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Talking About The Weather

What to do when you must interact with an administrator. It's not as bad, and quite a bit more survivable than you think.

Why do we devote so much talk to the weather? Weather talk is innocuous of course, but that realization only leads to another question. Why do we devote so much talk to an innocuous subject?

When I meet the *Associate Vice-President of Office Supplies* on the sidewalk in February, I am given to assert, if it is true, that it's snowing. That's a strange thing for me to do. Stranger still, my counterpart will likely confirm my observation. Together, we have agreed on something that needs no agreement. To point the snow out to each other is as useful as pointing out that we both have lungs. (Mine are pink and serve me well. His are the lungs of an administrator; black, crusty, and providing of a wheeze that can be heard well ahead of his arrival. That last bit is useful at times.)

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I don't talk to a friend this way. When I address a friend it's because I want to know what he/she has to say. My friend has a long history of offering up language enriched with the special powers of logic, order and coherence. The appearance of those things is comforting, and I am well aware that I must do the same if our friendship is to continue.

The *Associate Vice-President of Office Supplies* is not a friend. He is an administrator. And something ancient stirs inside when I encounter him. My head aches and I become annoyed by the realization that I must come up with a way to acknowledge this fellow without getting chummy. Weather talk does that. It's a cheap trick, but it's better than the alternative.

To push the point further, let's suppose, just for fun, that I skip the weather talk and engage the *Associate Vice-President of Office Supplies* in a conversation about something he is interested in — paperclips perhaps. He will likely tell me what he knows, and in so doing, his world, the world of an administrator, will be at hand. This is a world I'd rather not explore just now, and not just because we are both standing outside in the cold with snow melting on our heads.

I'm leery of this fellow, and I don't want to offer language that hints of a possible long term comradeship. This winds-up being a good move, because in a few days time I will hold in my hands a printed, multi-page report, written by this very person. The report begins, "It has been brought to the attention of this office that the monthly consumption of staples has increased by..."

This report (which is held together by staples) sets me to wondering. What good is this person? How does he differ, if at all, from the stuff that oozes from leaky radiators? How can he rise to the level of Associate Vice-President of Office Supplies and write

such a monstrosity of an opening? And exactly how can an office have attention?

Perhaps I should write this person (or office) a reply: “Dear Sir (or office), I am surprised and troubled by the ineptitude of the first ten words of your most recent report. We shared a nice few moments in the snow a few days ago and I had thought it possible that we might graduate from “weather talk” to something more substantive. But now my hopes are dashed. Perhaps you’re going through a rough patch. Everyone deserves a second chance. Why don’t you try again and write something else? You might want to start with an apology. Regardless of what you do next, it is vital that you soon improve your writing skills.”

We like to imagine that we normal folks are somehow, deep down, where it really counts, superior to the pointy-headed nincompoops that write reports about staple usage. And we are! Nevertheless, these people need to be dealt with from time to time, and weather talk does that. It allows us to acknowledge their existence, which is courteous, without getting too close, which, when it comes to administrators with titles like *Associate Vice-President of Office Supplies*, might be fatal.

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