

## **Don't Be Afraid of Reality**

*By Maurice Carter in The Covington News – September 16, 2012*

A small drinking glass sits on a smooth, damp rock, filled to the midpoint with water. With a friend, you examine the glass and debate: is it half empty or half full?

As silence is interrupted by a growing roar, the camera zooms back to reveal behind that initial scene a gushing waterfall, cascading in powerful torrents down a steep rock face. Water crashes and splashes everywhere.

Is the glass half empty or half full? My answer: What glass?

Some call me a dreamer, saying my philosophies of life are nice, but too idealistic for the real world. Then again, a fellow columnist recently referred to my view as “sad and negative.” Truth be told, it's a tricky business telling the optimists from the pessimists. Like most either/or labels, it's just not that simple.

Chamber of Commerce President Hunter Hall addressed Newton County Board of Education District 1 Representative Jeff Meadors in the board's Tuesday night meeting. Hall challenged Meadors over the perceived negative tone of his columns in the Newton Citizen and asked him to stop writing them.

I absolutely agree with Hall on the critical importance of industry recruitment for Newton County. And, I fully appreciate that our words in print make an impact on potential investors here. But, I'm just not sure asking someone to hush is a fix for much of anything. And, if your goal is to keep negative information out of the newspaper, making your request in a public meeting before an elected body may not be the best strategy.

True, the August 21 column Hall took exception with included statistics that don't paint Newton County schools in the best light compared to our neighboring counties. But, Meadors' point – that we should learn what works and improve – seems to have been lost. Likewise, Hall must not have read the August 28 column, when Meadors praised promising trends and good news for Newton County in newly released school data.

Any business investing billions of dollars in a community will do due diligence. If we have flaws, they will find them. And, besides, every community has them. Hall seems to blame Meadors for anonymous posts made by online readers of his column. Well, you don't have to spend much time reading news and opinion pieces on the internet to know mean-spirited pot shots are everywhere.

Where we set ourselves apart is our ability to acknowledge our shortcomings and talk or write honestly about our need for improvement. Demonstrated commitment to being the best possible place to live and raise a family will win out in the end – not how well we can hide inadequacies and hope no one will notice. They notice. They also know no place is perfect. Where we are matters; where we are going matters more.

I get that Meadors is only telling part of the story. Trust me; you can't cover it all in the space allotted to a weekly newspaper column. But, the answer is not to hush him up. The solution is to join in telling the rest of the story. Meadors is saying we have a long way to go and he is deeply committed to getting there. So, let us simply have an adult conversation about how we maintain momentum and move from where we are to where we all want to be.

In parting, Hall shared a book with the board on how to achieve change. I've had my share of training and life experiences over the years for implementing meaningful change. One of the most powerful images I've learned is that of "creative tension" presented by Peter Senge in his 1990 book "The Fifth Discipline." To understand creative tension, imagine yourself between two posts, with a thick rubber band attached to each and circling your waist. One post represents your vision of where you want to go. The other post is current reality. Move towards the goal, and the tension increases pulling you back to current reality. Slack off and ease towards current reality, and you'll feel the growing pull of the vision from which you've strayed.

The gap between our current reality and our vision is not trivial. It is, in fact, what gives meaning to the vision and energy to those who pursue it. That's creative tension, and it's a good thing.

It doesn't matter how full the glass is. What matters is that we see it for what it is and are committed to filling it up. We have the water.