A Curmudgeon's Dos and Don'ts
Guest: Charles Murray
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Charles Murray is a fellow of the American Enterprise Institute and is the author, most recently, of The Curmudgeon's Guide to Getting Ahead: Dos and Don'ts of Right Behavior, Tough Thinking, Clear Writing, and Living a Good Life.

WOODS: This is a bit of a departure for you in terms of the types of books that you write, and so I am curious to know—I suppose I know it from reading the book, but for the sake of the audience—what is it that led you to take this path of writing a book like this?

MURRAY: Well, it all started as a lark, really. At AEI we have an intranet, which is available only to the staff, and some of my colleagues starting posting a weekly tip on English usage, which a whole of the young members of the staff needed, because their English leaves something to be desired. And I decided that what I would do is add on some of my pet peeves for how to get along in an office environment. For example, excise the word like from your spoken English. There's nothing that drives me crazy more than somebody who uses like as kind of verbal punctuation as they are going along. So for several weeks I had a weekly tip, and I called it *The Curmudgeon's Guide*, because these were very curmudgeonly. And then after a while, I got into more serious topics and was having a wonderful time when somebody said: make it into a book. So I did.

WOODS: A title like *The Curmudgeon's Guide to Getting Ahead* deserves a book, in the same way that a guest I recently had on who wrote a book on *The Simpsons and Economics* had a title *Homer Economicus*, well, I'm afraid you have to write a book when you have a title that good.

You start off talking about presenting yourself in the workplace—very important advice right now with the workplace being as competitive as it is, and with frankly with so many young people entering the workplace for the first time being completely clueless about this.

MURRAY: Yeah, kids don't come into the job market at 23, having started working at 8 delivering newspapers the way that—sorry to talk about the good old days—but that's the way it used to be.

WOODS: Oh, sure.

MURRAY: You were used to an office environment. You have a lot of 22, 23-year-olds who have never been in an office, and so you have to say to them, you know what? It's probably not a good idea to start calling the boss of the whole organization by his first name the first time you walk into an interview. It's probably not a good idea to show up with a visible tattoo or with lots of piercings through your eyebrows. Simple stuff like that.

WOODS: Now as I told you before I went on, there will be a lot of libertarians who will take offense at this, but the point of what you're saying is not to say you shouldn't have these things—although in my opinion, you probably shouldn't—but rather that if you want to get ahead, you don't gratuitously offend the sensibilities of the people who are going to be employing you. And chances are, these people don't want these features in an employee, and particularly, they don't want somebody who right away uses the first name. I am so glad that there's a book out there today that says we've gone a little bit overboard in the casual aspect of our lives in terms of the way we dress and the way address each other.

MURRAY: Yeah, Tom, and I also want to emphasize, though, that this is not advice to suck up. In fact, the very first tip in the entire book is don't suck up, because successful people who run a good office, they recognize it when you're sucking up to them. What I am saying is, don't do things that are automatically going to make them write you off as being hopeless. It may not be fair that a lot of curmudgeons like me look at a tattoo and the only thing we can think of is what that's going to look like when the person who has it turns 60. It may not be fair that we think that way. But we do, and so deal with it.

WOODS: I remember back when I was in academia, one of my deans was a fairly young black woman, and she had just had a girl, and she named her Michelle. And she said, now you notice I didn't go out of my way to give her an African name, to give her a highly unusual name, precisely because I want her to be successful. I want don't want her very name to come off as if she's belligerent and difficult. I want her to seem just like a kid. And that's not because it's wrong to name people whatever you want to name them. She's just thinking in terms of what's likely to work.

Now, in this first section my eye is immediately drawn to number 11: manners at the office, and in general. What do you recommend here?

MURRAY: Well, in terms of manners, the first thing that you want to do is be cheerful and show up on time and do some really basic stuff that a whole lot of your competitors in the job market aren't doing these days, which is to say that people say: how do I get noticed by the senior management? What kind of break do I need? What I think people don't realize is the degree to which simply having someone who shows up on time every day, and is cheerful, and upbeat, and works hard, all by itself puts you in a small very category of people.

WOODS: I would say that is probably about the best advice somebody can get starting out, because it is for some reason so unusual. I don't understand even when I am in a retail store when I know jobs are scarce why are so many of the employees are obviously extremely

unhappy to be there, in a foul mood. I would be as attentive to the customer as I possibly could in a market like this.

