

# **WHEN YOU GRAB A CAT BY THE TAIL**

**SHORT BURSTS  
OF INSPIRATION  
FOR BUSY PEOPLE**

**ROB LEBOW & WILLIAM L. SIMON**

SelectBooks, Inc.

*When You Grab a Cat by the Tail*

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First Edition

ISBN 978-1-59079-108-0

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Lebow, Rob.

When you grab a cat by the tail : short bursts of inspiration for busy people / Rob Lebow & William Simon. — 1st ed.  
p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-59079-108-0 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Inspiration. 2. Success--Psychological aspects.

I. Simon, William L., 1930– II. Title.

BF410.L43 2007

158.1'28--dc22

2006012420

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

## Also by Rob Lebow and William L. Simon

- *Lasting Change: The Shared Values Process That Makes Companies Great*, John Wiley & Sons, 1997

## Other Books by Rob Lebow

- *A Journey into the Heroic Environment*  
First Edition, Prima Publishing, 1990  
Revised and Expanded, Random House, 1997  
Third Edition, SelectBooks, 2004
- *Winning at Softball Isn't Everything If You Miss All the Fun!* (Expected in 2007)
- *Time Changes* (Expected in 2008)
- *Building the New Ark for the Christian Family* (Expected in 2008)

### Co-authored:

- *Accountability—Freedom and Responsibility Without Control!* (with Randy Spitzer), Berrett-Koehler, 2002
- *Succeed in Real Estate Without Cold Calling* (with Phil Gerisilo), SelectBooks, 2005

## Other Books by William L. Simon

- *Beyond the Numbers: How Leading Companies Measure and Drive Success*, John Wiley & Sons, 1997

### Co-authored:

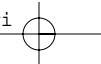
- *The G.O.D. Experiments: How Science Is Discovering God In Everything, Including Us* (with Gary E. Schwartz), Atria/Simon & Schuster, 2006

- *The Truth About Medium: Extraordinary Experiments with the Real Allison DuBois of NBC's Medium and Other Remarkable Psychics* (with Gary E. Schwartz), Hampton Roads Publishing Company, 2005
- *The Art of Intrusion: The Real Stories Behind the Exploits of Hackers, Intruders & Deceivers* (with Kevin D. Mitnick), John Wiley & Sons, 2005
- *In Search of Business Value: Ensuring a Return on Your Technology Investment* (with Robert McDowell), SelectBooks, 2005
- *The Art of Deception: Controlling the Human Element of Security* (with Kevin D. Mitnick), John Wiley & Sons, 2002
- *The Afterlife Experiments: Breakthrough Scientific Evidence of Life After Death* (with Gary E. Schwartz), Pocket Books/Simon & Schuster, 2002
- *Driving Digital: Microsoft and Its Customers Speak About Thriving in the E-Business Era* (with Robert L. McDowell), HarperBusiness/HarperCollins, 2001
- *High Velocity Leadership: The Mars Pathfinder Approach to Faster, Better, Cheaper* (with Brian K. Muirhead), Babbage Press/HarperCollins, 1999
- *On the Firing Line: My 500 Days at Apple* (with Gil Amelio), HarperBusiness/HarperCollins, 1998
- *Profit from Experience: The National Semiconductor Story of Transformation Management* (with Gil Amelio), Simon & Schuster, 1997
- *The Shortcut Route to Winning Backgammon*, Minerva Publishing, 1997

*Dedicated to Sharon's courage and Lauren's starting  
her life anew with NASCAR. These two precious and  
brave ladies grabbed a "cat by the tail."*

*For Arynne and Victoria,  
Sheldon, Merrilee, Vincent and Elena,  
and David*

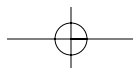
*A special thank you to our friend, Jim Gabbert,  
for giving us the idea for the title of this book*



*The man who sets out to grab a cat by its tail learns something that will always be useful and which never will grow dim or doubtful.*

MARK TWAIN

*Tom Sawyer Abroad*



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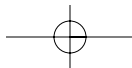
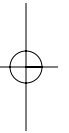
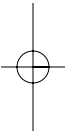
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## PREFACE

**P**eople often ask novelists and screenwriters amusing questions. One of the recurring ones is: “Where do you get your ideas?” The question amuses us because the answer is obvious: ideas are everywhere. We are literally bombarded with material from every part of our lives. Stories told by family members, friends, even strangers at an airport or in a bar start us chuckling or thinking. Every newspaper and magazine is filled with tales of events and relationships that could be the germ for a full-length work of fiction. After all, truth is the best form of fiction.

