

LIFELINE

Edward Tufte



Edward Tufte is author, designer, and publisher of *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information* (1983), *Envisioning Information* (1990), and *Visual Explanations* (1997). For 32 years he was a professor at Yale and Princeton, teaching political economy, data analysis, and statistical graphics. Recently, he retired at age 57 to write more books about information design and to build large sculptures in the landscape.

Who was your most influential teacher, and why? Lincoln Moses and Bill Brown taught a biostatistics seminar at the Stanford Medical School, where students worked with real researchers on real problems. Lin taught with statistical and ethical insight, as well as taking me, then a lowly student, out for a beer now and then.

What is your favourite book, and why? Evelyn Waugh's *Scoop*, a wicked and witty novel about journalism and the incentives to corrupt evidence.

What is your favourite journey, and why? From sea level, diving 60 feet down near Darwin and Wolf Islands of the Galapagos to photograph schooling hammerhead sharks.

What are your favourite sayings? If you're not doing something different, you're not doing anything at all. It comes with the package, to reconcile myself to life's inevitable trade-offs and heartaches.

What are you currently reading? At the dinner table, reading aloud *The Waste Land* and a luscious new translation of *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*.

What complementary/alternative therapies have you tried? Did they work? Vitamins, selenium, vegetables, fruit, fish; so far so good. I also have found (subject to my usual controls) that pistachio nuts are brain food, a result I've long hoped to publish in a major medical journal.

How would you like to die? After the discovery of extraterrestrial intelligence.

Jabs & Jibes



The German in the grass

He was a gruff, no-nonsense Hollander who had immigrated to Canada after the war—“I always wanted to be a cowboy”.

A half-century of ranching in Northwest British Columbia had left its mark. He had been referred to me with progressive right hemiparesis; his speech was slurred as he cracked me a lopsided smile. I asked him to draw a clock, and he couldn't complete the numbers in the right upper quadrant. He had enough insight to know it wasn't correct, and became frustrated.

During the physical examination, I noted a few scars around the right shoulder and chest wall. Having trained in South Africa, I recognised they were bullet wounds, curiously out of place in the Pacific northwest. “What happened here?” I pointed to the shrapnel that showed up on his chest x-ray. “That happened when I was in the (Dutch) resistance during the war.” We had a few minutes before they could take him to the CT. “Tell me about it.”

“It was during the early days of the German invasion. Four of us had ambushed a car and shot two SS officers near our village one night. The next morning there was a big commotion at the other end of the village. German troops with tracker-dogs had followed our trail. The dogs led them into the house of one of my accomplices. There was a lot of screaming. I could hear the German officer shouting orders over the barking of the dogs. They shot my friend, Pieter, and his whole family right there in the street, in front of everybody. Fortunately, my mother realised what was happening. She shouted a message, which was passed on up the street. Everybody sprinkled pepper around their doorways. The dogs started sneezing and got thrown off the scent. The German officer started raging at his men. We made good our escape during the chaos.

“We started running like hell through the open countryside behind our village. Before we could reach the sanctuary of the next village, while we were still crossing a polder with fairly tall grass, the Germans were back on our heels, and shooting. I got hit in the shoulder. We had no option but to dive for cover in the tall grass and hope for the best.

“With ruthless efficiency, the enemy set up two machine-guns on the walls of the polder, which gave them a clear field of fire. The troops walked the field in a grid-pattern, flushing us like game birds.

“They got Jakob first. There was a lot of shooting. He had managed to draw all the dogs to himself and took them down with him. The Germans had to move a lot more cautiously. After an eternity, Gerritje got up and ran. Bullets cracked overhead, he screamed; there was silence except for the Germans walking through the grass, talking to each other.

“One of them walked straight towards me. I was ready to kill him. I hated Germans more than anything else on earth. At that moment, the German walking towards me said, ‘Stay still! Don't move! I didn't see you!’ He said it under his breath, with the swishing of the grass, as he marched past me, so his friends couldn't hear. I put my pistol down and watched his back disappear in the grass. He called to his friends, ‘All clear! We got them all’.”

Some weeks later, I told his story to a friend, with that analytic but humane ethos distilled in Jewish psychiatric tradition. “Why was he telling you that story at that time?” he asked, with sudden intensity. Before I could reply he said, “The patient was facing his next life-threatening situation. He was hoping you were going to be the German in the grass.”

Mike Kenyon