Before we go on to the next section, I can't help pointing out number four in your list because it just resonates with me. You and I have a lot of the same pet peeves. I can't stand phrases like "at the end of the day" or "going forward," or a particularly detailed or difficult one perhaps for some people to notice but the word "only" is very often misplaced in sentences. I notice that right away as an editor.

MURRAY: Yeah, as an editor, you will notice that. A lot of other people won't. But let me give you another example: "reaching out." Just think about how many times every day people talk about reaching out, but what they are saying is: I want to get in touch with somebody. I want to contact this person. There's nothing wrong with it the first time you hear it. The fifteenth time you hear it you say, look, reaching out means something like you have a crippled co-worker that needs your emotional support. Okay, that's reaching out. But just getting in touch with someone—be simple, be straightforward, don't use the jargon.

WOODS: Now, in your section on thinking and writing well, you're giving in some cases here some good advice for people starting off as writers. I've given some advice on that subject myself, but I'd like to hear what you say. You've obviously been an extremely successful writer, and I think people have a lot of misconceptions about what it takes to be a good writer, what their first steps ought to be, and so on.

MURRAY: Yeah, now mind you, everybody has a different style, so all I can do is to tell people how I do it. But one thing I think is pretty applicable, Tom, is your first draft is likely to be awful. My first drafts are awful. I would never show my first draft to anyone, because writing is a process whereby you discover what you're thinking, and in the course of doing that you are constantly rewriting. And you're not just rewriting to make it prettier or cleaner, although that's part of it. You're rewriting mainly because as you go through that process, you're getting better ideas. Your arguments are getting more nuanced. That's the way it happens, and just saying, oh, I am going to put it on paper, and people will be able to figure out what I mean even if it's not too elegant, they can still figure it out—that misses the whole point about why you are going to write it in the first place.

WOODS: I like your advice "don't wait for the muse" because I think even a seasoned writer sometimes feels that it would be beneath him to sit down and force the words to come out. We just have to sit until the inspiration comes. But maybe it won't.

MURRAY: You know what? If there's one thing that I think is true of just about every successful writer, whether it's fiction or non-fiction, is you sit down at a given time of the day and you stare at that computer screen or at the piece of paper, and you do what you can, even if you don't feel like it. Everybody who is successful that I know of does it that way. And the reason is, it's very seldom that you say, oh, I have this wonderful paragraph I want to write; let me rush to the computer and put it down. It happens because you have put yourself in the position where

that's the work you're going to do today. Now, mind you, Tom, sometimes I just really feel dried up. What you do then is you go back to the draft of a chapter, which already is in pretty good shape, and you edit it. And you make yourself edit it, and as you're doing that, a lot of times you start to come up with new ideas again.

WOODS: What do you think the key step is between going from being a pedestrian writer to being an elegant writer? How do you go from just a workaday writer to being somebody who writes these beautiful, unforgettable one-liners? And when I say one-liners, I don't mean that in a disparaging way, but there are writers out there who write these beautiful maxims as if they are just nothing. They just flow from their pens.

MURRAY: Well, anytime you see a chunk of prose that looks effortless, chances are, well, it's like the duck paddling serenely across the pond, paddling furiously underneath the surface. One of the things that I take most pride in is that people will sometimes say of my prose—it looks so effortless. It's so simple. To achieve that level of simplicity requires an incredible number of rewrites. And the thing you have to be sensitive to is the nuances of the language. You have to love the language. You have to be interested in the distinction between the meaning of continual and continuous. It's that kind of sensitivity to the capabilities of the English language that enables you to go through and say there's a better way of saying this. And also, as I said before, once there's a better way of saying it, you realize your meaning has changed as well. Now, I think that's a personality factor. If you don't love the language, if you don't get pleasure in having said something well, maybe writing isn't what you ought to make your profession. You still have to write memos, however. You still have to write emails. You still have to communicate professionally, so you can at least become workmanlike.

