



Self-improvement, spell-check, and more: An update from the Smith College class of 2000

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Despite our youthful mien, THE SCRAP BOOK has been around awhile, and as a good American, over the decades, we've sampled our share of self-improvement regimens, from Prof. Emile Coué's formula for happiness ("Every day, in every way, I am getting better and better") to the Dale Carnegie Course (How to Win Friends and Influence People) to Roling (we're still sore). So imagine our delight when this week's issue of U.S. News & World Report landed on our desk, featuring this cover: "50 Ways to Improve Your Life in 2007."

Talk about News You Can Use ! But then--well, imagine our disappointment when we rolled up our sleeves, took a deep breath, and prepared to improve our life. Of the 50 ways to make ourselves better SCRAPBOOKERS, most are anodyne (Stop Type 2 Diabetes Before You Get it; Join a Reading Club; Take Up an Instrument--Again; Lose Weight; Save Fuel), some are politically correct (Downsize Your Ride; Learn About Islam; Support Local Farmers), and some sound as if our friends at U.S. News think it's still 1971 (Unplug the Television; Do Something About Darfur; Lose Those Shoes).

Some are positively dangerous (Start Your Own Blog; Give Your Teen More Driving Time; Work Up a Sweat in Less Time), some are painfully fatuous (Read The Audacity of Hope by Sen. Barack Obama, who "invites us to discard the mutual blame inherent in red-state-blue-state thinking in favor of a broad-based progressive political sensibility that is both civic and civil") and some defy explanation (Drink Some Cups of White Tea; Turn Up Your Suction Power; Learn to Print Better Photos).

To be honest, THE SCRAPBOOK ended up tossing the issue aside in disappointment--and a little anger, too. For who, in their right mind, believes that installing crown molding in your dining room, coaching your kid's sports team, or writing a family cookbook lines the path toward happiness? Not us. In fact, from THE SCRAPBOOK's point of view, the 51st way to improve your life in 2007 is to chase U.S. News & World Report's editor-in-chief down the street with a rolled-up umbrella in hand. It's aerobic, low tech, and satisfaction is guaranteed.

The Perils of Spellcheck

The most entertaining Reuters dispatch in a long time was filed by Ross Colvin from Baghdad, on December 19. Someone (we'd blame the copy desk if we were you, Ross) obviously set the spellcheck on full automatic mode. Our comments are in brackets:

"In a report on Monday, the Pentagon said the Medic Army militia of radical Shiite cleric Montana al-Sadri [first cousin of Nebraska al-Tikriti] had replaced al Qaeda as the 'most dangerous accelerant of potentially self-sustaining sectarian violence in Iraq.' . . . U.S. commanders in Iraq have previously been reluctant to blame the Medic Army by name [yes, normally they call it the Mahdi army]. . . . Shiite Prime Minister Nora al-Malice [no relation to Nora Ephron] . . . has vowed to dismantle the militias but has done little so far to rein them in."

We recommend Clint Eastwood to play the part of "Montana" in the new movie, You're in the Medic Army, Now.

Heads Will Roll!

Last week, the Deutsche Oper in Berlin finally performed its version of Mozart's Idomeneo. You may recall in September the opera was canceled because it was deemed too controversial and an "incalculable security risk." The reason: It would have featured the severed head of Muhammad (along with the heads of Jesus Christ, Buddha, and Poseidon--not that anyone seems to worry about the sensitivities of Christians, Buddhists, or, um, Atlantians).

But then came the public outcry over the cancellation. Chancellor Angela Merkel called it "self-censorship out of fear"; Interior Minister Wolfgang Schäuble insisted, "We will not accept it."

And so the curtain was finally raised. When Idomeneo emptied his sack of heads, one heckler is reported to have yelled "Stop it!" and "Boo!" He was quickly countered by other shouts of "Continue!" And at the opera's end, the audience showed its support with thunderous applause.

THE SCRAPBOOK applauds, too, on principle. As for director Hans Neuenfels's rendition of this Mozart classic, in which the severed heads represent a liberation from organized religion--a modern German interpretation Roger Kimball rightly describes as "gratuitously offensive" and "anachronistic balderdash"--we are going to have to side with the heckler.

Dial T for Taliban

An extra scrupulous Reuters reporter was on the job in Kabul last week, bearing the good news that "NATO and Afghan forces have killed about 50 Taliban fighters in the past few days in an operation in southern Afghanistan, an alliance spokesman said on Wednesday. . . . There were no casualties among NATO and Afghan forces in the latest operation, said NATO spokesman Brigadier Richard Nugee. The Taliban could not be contacted immediately for comment."

That's right: You can't trust those lying NATO spokesmen without checking first with the terrorists--sorry, not terrorists, but "Taliban fighters."

The Way We Live Now

Notable achievements from the Smith College class of 2000, as related in the latest Alumni Quarterly: "In other wedding news, Christie Rowe married Sila Thielke . . . in July. She sends apologies to 'all my Smithie friends who I told that I didn't believe in the 'heteronormative subjugation.' She adds, 'Sadly I couldn't get Sila to take my name, unlike Sarah (Cliffy) Clifthorne '02 who just married Scott Bailey Clifthorne and gave birth to Emerson Clifthorne!' . . . Jason Goldbarg sends his first update! After nearly six years living in Boston and working for Harvard University, **National Gay and Lesbian Task Force**, Theatre Offensive, and as a self-employed gardener, he has moved on. He writes, 'In 2001, I began my lifelong gender transition. My name is Jason and I am a self-identified queer trannyboy. I enjoy playing with animals, gardening, and creating art, and I am currently a painter and mosaic artist.'"

Way to go Smithies! And on that happy note, we wish you all a prosperous and healthy new year.