And it’s not just story ideas that dance in front of us almost constantly. The same is true of quotations and anecdotes we run across almost every day that hold the power to inspire us, teach us, guide us, make us laugh, or even force a tear to the corner of our eye. The best of these thrill us when we encounter them ... but even the best are all too soon forgotten.

That’s where this book comes in. In these pages, you’ll find some of the very best of those stories. The ones you wish you could remember and now you can. Some of these pieces are whimsical, while others might make you sad. Some entertain, some will leave you with a message worth remembering—perhaps even with a thought, idea, or lesson that will change your life or the life of someone else you tell the story to.

Mark Twain had it right when he wrote in *Tom Sawyer Abroad* the words that appear on the cover of this book: “The man who sets out to grab a cat by its tail learns something that will always be useful and which never will grow dim or doubtful.”

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(Cat Lovers, please address your complaints to Mark Twain, not to us.)

This very act of taking risk by “thinking a bit deeper than we normally care to do,” as the great Western philosopher René Descartes might suggest, however painful or frightening, teaches us things we can’t learn any other way. And, that is the point of this book.

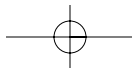
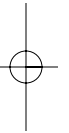
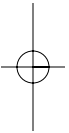
We hope you enjoy this collection of stories and ideas. Please feel free to share those stories that touch you. If you do, then we’ll know our efforts have been successful.

**Note to the Reader:** Some of the stories and ideas in this collection, you will note, have no attribution. When that occurs, you can be certain that we have related the story or information to you directly as we thought, said, or interpreted it. When we have used someone else’s idea, concept, philosophy, or story to make our point, we have tried our best to attribute its source correctly. Sometimes, that was not an easy task.

# PART ONE



# THE ONLY CONSTANT IS CHANGE





*Against the assault of laughter nothing can stand.*

MARK TWAIN

*The Mysterious Stranger and Other Stories*



**F**inancial wizard Bernard Baruch was a confidant to five United States presidents starting with Herbert Hoover. During this period in American history, he literally saw his country change from horses and buggies to the nuclear age. As Baruch left his Georgetown flat on his ninety-second birthday, a young reporter asked him how it felt to be ninety-two. Looking at the lad, he responded kindly, with his characteristic dry wit, "Young man, it feels pretty good being ninety-two, considering the alternative!"

Like growing old, change is inevitable and hard to accept ... but better than its alternative.

And not just for people. In the worlds of government and business, those organizations that cannot or will not change are doomed to a slow death. That's what history teaches us ...

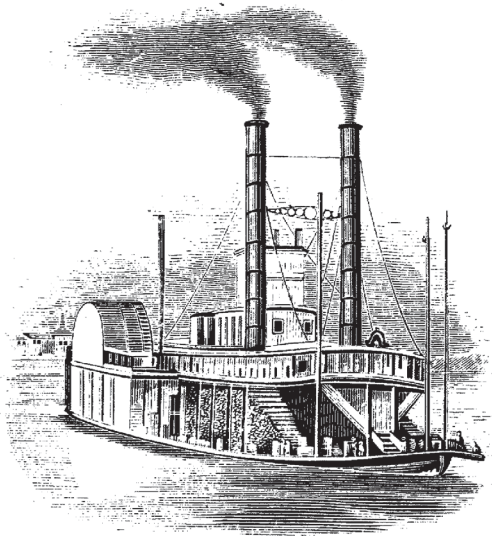
## FULTON'S FOLLY



**W**hen Robert Fulton first showed off his new invention, the steamboat, skeptics were crowded on the bank of the Hudson River yelling, "It'll never start! It'll never start!" But it did.

After a lot of cranking and groaning, the new boat got going.

As the steamboat made its way down the Hudson River on its maiden voyage, these same skeptics were quiet for only the briefest of moments, when they started chanting, "*It'll never stop! It'll never stop!*"





## IT'S HARD TO CHANGE THINGS



**T**he U.S. standard railroad gauge—the width between the two rails—is 4 feet, 8½ inches. To most, that's an odd number, and yet it was and is the standard for every commercial train system in our country. "Why was that peculiar measurement used?" you might ask. The answer may bring a laugh about how hard it is to change things.

