

GUEST FORUM

Lyle's Law of Learning

IT WAS 1969 AND WE WERE STANDING on the bridge of a freighter, *S.S. Hong Kong Bear*, bound from San Francisco to Yokohama. A Japanese fishing boat had appeared almost dead ahead, and since we were steaming at about 20 knots, we were approaching each other at a good clip. The first mate turned to me and said, "Watch this guy. It could be interesting." He was right. As we approached the fishing boat, it suddenly turned and cut directly in front of our ship. We all waited for the collision. Fortunately, it did not come. The boat reappeared to starboard and dropped rapidly astern as we pushed on toward Japan, and the fisherman went back to pursuing the wily tuna or whatever it was that he pursued. What was that all about? It's a matter of accumulation and transfer.

In some parts of the Orient, there was—and probably still is—a belief that a boat sailing through the water accumulates a trail of spirits—generally of the evil variety—each one glomming onto the last one in line until they create an impossible burden of bad luck. One way to get rid of these unwanted hitchhikers is to force another boat to cut across your wake, whereupon the spirits are transferred from the *crossee* to the *crosser*. Of course, the closer the encounter, the more spirits that will be transferred. This has caused some anxious moments for the captains of freighters plying the waters of the Far East when a fisherman, down on his luck and blaming the spirits hanging onto his fantail, suddenly cuts beneath the freighter's bow, just as that one did with *Hong Kong Bear*. We were lucky. And so was the fisherman. At least he kept his boat; we don't know if the fishing improved or not.

People, as they cruise through life, also accumulate a lot of "stuff." Of course they accumulate some material possessions and, with any luck at all, some measure of financial wealth to see them through their retirement years. More importantly, however, they accumulate a wealth of experience that helps them deal with the various situations that continue to occur in their lives. And maybe some of that experience could be of use to someone else.

A while ago, I received a letter from Jim Froula, Editor of *THE BENT*, offering an opportunity to do some writing for the publication. He suggested that I could write a series of "Lyle's Laws" that would give me the opportunity to reflect upon my experiences and perhaps find something of interest and even value to his readers. Is that a deal or what?

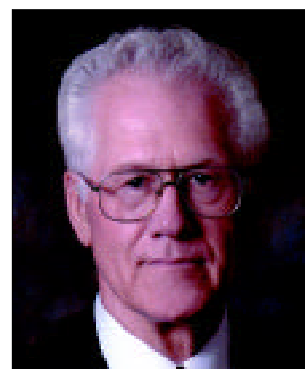
Referring to my conclusions as "laws" troubles me a bit, though. Webster defines a law as "a statement of an

order or relation of phenomena that, so far as is known, is invariable under the given conditions." One of the things I have learned is that there are precious few orders or relations that are invariable. It might be better to refer to these laws as "aphorisms" which is defined as "a concise statement of a principle." I'm afraid, however, that "Lyle's Aphorisms" doesn't have the same

ring to it, so "Lyle's Laws" it is—which brings me to my first offering, Lyle's Law of Learning.

My goal in writing Lyle's Laws is to help my readers profit from my mistakes. There have been many. At first blush this could sound a bit cynical—profiting from the misfortunes of others. Not so. If people are doing interesting things, they are going to make mistakes. Their misfortune would be if they did not reflect upon and thereby learn from those mistakes. Our misfortune would be if they did not allow us to profit as well.

Indeed, isn't education itself a process of learning from the mistakes of others? Of course, our teachers don't tell us about all of the false paths that have been followed; all of the things that



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It is better to learn from the mistakes of others.

people thought would work but didn't. They present only the principles that have been proven and that we can count on. While we are learning about all the things that work, however, we are also learning, by exclusion, about a lot of things that didn't work, thereby learning from the mistakes of others.

When I was just getting into the study of mathematics, I was fascinated by the beauty and order of the proofs that we studied. How could anyone progress unerringly along this logical path with all its theorems and lemmas and corollaries and be able, in the end, to write with such confidence, "Q. E. D."? It was actually a great relief when a mathematician explained that the route

taken by the original prover involved many false paths and dead ends. The prover didn't tell us about all of those, but, as we learned the proof, we were clearly learning from his mistakes.

There are at least two ways to violate this law. The first is to observe the mistakes that other people are making but fail to learn from them. We certainly see this in our every day life when people young and old observe the destructive results of drug use but go ahead and try them anyway. The second—and probably more common—is to completely neglect the experience of others, to not even recognize that there are people out there who are having, or who have had, experiences similar to our own. This may be a result of ignorance, but it is more likely a sin of arrogance. Both are to be avoided like the plague.

In closing, I need to offer a caveat. These laws are generally restatements of principles that have been around for a long time and are not claimed to be original. Indeed the *Law of Learning* is not unlike the naval adage “Safety rules are written in blood,” a reminder that the Navy's sometimes-onerous regulations are based on the unfortunate experiences of the past. Learn from the mistakes of others.

That done, I bid you farewell. I have cut across your bow close enough, I hope, to have let you slice off a little of my experience and perhaps to benefit therefrom.

See you next issue.

—Lyle D. Feisel, *Iowa Alpha '61, P.E., Ph.D.*