

STANLEY'S "MAGIC EYE"



Since ancient times --- clans like ours --- have gathered round the fire --- on nights like this --- to celebrate their most precious values --- by recounting their tribe's story --- and then to remember why it matters.

Let's begin BENS' story with a parable.

Three umpires are having a beer after the Red Sox game.

The first, a rookie, says: "Gee guys, I want you to know --- I call them the way I see them."

The second umpire says: "Hey, kid --- I call them the way they are."

And then the third umpire --- whose name is Stanley --- smiles and says: "They Ain't ----- until I call them."

SO WHAT HAPPENED FIRST?

Twenty-five years ago Stanley Weiss saw what wasn't there. BENS wasn't -- until he called it.

Stanley had built a flourishing business and was free to enjoy the good life.

Instead, he looked for a way to contribute to our country's security.

Stanley worried that security policy was becoming the captive of a new elite --- a complex of policy wonks and ideologues.

--- A priesthood of specialists was arguing about nuclear theories that seemed literally incredible to a businessman like Stanley.

--- Partisans and ideologues were fighting about whether to spend more or less on defense, not how best to build the defense we needed.

Stanley saw what was missing from our debates. What was missing was the direct engagement of “an alert and knowledgeable citizenry” that Eisenhower had called for in his Farewell Address.

Specifically what was missing was the engagement of the best of our business leaders who --- unlike the wonks and ideologues --- had mastered the classical American disciplines of problem solving, cold-eyed realism, and delivering results.

So Stanley created BENS to mobilize such leaders.

It took a “magic eye” --- Stanley’s “magic eye” --- to see what wasn’t there -- to see what was missing.

And --- by the way --- Stanley’s same, rare intellectual power to observe reality closely --- to see what others don’t --- consistently delights fans of his columns in the International Herald Tribune

AND THEN WHAT HAPPENED?

Stanley’s vision of BENS was clear from the beginning.

BENS should be a national organization of business executives --- not of corporations

BENS should focus only on issues where business leaders’ experience and standing had distinctive value.

BENS should be member driven. Members would define their own agenda.

Members would work directly with government change agents, face to face, not through staff.

BENS only interest would be the national interest, independent of any corporation, ideology, or political party.

And BENS would not just propose good policy. It would help government leaders make it work in practice.

Stanley knew some folks liked to discuss policy. Let them join a Talk Tank.

Others liked to study policy and issue reports. Let them support a Think Tank.

Still others were star struck and liked to tell their golfing partners what they had said to the Secretary the night before. Let them join a Star-Struckin' Tank

Stanley wanted BENS to be a DO TANK. It would mobilize business executives who want to produce results --- to help implement change in practice.

This vision of BENS as an organization of independent, action oriented executives was clear, fresh and distinctive twenty-five years ago and remains BENS' DNA today.

AND THEN WHAT HAPPENED?

BENS suffered the pains and pangs of a very cold start-up.

Stanley's first BENS speech was to a roomful of A-List prospects in New York. He prepared meticulously. But when he stood up, he froze with stage fright.

He was so bad --- how bad was he? --- he was so-o-o-o bad --- a friend told him --- "Stanley, I like you and I like what you say, but --- **Don't – Give – Any – More - Speeches!**"

But he did.

One morning he pitched BENS to 83 notables in Kansas City. No one joined. Well--- one joined. And that one --- it turned out ---was a giant of business --- throughout the mid-west--- and he has partnered with Stanley ever since --- to build BENS in our heartland.

This is the way Stanley built BENS. He found partners --- one at a time --- who then helped him recruit their fellow CEOs --- one at a time.

Stanley also recruited professionals who established a gold standard for staff performance from the outset. Three are here tonight.

Two scholar/practitioners --- Dr. Robert Lamson of Seattle and Dr. Jim Morrison --- helped Stanley mount an actionable BENS' agenda, right from the start.

And Chuck Van Zoren ---the CEO of a Kalamazoo trucking company --- was so taken with Stanley's vision --- he moved to Washington --- donated a year of his life --- to teach BENS how to make its trucks run on time --- **donated a year of his life!**

One other staff pioneer who is not with us tonight. Mary Dent Crisp had served as Co-Chair of the Republican National Committee. She instantly enabled BENS to be heard and trusted by senior decision makers. She died a few weeks ago. She had the grace of a swan and the moral courage of a patriot.

The professionals who have served BENS all these years since have been a crack cadre --- a treasure of talent and teamwork.

Like Stanley --- they care for each other like family.

And they have a special, quiet grace --- because --- like those who sing back up for a rock group --- they know their job is not to sing their own songs --- but to help BENS' members be heard.

So by the late 80's the building blocks of Stanley's vision of BENS' were in place. It was ready to take off.

AND THEN WHAT HAPPENED?

Of course, the heart of BENS' story is how its work has made Americans safer.

So let's imagine that we can see --- in our mind's eye ---- some video highlights that show Stanley's vision of BENS at work.

It's 1996. We're at a BENS' dinner like ours tonight.

Secretary of Defense Bill Perry is speaking. He is thanking BENS for their muscular support of the Nunn-Lugar program --- that elegant model of American pragmatism to de-nuke the missiles of the former Soviet Union.

He is showing us snapshots from his series of visits to Ukraine to implement Nunn-Lugar.

The first slide shows us a fully armed SS 18 missile in its silo, still targeted at us.

The second shows us the same silo --- now empty --- its missile destroyed, -- its warheads deactivated and gone.