The American railroads were initially based on the standard being used in England. The British used this gauge because tramways at some of their mines used it. And why were the tramways built to that gauge? Because the people who built them used the same jigs and tools that they had used for building horse-drawn wagons.

But why did the wagons have that odd wheel spacing? It has to do with "wheel ruts," of all things. The ruts in the dirt and mud roads of England were that distance apart; if the wagon-makers had used any other spacing, the wagons would have dragged along off-kilter—one wheel up on the surface, the other riding in a rut. The goods would have constantly spilled out, not to mention the drivers and passengers, and the wheels would have broken often. So building wagons with wheels just far enough apart to fit into the ruts was a necessity, a no-brainer.

And why did the roads of England have ruts with this curious dimension? Because the roads had first been built when England was a dominion of Imperial Rome, as part of the massive construction campaign of

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roadways and waterways created by the Romans throughout much of Europe some two thousand years ago. Incredibly, many of those very roadways were still in use and still bearing the same dimension of wheel ruts from Roman times, ruts created by the Roman war chariots. Since the chariots were made by or for Imperial Rome, they were all alike in the matter of wheel spacing.

The width of those Roman chariots was designed to be just wide enough to accommodate the back ends of two Roman war horses.

This means that the U.S. standard railroad gauge of 4 feet, 8½ inches was actually derived from the original specification of an Imperial Roman war chariot more than two thousand years ago, over three thousand miles away, which was based on the rump width of horses!

Now you know the history of the standard, but it doesn't stop there. The insurmountable momentum of this standard thrives even today. When you see that picture of an American space shuttle sitting on its launch pad, gleaming with the latest technology human ingenuity can muster, remember these additional facts.

There are two big booster rockets, called solid rocket boosters or SRBs, attached to the sides of the main fuel tank. The story goes that the engineers who designed the SRBs wanted to make the boosters a bit wider to gain additional thrust, but the thrusters have to be shipped by train from the factory to the launch site.

The railroad line from the factory runs through a tunnel in the mountains, a tunnel only slightly wider than the railroad track, and the railroad track is about as wide as—you guessed it—two horses' behinds.

So, a major design feature of what is arguably the world's most advanced transportation system ever conceived was determined over two thousand years ago based on the width of two horses' behinds!



# PUTTING CHANGE IN PERSPECTIVE



ometimes life just doesn't seem to be fair, and we just have to make the best of it.



*Guys aren't able to get \$15 or \$20 million [a year] anymore,  
so you have to play for the love of the game!*

NEW YORK KNICKS STAR PENNY HARDAWAY,  
bemoaning the National Basketball Association's  
idea of a salary cap while he was playing  
for the Orlando Magic



## THAT'S THE WAY IT'S ALWAYS BEEN DONE!



**A** young woman named Ellen married a young man who came from a small town in another state. Her new husband, Steve, often mentioned how much he enjoyed his mother's pot roast. Ellen decided to surprise Steve and called his mom for the recipe. When she read the handwritten reply from her mother-in-law, Ellen realized she had a question about the cooking instructions.

At the next family gathering, she found herself at one point alone in the kitchen with Steve's mom and took the opportunity to clear up the mystery. "There's one part I didn't understand," she began. "The recipe says to buy a 5½ to 6 pound brisket. But then it says to cut off the end. Why do you buy that size roast and then cut off the end?"

The older women paused for a moment and then said, "Well, dear, that's the way I learned to do it. That's the way we've always made it in our family."

Steve's grandmother had come into the kitchen while they were talking and started to grin as she overheard the conversation. Steve's mom turned to her mother for help. "Mother," she said, "why do we always cut off the end of the brisket?"

## THAT'S THE WAY IT'S ALWAYS BEEN DONE! 9

At that, Grandma burst out laughing. "Honey," she explained, "we were so poor in the old days, we couldn't afford a pot large enough for the whole roast, so we had to cut the end off."

For forty years, Steve's mother had been cutting the end off the brisket simply because that's the way it had always been done.

How many things in your life or in your organization  
are out of date and holding back change?

