

Mayor, Say Yes to Intoxication

Get wasted more. Scheme less.

Salem would be much better off if our city officials — Mayor, City Manager, city councilors — took this advice.

I've got scholarly support for it. Edward Slingerland is an expert in Chinese thought and cognitive science.

In his book, "Trying Not to Try," Slingerland extols intoxicants, which historically have been used by humans as social lubricants.

When wasted, people are naturally spontaneous. In modern parlance, real. Alcohol, cannabis, and such loosen the cognitive control needed for lying or faking.

He writes, "In ancient China, no major treaty was signed without first bringing everyone together in an extended, alcohol-soaked banquet."

Whenever I see Salem's city leaders sitting in a meeting with forced smiles, spouting platitudes, soberly concocting thinly disguised schemes to enrich the already wealthy and strengthen the already powerful, I think, "Guys, why can't you just act real?"

Honest crooks are more appealing than deceptive saints. Genuine arguing is preferable to fake agreeing. Truthful differences trump a false consensus.

If there's one word (OK, three words) that describes the relationship of City Hall with Salem's citizens these days, it's lack of trust.

One reason is that special interests in this town continually are bowed down to while the general community interest gets kicked in the butt.

Allowing Salem Hospital to demolish historic Howard Hall and clear-cut an ancient urban forest in the face of strong opposition from neighbors and the City's own Historic Landmarks Commission, while ignoring an adverse legal ruling, is a recent example.

I saw ordinary citizens standing before City officials, pleading “Do the right thing.” Mayor Peterson would utter meaningless empty words, “Thank you for your testimony,” then guide the city council to do the wrong thing.

Salem can’t prosper with this sort of duplicity from top elected and appointed officials.

Another example is the Mayor setting up a farce of a “blue ribbon” task force to plan a new police facility. She did this after encountering intense resistance to a poorly thought-out proposal to build a way over-priced facility over Mirror Pond at the Civic Center.

Soon it became obvious that the task force was stacked to affirm the Mayor’s pet proposal, or a close variant. Fresh, creative, collaborative ideas from citizens weren't welcome.

Only marching in lockstep with rigid, unworkable, discredited ideas was. I felt like my head was going to explode after sitting through most of a recent task force meeting.

That’s the malevolent power of tightly-controlled bureaucratic scheming: it’s obvious that B.S. is being spewed out, but concerned citizens can’t avoid the crap washing over them.

Unfortunately, I doubt the current crop of City officialdom is going to transform into people who embrace open-mindedness and open problem-solving.

Nor, sadly, are they going to raise glasses or a bong in inebriated fellowship with the many Salemians who want to help them find solutions to this town’s problems.

Too bad. Leaders unafraid of some wild-and-crazy would make this town strangely saner.

Strange Up Salem seeks to lift our city’s Blah Curse. Give us a Facebook like. Brian Hines blogs at hinesblog.com