In the third we see us a patch of sunflowers --- growing where the silo had been filled in.

Americans are now safer.

Imagine a second video.

Now it's 1997.

We see Secretary of Defense Bill Cohen --- at a table --- working face to face with the Chairmen and CEO's of some of America's most innovative companies --- Federal Express, Home Depot, AOL, Harman International --- all members of BENS' Tail To Tooth Commission.

Josh Weston --- BENS' Vice Chairman --- had a "magic eye" like Stanley's. He saw what was missing --- a Commission to work with change agents in the Department of Defense --- like Cohen and others --- to install world class business practices --- and reinvest the billions saved in combat capabilities.

The Commission didn't produce a report. Instead, it delivered concrete action plans, detailing how to implement reforms that had been studied to death for decades.

Now one last tape.

It's September 2001. We see a New Jersey businessman at home one night searching the web.

Ray Chambers lost friends in the attacks a few days before.

His "magic eye" sees what's not there --- what's missing ---- a way to mobilize local business resources to help deal with such disasters.

Ray finds BENS on the web and then commissions them to design and build a public-private partnership to do this--- the New Jersey Business Force.

This model --- a local Business Force ---is now at work in several states. And because --- all homeland security --- like all politics --- is local --- it's now spreading like wild fire across the country.

SO HOW DID BENS PRODUCE SUCH RESULTS?

BENS is producing results as Stanley had originally envisioned.

But how? So why has BENS become so effective --- with only a few million dollars a year and with only a few hundred members.

Ahh. Let's draw closer to the fire and look at the soul of BENS.

Fundamentally, BENS works because of character --- specifically three quite special qualities of character.

BENS' works first, because Stanley and his partners have a quiet, authentic passion to serve. Not for show. Not for strut. More like breathing --- instinctive, reflexive, unconscious.

This passion to serve greatly multiplies BENS' effectiveness, because it moves its members to donate --- what is priceless --- their independent judgment and skills.

BENS also works because Stanley and his partners have a special kind of integrity --- specifically, the integrity of meaning.

The enemy here --- is Bull-Shit.

We mean Bull- Shit in its precise and formal philosophical sense --- of course. Recently, a Princeton professor formally defined Bull-Shit in a philosophical treatise --- On Bullshit. He said truth-tellers and liars agree there is a truth. But Bull-Shitters don't believe in truth or meaning.

This loss of meaning produces mission morph and mission mush until we forget what we are really trying to do.

But Stanley and his partners know what they mean --- say what they mean, and they mean what they say.

The key to their integrity is the discipline they bring to BENS choice of words.

They write not just so they can be understood. They write so they can't be misunderstood.

They know --- as Mark Twain said --- the difference between the right word and the almost right word is --- the difference between lightning and a lightning bug.

BENS' integrity of meaning multiplies their effectiveness.

It focuses its work.

And it ensures that BENS' simple, clear, sweet melody will be heard --- even on a noisy street.

BENS also works because its members have one other special quality of character --- strength of will.

For twenty five years, Stanley and his partners have had ---

--- the determination --- the persistence --- the stamina --- the resilience -
--tenacity --- the focus --- the desire --- the resolve --- and the drive

--- to create BENS, build it, grow it --- and to make it work.

So BENS works because Stanley and his partners have had these special qualities of character --- the strength of will, the integrity of meaning, and the quiet passion to serve.

Stanley brings one other personal quality to BENS that graces it and multiplies its effectiveness and --- his gift for friendship.

Aristotle described two special kinds of friendship. There are "enjoyable" friendships. Friends simply enjoy the pleasure of each other's company.

And there are "perfect" or "complete" friendships in which friends share their lives' most cherished hopes and dreams.

Stanley is gifted at both.

He has friends all over the world who enjoy his wit, his intellectual curiosity, and his vitality. Many are here tonight.

And he has many complete friends, including his close partners at BENS who share his hopes and dreams for our country.

And on a personal note --- over the last twenty-five years he and I have grown --- what Aristotle surely had in mind --- by a “perfect friendship.”

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

So now our fire has died down.

We've recounted our clan's story and celebrated our tribe's most precious values.

Let's ask ourselves finally--- why does it matter?

It matters because BENS' story reminds us of the story of the American people --- at our best --- in troubled times throughout our history.

We have always depended on the strengths of all Americans and on their passion to serve when our country is in danger.

And now we face dangers Eisenhower described in 1961 with eerie prescience.

“We are --- he said --- “threatened by the conflict now engulfing the world. ... We face a hostile ideology global in scope ... ruthless in purpose ... insidious in method ... And unhappily ... of indefinite duration.”

Tonight we may not yet have seen the worst of this conflict. It could still come directly and ruthlessly to where we live --- where our children play.

This means that --- as far as we can see into the future --- our security will require the talents of all “alert and knowledgeable citizens” --- citizens who know how to do things that the government and policy wonks do not.

But this is hard to do in our times. It's out of fashion. We're out of practice.

But we can learn from Stanley and BENS how to do this.

So can our children and their children.

Because BENS is a model that that can be used by citizens of all walks --- who have the “magic eye” to see what's missing --- and who want to mobilize what they can distinctively contribute --- on their own initiative --- without waiting for government to ask.

This is BENS' most enduring legacy and their most profound promise. This is why the story of Stanley and BENS matters.

Henry Adams once said --- a teacher will never know where his influence ends.

Neither will Stanley Weiss

Remarks at BENS 25th Anniversary May 9, 2007
By Larry K Smith