## THE FEAR OF GOING AFTER WHAT YOU WANT



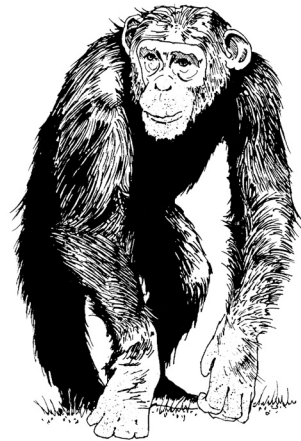
**P**ut five chimpanzees into a cage. Hang a banana on a string and put stairs under it. Before long, a chimp will go to the stairs and start climbing toward the banana.

At that moment, spray all the chimpanzees with cold water. Continue this procedure—each time a chimp puts a foot on the stairs, spray them all with cold water.

Eventually, all the chimpanzees will have learned that the stairs are to be avoided.

Then remove one of the chimpanzees and introduce a new one in its place.

Soon, the new chimp will spot the banana and head for the stairs. To his horror, all the other chimpanzees will attack him. After another attempt and another attack, he begins to understand that if he tries to climb the stairs, he will be assaulted.



THE FEAR OF GOING AFTER WHAT YOU WANT 11

Next, replace another of the chimpanzees. Of course, the same thing happens: whenever the chimp heads for the stairs, he'll be attacked, until he finally stops trying.

Here's where the experiment gets interesting: Continuing in the same way, you eventually replace the last of the original chimpanzees, the last one that knew that one chimp trying to climb the stairs would get them all an uncomfortably cold shower. Nonetheless, when the fifth new chimp starts for the stairs, the others will all attack him.

None of them know the original reason. They only know that no chimpanzees can be allowed to approach the stairs.

## RIDDEN ANY DEAD HORSES LATELY? FOR PEOPLE WHO HATE CHANGE!



**M**anagement has been compared to owning and riding a horse because the manager (the owner/rider) has to direct its course, control its speed, groom it, and provide resources. Common sense suggests that when you discover you're managing or working on a project that has turned into the equivalent of a dead horse, you should follow the advice of the Lakota Indians, who had an adage that stated, "When you discover you're riding a dead horse, the best strategy is to dismount." But, in today's worlds of business and government, instead of simply admitting mistakes, cutting losses, and dismounting, other strategies are often tried, like these—

1. Buy a stronger whip
2. Change riders
3. Threaten the horse with termination
4. Appoint a committee to study the dead horse
5. Arrange to visit other sites to see how they ride their dead horses



RIDDEN ANY DEAD HORSES LATELY? FOR PEOPLE WHO HATE CHANGE 13

6. Lower the standards so that dead horses can be included in performance appraisals
7. Create an ad campaign with the slogan, "This horse is not dead," and use it to establish brand recognition
8. Hire outside contractors to ride the dead horse
9. Create an exciting incentive program for dead horses
10. Donate the dead horse to a recognized charity and deduct its full original cost, making the IRS your riding partner
11. Provide additional funding to increase the horse's performance
12. Do a time-management study to see if lighter riders would improve productivity
13. Purchase an after-market product that promises to make dead horses run faster
14. Rewrite the performance requirements for dead horses

And, finally—

15. Promote the dead horse to a supervisory position with a corner office.

# THE JOHNSONVILLE STORY



*If I want to change the results, I have to change myself first.  
This is particularly true for me, the ... CEO, but it is equally  
true for every employee.*

RALPH C. STAYER

CEO, Johnsonville Sausage Company, Wisconsin



**O**nce upon a time, a sausage maker realized his business was in trouble. As head of the Wisconsin-based Johnsonville Sausage, Ralph Stayer set out to discover the problem. He hired a research team to conduct a survey of his employees and was startled by the results. What dismayed him was the news that his typical employee saw nothing at Johnsonville but a place to earn a salary.

Sure, you might think it shouldn't have come as a surprise that workers in a sausage factory weren't finding a lot of job satisfaction. But this was a family-owned business, and Ralph Stayer had been imagining a work force dedicated to the company.

After a lot of soul searching, Stayer decided the problem wasn't with the employees, but with himself. "I had made all the decisions about

## THE JOHNSONVILLE STORY 15

purchasing, scheduling, quality, pricing, marketing, sales, hiring, and all the rest of it.” He finally came to accept that his employees lacked commitment to Johnsonville Sausage because he had left them no authority to make decisions or to control their own work.

