just let life happen. When you're still building your career, raising a family and trying to figure out just who you are and what you want out of life – you tend to miss the point. Just be. Just be and let that be good enough.

I resolve to do this in the coming year.

In the past year, I've heard the same message from a Native American fire keeper and a Reform Rabbi. You are exactly where you are supposed to be.

What an affirming message to take into a new year. No matter what your dreams or goals are, you are right where you are supposed to be. And, it might not be a pleasant place. And for many of us, it isn't clear why we are supposed to be in the place we currently find ourselves. But, that is the point of the message. You don't have to understand it all. You just have to trust that you're okay just as you are and where you are.

Resolve to believe this in 2007 and live each day as it comes. That doesn't mean you shouldn't plan, dream and schedule your life. But I've often heard that man plans and G-d laughs.

I think we need to plan a little less and laugh a little more.

Happy New Year to you.

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***Talk Radio Should be Forum, Not Soapbox***  
***By Ben Merens for The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel***

I am a talk radio dinosaur who wants to make a comeback. I am a talk show host who never voices an opinion.

I host a daily, two-hour, current events, call-in show for Wisconsin Public Radio. My charge is never to voice my own opinion.

I am paid for being "professionally objective" and allowing any caller's opinion (on topic) to be heard. Most of my programs have at least one very opinionated guest.

You may ask, why would anyone go into the talk radio business and be "voiceless"? I often wonder that myself. But I've earned the trust of people on the right and left by working this way.

Since joining Wisconsin Public Radio 15 years ago, I have come to appreciate my role. I am a steward of the public airwaves. Not because I work for "public" radio but because I work on the public's airwaves — just like all talk show hosts do.

These airwaves belong to all of us. No matter which corporation owns the broadcasting rights.

My job is to lead public discussion for all members of the public. Here's a little secret for all of you commercial talkers: So is yours.

We have serious problems to tackle in our world, nation, states and local communities.

We have a great power to lead an open forum on how to deal with abortion, the Iraq war, the budget deficit and debt, the environment, taxes, education.

We all know the issues. But we don't have all the answers.

Talk radio's role has gotten lost along the way. Hosts should be moderators of public debate. Not that hosts shouldn't have opinions. And I actually believe they should voice them sometimes — but not to the detriment of the public debate.

We can ask open-ended questions. We can seek to understand positions we don't hold nor would ever consider holding. We owe it to the public to allow a wider range of views to be heard on our shows than those we hold ourselves.

The time for public debate is not just during election season. In fact, real public debate seems to fall off the table when the candidates come asking for your votes.

The public debate should be constant. The public debate arguably will be strongest when the candidates or potential candidates aren't running and might very well be listening.

I know conservative talk is where the commercial pendulum is swinging today — but that's just it. Pendulums do swing.

We need to set standards that aren't dictated to by what sells at the moment. Then the balanced talk that we all provide will sell. The public will not only expect it but will demand it.

Talk radio in America should be open to the young and old, left and right, conservative and liberal. By joining all these voices, we can try to reach compromises that our elected officials often seem unable to reach.

This isn't a game or just a money-making venture. This is our country's future, our world's future, and, most importantly, our children's future.

Well, that's my opinion.

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