



## LYLE'S LAWS

# Lyle's Law of Palatability

**A**MONG THE MANY CHARACTERISTICS that distinguish one culture from another, food is one of the most salient. Germany's *sauerkraut* is another country's rotten cabbage. Scotland's *haggis* is another country's discarded organ meat stuffed into a sheep's stomach. Mexico's *gusanos asados* are another country's yucky worms. In the United States, regional differences fall into the same category; grits, for instance, are not universally relished. And then there is *lutefisk*.

When we moved to Taiwan some 35 years ago, our children were all in elementary school and

we knew that there could be some gastro-nomic challenges ahead. We talked it over and agreed on the following basic principle: You don't have to eat it. Just don't make gagging noises. Push it around on your plate a bit, and wait for something more to your liking to come along. It seemed to work. None of the children starved, their psyches did not appear to be unduly damaged, and I don't think we offended any of our hosts. Puzzled, perhaps, but not offended. And so we maneuvered our way through the sea slugs, kidneys, eels, and fish balls, which I (usually) enjoyed and various other members of the family pushed around on their plates.

The principle worked for us in the food arena and I think it can be extended to other areas of the human experience.

Restated as Lyle's Law of Palatability, **You don't have to like it. You do have to deal with it graciously.**

What, you ask—and well you might—is “it”? Clearly there are many “its,” and I will attempt to deal with a couple.

First—and probably the most difficult—is people. Substitute “people” for “it” in the Law of Palatability, and we have created quite a challenge. Some people are just not very palatable, because of their appearance, their behavior, or even their belief system. But we have to deal with them. Avoiding gagging noises is not enough. We at least have to push them around on the plate. Graciously.

Today, in industry and in education, much is made of the process of teaming. Clearly, (please forgive me when I do that; I always hated it when the math professor said “clearly” when it was not at all clear to me) a team cannot be effective unless the team members are cooperating with each other. I think it is too much to ask, however, to

expect that every team member will *like* all the other members. But everyone must deal with all the others. Graciously.

I knew a dean who had two department heads who just couldn't stand each other; they were apparently incompatible and, to each other, unpalatable. Their mutual dislike was hindering the organization because they refused to cooperate, and their departments, the school and the students were not being well served. The dean called them in and laid down the law. You don't have to love each other, but you do have to act as if you do. A pretty good corollary to the Law of Palatability.



*You don't  
have to like it!*

It is possible, of course, for a person to go beyond the merely unpalatable to being truly contemptible. In such a case, the law still can be applied, but in a somewhat different manner; gagging noises should still be avoided, but the situation needs to be met head-on. If, for instance, in the situation just described, Department Head A was involved in unethical or illegal activities and that is why Department Head B didn't like him, then B has an obligation to deal with the situation. Graciously. Although I admit that being gracious in such situations is not easy. This is the most difficult part of the honor code or the various codes of ethics. “I will not lie, cheat, or steal” is relatively easy. “Nor tolerate those who do” is not.

Another interesting “it” is “the situation.” The Law restated: *You don't have to like the situation. You do have to deal with it graciously.* School, for instance. Ever have a bad professor? Unfortunately, most of us have. Obviously it is a situation that we don't like, but there is nothing to be gained by making gagging noises. I have had students tell me they were not attending class because the professor was so bad, and, of course, they weren't studying the material either, and, furthermore, they weren't passing the tests. Hoo, boy! Deans will do their best to straighten out the bad professor, but students need to deal with their own situations. (See also Lyle's Law of Whining. Whining and gagging are not the same, but they do have the same antidote.)

One place where the Law of Palatability must be applied judiciously is in our jobs. Ideally, everyone loves his or her job and looks forward to going to work every morning, including Monday. Practically, that is not the case. Rather, even if you do love your job, there will likely

be days when you would rather be doing something else. So you don't necessarily like it. But you did sign up for it, so it is yours to deal with.

But I said that the law must be dealt with judiciously. Given that very few jobs are a joy all the time, neither should a job *never* be fun and satisfying. If that should ever happen to you, it is probably time to suspend the law and decide that the way you are going to deal with the situation you don't like is to get out of it. One can push the food around on the plate for only so long. Eventually, it is time to get up and leave the table. Life is too short to spend it in unrewarding

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pursuits.

As I look back on the original formulation of the Law of Palatability, I recognize that it came about primarily because of our own self-interest; we didn't want to be embarrassed by a kid pitching a fit because someone offered him a serving of sea slug. There were secondary motiva-

tions, however, that were much less self-serving and that I hope will generally guide the application of the law. One was the desire to protect our children from having to do things that they really found disagreeable. The other was to keep our gracious hosts from being embarrassed because they had not thought to serve wieners and macaroni and cheese. The best laws, while guiding our own behavior, are motivated by their benefit to other people. Let it be so with this one.

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

#### 2006 FELLOWSHIPS

Tau Beta Pi's 73rd annual program of graduate fellowships for study in the 2006-07 academic year will close February 1, 2006, when applications must be in the hands of Director of Fellowships D. Stephen Pierre Jr., P.E., Alabama Power Company, P.O. Box 2247, Mobile, AL 36652-2247.

Up to 20 cash awards will be given, each worth \$10,000. They will be made on the promise of future development in engineering or related fields and financial need. Winners in the program will be selected by the Fellowship Board and notified by April 1.

Through the generosity of the Best family, a trust fund in memory of Ina C. and Raymond A. Best, NY Γ '33, is earning income for an award to a graduate engineer and member of

The — Best Fellow must study business administration at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and acquire a master's degree in business.

All members of Tau Beta Pi are eligible to apply. Applications will be available after November 1 on-line at [www.tbp.org](http://www.tbp.org).

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