So he took a radical step: He placed full authority in the hands of the management team, giving them responsibility for company decision making.

That should have produced a happy outcome—right?

Hardly.

Stayer had gone, in his words, “from authoritarian control to authoritarian abdication.” The managers struggled to meet the challenge of taking control because all they had ever known was a very different management style. Previously, the number one rule had been “Take all tough decisions to the boss.” Now, they believed, Ralph was asking them to assume both the risk and the responsibility. And they wanted no part of it. They were happy with the way things had been. They were not open to these new ideas. The whole thing just scared them.

Give Ralph Stayer credit. He wasn’t deterred by this rebuff. Instead, he turned to the rank-and-file workers, the same workers who in the past had behaved like robots, day in and day out. Here was the surprise: Given the opportunity to be involved with the business, the workers jumped at the challenge.

By outlining the risks and the opportunities the future held and asking for his people’s help and involvement, Ralph had started a grass-roots revolution in his business. It was rocky sledding at first for everyone because he had to learn to let go and to trust. For the managers, because they had to become coaches and people who inspired. For the line workers, because they had to become immersed in business skills and learn how to “own their jobs.”

The workers rolled up their sleeves and took on the challenge. This meant they had to learn budgeting, scheduling, quality control, and all other aspects of the organization’s business—jobs they had never been expected to do in the past.

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Was the experiment a success? At the time Ralph began his journey, Johnsonville's annual revenues were under \$80 million. Today, Johnsonville Sausage is a billion-dollar-plus business and its products are distributed and carry a reputation for quality all over the United States.

In the process, Ralph and his people learned valuable lessons about trust, character, and faith in people.

Change is tough, but constructive change is always worth the risks and the effort. Johnsonville grabbed a cat by the tail and survived to thrive and enjoy the journey.

Interested in knowing more about this fascinating story? You might want to pick up the book *Flight of the Buffalo: Soaring to Excellence, Learning to Let Employees Lead* by James A. Belasco and Ralph C. Stayer, Warner Books, 1994.



*Just imagine what it would feel like if your job were being totally reshaped right before your eyes .... It is. We are being transformed even at this very moment, by our extraordinary velocity and by the emergence of a newly insistent force—The Power of Now.*

STEPHEN BERTMAN

*Hyperculture: The Human Cost of Speed*



# TODAY'S NEW WORKERS



- *How we define an employee has changed.* The conventional practice of management is gone. The whole employee-employer relationship has been transformed. Attitudes and values of the workforce have shifted. People simply don't run their careers the way they did in times past. The young new employees are the intense children of technology—the pushy offspring of our networked global economy, the rash youngsters born of the Internet.
- *The new generation are headstrong, irreverent smart alecks that thumb their noses at tradition and talk back.* They aren't going to respond to traditional management beliefs and practices. They insist on special treatment. This is reality. They require us to move at a higher metabolic rate. They hold our future in their hands.
- *It's now an employee's market.* The twentieth century ended with the United States' unemployment rate remaining at its thirty-year low. This confronts managers with one of their biggest challenges: finding competent people. Talent is the scarcest it's been at any time throughout the working careers of most people who currently hold a job.

U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

## FINDING NEW PEOPLE



**R**ecruitment must become a part of your everyday consciousness. Be on the lookout for talent all the time. Don't wait around until you have a job opening, and don't totally delegate the task to someone in Human Resources. Staffing decisions are too crucial to your own career future for you not to get involved. The secret is to never stop scanning the social landscape for talent. The other side of the equation is to nail down your organization's major points of appeal so you can romance those people who show promise.

