

Time to risk an epiphany, boys

Our best politicians have an important attribute - the strength to admit wrong-headedness.

Most get themselves elected by being wedded to a point of view, and voters who think the same vote for them. End of. However, progress is stalled at times unless someone has the fortitude to admit they're off beam.

When in 1981 New Plymouth City Council seemed hung over whether to build a decent sewerage plant, leading opponent Roy Burkitt suddenly changed his mind. He told new mayor Daisy Lean of his epiphany on a plane trip to Wellington, and Lean recalls he felt such jubilation he nearly jumped out at 10,000 metres.

Burkitt said he was swayed by what he'd discovered about our coastal waters from a friend in the offshore oil and gas industry, so he decided to swallow his pride and switch votes. Only one extra supporter was needed, so Lean's world-class proposal went ahead.

Something similar happened with our hospice. We were one of the last places in New Zealand to get a stand-alone facility after years of opposition from medical staff, who understandably feared money needed for end-of-life care would divert to bricks and mortar. It took one brave man to change his mind for today's magnificent facility to eventuate.

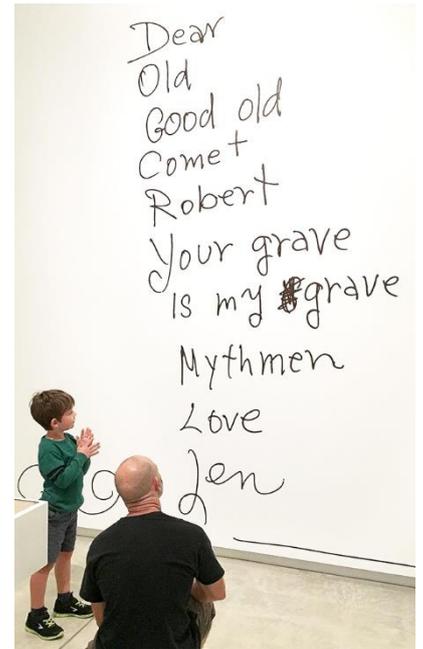
Dr Ian Smiley was the leading medical practitioner at the hospice and his colleagues respected his views. When after years of opposing a stand-alone he suddenly agreed we needed one, the last barrier was gone. He had been taken on a hospice tour by those pressing for a stand-alone, but he recalls while such visits were useful, a key reason to switch was the realisation that to thrive the hospice needed maximum public support and exposure, and that wouldn't be helped by being located in a well-appointed but out-of-the-way ward at Taranaki Base Hospital.

Apocryphal moments. The point is, we now seem to need another epiphany, and I want to identify the person who needs to have it.

Before I do, let's step back to Easter weekend, which began when the family arrived from Auckland and declared it was time they had a look at Len Lye. Things started badly. Being Good Friday, everything was closed so I went online to find when Trilogy played, since in my supposedly expert opinion that's the signature exhibit. But Trilogy wasn't mentioned anywhere.

No matter, we fronted up on the Saturday, family in tow, including grandchildren aged five and seven. I made an ass of myself at reception with my catholic views after we were told Trilogy isn't on show at the moment, but that there are plenty of other things to view, including the Len Lye film.

We hadn't seen that, so, okay, it would have to do. It's a long film, but a riveting one (no pun intended). Our grandson was absorbed. Later, he and his father spent a lot of time looking at



the other exhibits, only two of which were Lye sculptures. That didn't seem to put them off for a moment, and pretty soon I was beginning to formulate a new appreciation of the gallery.

The views held by us locals may have become a tad myopic, mired by years of politicking and attendant media coverage. We've backed ourselves into fortresses of opinion, while meantime the outside world is amazed, awed even, that a provincial city can attain such a world-class asset.

At the risk of sounding sexist, the Len Lye film leaves the indelible impression he was the epitome of Kiwi blokedom. He might have danced around in funny kit, spoken in riddles, and led an outrageously macho sex life, but his vision was grounded in classic New Zealand backyard ingenuity.

The film is populated by deadpan engineers behaving like the best of our garage workshop forebears, the tinkerers and welders who to this day live out the male New Zealand dream. Lye's art is closer to the worldview of the tradie than the preciousness of Parnell galleries.

John, you'd love it, just like all of us blokes sitting in the Len Lye Centre theatre that Saturday Easter morning. Which is why you need to swallow your pride and pay the place a visit.

One other recalled epiphany might help. When Tom Cruise was here filming the Last Samurai in 2003 and putting Taranaki in the spotlight, the editor of this newspaper realised his was the last media outlet in the world calling the mountain Egmont. He switched. He got death threats. Brave man.