

# THE EXTRA POINT

BY JERRY ROBERTS



## # 1583 Intelligence or Not Being Stupid – Which Do You Choose?

While growing up, I remember being told by my elders, two sentiments that seemed to be pretty much the same, but, well, different. One was, “Jerry, you’ve got to be smart about things if you want to get ahead.” The other was, “Jerry, if you want to get anywhere in life, you can’t be stupid.” Well, which was it, do I want to be smart, or simply avoid being stupid? I’m Jerry Roberts, and today we consider our options. That’s coming next on The Extra Point.

Mark Twain isn’t just known for his celebrated books like Huck Finn and The Adventures of Tom Sawyer. He’s also one of the most quotable figures in American history. If anyone has ever told you to “never let your schooling interfere with your education”, then you have been quoted Twain.

Concise and clever, Twain quotes were basically 19th-century memes. They’re so easy to spread that it can be easy to forget just how much wisdom Twain managed to pack into such an irresistible little bundle of words.

Take for example another of his famous quotes, which I was recently reminded of: “It ain’t what you don’t know that gets you into trouble. It’s what you know for sure that just ain’t so.” Sure, it’s funny, but both science and super-achievers say it actually contains some of the best advice on how to make yourself instantly smarter.

In fact, what Twain was saying is backed by serious science. Back in the late 1990s, two psychologists — Justin Kruger and David Dunning — measured a group of participants in a research project, noting their self-evaluations on a range of abilities.

The same pattern appeared again and again: Those that were actually poorest at whatever was being tested rated themselves the most highly, while actual high performers were much more modest about their own abilities. From that, the now famous Dunning-Kruger

effect was born, showing that the more ignorant and incompetent among us are often the most self-confident, while genuine experts wrestle with self-doubt.

According to Dunning, the real lesson is that all of us should be more humble about what we think we know. We’re all victims of the Dunning-Kruger effect at times.

Somebody who bought into this was the late Charlie Munger, Warren Buffett’s right-hand man. He said this: “It is remarkable how much long-term advantage people like us have gotten by trying to be consistently not stupid, instead of trying to be very intelligent.”

Buffett and Munger followed that concept for decades, buying and selling huge amounts of stock and amassing an incredible fortune.

Trying to avoid believing things that aren’t true -- a.k.a. trying not to be stupid -- will often get you much farther in life and business than trying to be exceptionally clever.

Amazon founder Jeff Bezos goes along with this philosophy, and has talked about how intellectual humility is one of the key traits he looks for when hiring.

If I had to guess, I think the majority of Guam employers would rather hire people who are careful in their decision-making, even if it means they don’t often come up with the big idea that someone else might. He/she may also not stumble and fumble something that is important, due to overconfidence.

Experienced investors will tell you that they mostly made their money through a series of careful moves and not taking wild chances; while they racked up most of their losses by being careless just a few times.

Overall, this fundamental principle seems to be one that deserves consideration.

(Con’t.)

Maybe we should all spend less time trying to show the world how smart we are, and focus more on just not being stupid.

To all the people running for office this year, this could be some good advice for you as well, and not something to think about only during your campaign.

If you're so fortunate as to be chosen by Guam's electorate to serve, try to remember this during your term: Don't try to impress us with how smart you are. Instead, do impress us with how dumb you're not.

That's the Extra Point. Be responsible and make something good happen today. For 93.3FM, the Ray Gibson Show, and First Hawaiian Bank, I'm Jerry Roberts.

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