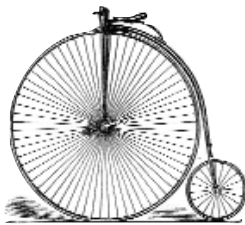
- *A move to "self" employment.* The average age of the workforce is shifting upward. The average employee's tenure in a job keeps shrinking. The employee population also is rapidly migrating from conventional employment towards free agency, temp work, consulting, "tele-work," virtual employment, and project work. Prior to the year 2005, the U.S. Department of Labor predicted that by the year 2005 the largest employer in the country would be "self." The most serviceable management mindset for now is to deal with all your people as if they were not employees but volunteers. Your job is to make the organization "sticky," so the good people don't want to leave.
- *Traditional jobs are not happening.* A 1999 survey of workers in California, where the New Economy first took root and where just about everything happens first, indicated that only a third of

FINDING NEW PEOPLE 19

California's workers have "traditional jobs"—that is, single [sole employment], permanent, full-time, day-shift work paid for by an employer at the employer's site. And only 22 percent have held such a job for at least three years.

*BusinessWeek*, January 10th, 2000

## ON CHANGING CAREERS



- Bill Boeing was a furniture manufacturer.
- The Wright brothers were in the bicycle business.
- Alexander Graham Bell was a teacher of the deaf.



- *Literally, everything is obsolete.* “In three years, every product my company makes will be obsolete. The only question is whether we’ll make them obsolete or somebody else will.”

Bill Gates  
*Business @ the Speed of Thought:  
Succeeding in the Digital Economy*



- *Give people reasons.* The most innovative organizations are rapidly replacing rules with roles, creating a strong sense of purpose and clear understanding of goals and mission, and leaving employees to their own devices, absent rigidity.

Richard W. Oliver

*The Shape of Things to Come: 7 Imperatives  
for Winning in the New World of Business*

- *Reach people through their hearts.* Rather than spending time and energy monitoring people, invest in capturing people's hearts. In short, dramatic shifts in the factors of success require equally dramatic shifts in management philosophy and in the concept of work and worker.

O. Aktoug

*Academy of Management Review*

## Faster ... Faster

- "Speed. Speed is God, and time is the devil."

Silicon Valley saying

- To survive in the future, you're going to have to make decisions on the run.
- *Most organizations have the capacity to be fast.* But very few have figured out how to stay fast. You'll see short bursts of acceleration, then they fade. Management hasn't caught on that it has to make the company hard-core rapid in a way that endures.
- *The fact is, speed requires sacrifice.* We have to manage more intuitively. There is less time for deliberation, less payoff from planning.
- Instead of digging in and dissecting situations thoroughly before deciding what to do, we must rely more on analysis by action.

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- *Problem solving has to happen in real time.* This means managers need to become adept at “calling audibles”—that is, changing the play at the last moment to exploit new information and to fit constantly fluctuating circumstances.
- Our peripheral vision must become better.
- The historical records show that humans have never, ever opted for slower.

Stephen Kern, Historian

# FINAL THOUGHTS ... ON CHANGE



*Everything that can be invented has been invented.*

ATTRIBUTED TO HENRY ELLSWORTH

Commissioner of the U.S. Patent Office, 1843



## Inventors Change the World

**S**ometimes stories that aren't true circulate widely because they tickle our funny bones ... or because, though untrue, they seem to represent an important insight, contradiction, or unspoken wish.

The above quote has been reprinted in many dozens, perhaps hundreds, of books and articles and repeated in a great many speeches. The quote was said to have been written by Ellsworth to explain his recommendation that the Patent Office be closed, since there would be no further need for it. In Richard Nixon's book *1999: Victory without War* (Simon & Schuster, 1988), Nixon attributes the quote to a different Patent Office commissioner, Charles Duell. But in reality, it was never uttered ... by either commissioner!

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How this mistaken quote originally came about is a bit of a mystery. More than likely, it is a corruption of a statement Ellsworth did make: "The advancement of the arts, from year to year, taxes our credulity, and seems to presage the arrival of that period when human improvement must end."

It's likely that Ellsworth meant he was in awe of the ingenuity of American inventors and could hardly believe this level of ingenuity could continue indefinitely, but we know it has and it probably will persist, if history holds any clues to our technological future. Probably Commissioner Ellsworth was really praising inventors, not predicting the end of their inventiveness.

So, what makes this quote so popular that it has been repeated over and over again for more than 163 years? Perhaps it's because we enjoy laughing at our neighbor's shortsightedness.

But, here's another possibility: Perhaps the quote is so popular because it reminds us all about the danger in making too confident a statement about what is going to be possible and not possible in the future. Perhaps our thoughts and energies should be on the possibilities of the human mind and spirit ... not its limitations!



The new wisdom: The only constant is change.