WOODS: This week I've been looking at some of my essays from five to ten years ago, so they are not fresh in mind anymore, and when I stumble upon an especially elegant sentence, I can't tell you how much pleasure it gives me. Because when I'm writing those sentences, and I know I've nailed it, and I've used the precisely correct words and the cadence and the rhythm are just right, and it's just the right length, you know that you've done it. I think I was thinking of Thomas Sowell when I was talking about somebody who can just spit out these universal maxims as if they are just effortless. Sowell has a beautiful prose style, and oftentimes when I recommend writers to people, I say if you want to be a better writer, you should be reading people at the caliber of a Thomas Sowell. Because then, when you look at your own writing, you will say, Sowell would never, I mean, over his dead body would he write a pedestrian sentence like this. Let me work at it until it has a little bit more presence, let's say.

MURRAY: Yeah, and I think there's something to be said at the beginning of your career for reading someone whose prose you really admire. I had a mentor when I was in my 20s who wrote quite beautiful prose, and I just tried to imitate the way he wrote. Now, I'm sure that my imitations weren't that great the first year or two, but in the process of imitating somebody who does something very, very well, you get better yourself, and that's as true of writing as it is of carpentry or any other craft.

WOODS: I remember in high school I felt entitled because I was the smart kid. I was going to get A's on everything, but junior-year English I was getting C's on my papers. The teacher said, the problem with your papers is you think that a lot of flowery language makes you a good writer. It actually makes you an intolerable writer. And now I look back, and I am just mortified by what I used to write as a young man. She was absolutely right. She mercilessly cut out every unnecessary word. And that is the beginning. That is the rock-bottom beginning, absolutely necessary stage that you have to reach before you can progress, is to get the wordiness under control.

MURRAY: Right, and the only way you get that is having a mentor, whether it's a professor in college, or whether it's somebody on the job who is merciless as they mark up your papers, and they pick on every tiny thing. Until you yourself are trying to pick on every tiny thing in your own prose, you're never going to be as good as you want to be, and so intense criticism from outside at the beginning and then internalize it subsequently.

WOODS: Of course, that also means that it's important for you to have an open mind and not be convinced that you already are William Shakespeare. You have to know that you have a long way to go. That is another key step. Instead of thinking that everything you've written is already pure genius and elegance, it's not, and it won't be, and it's normal that it's not when you're first starting out.

MURRAY: There's sort of an ideal combination, which actually I am pretty good at. I am pretty good at being incredibly self-critical during the writing phase of it and the rewrites. I also love to reread my own stuff when it's finished. So I get enormous pleasure out of rereading things, including years later, but I wait to take that satisfaction until after the endless rounds of self-criticism.

WOODS: In your section on the formation of who you are, your first item is just two words—leave home. Elaborate on that?

MURRAY: Yeah, 23 years old, 22 years old, get the hell out of Dodge. You've been accustomed all your life to being supported by your parents. These days college is not a bridge to adulthood. It mostly prolonging adolescence to grow up. And so you've got to get out of the house. Don't tell me that you can't afford any place to live. Yeah, you can. You can get together with a couple of friends, share the rent. It just won't be as good as your parents' place probably. But that's not the point. You've got to get out.

WOODS: Then you say, "Get real jobs." Now, when you say "real jobs" are you disparaging somebody who gets the simple, entry-level job or the McDonald's job just to prove that he can work and be reliable? What do you mean by a real job?

MURRAY: I mean cut out the internship stuff. This business of going off to get internships at the American Enterprise Institute, or Brookings, or the Museum of Modern Art. I know it's very fashionable. You're supposed to be learning all this networking and stuff. You're a lot better off

during the summer in college going out to Glacier National Park and waiting tables for a couple of reasons. One is that being an intern is not going to teach you how to deal with a workplace. You can't get fired if you're an intern, and you're getting paid nothing, and people don't care whether you perform or not. If you're working at a job, including waiting tables at Glacier National Park, there is somebody who is judging your performance. You are having to perform, fill a job. That's the valuable part of having a job before you get into the adult workplace. Once you are in the adult workplace, yeah, I suppose going out and working for Habitat for Humanity or some other non-profit, it's not a bad thing to do, but I think that an awful lot of people in their 20s would be better served by working for an organization that is producing a product or a service that somebody wants to buy, that's subject to the discipline of the marketplace as opposed to a more ephemeral kind of "let's go out and help the people" kind of thing.

WOODS: As you wrap up *The Curmudgeon's Guide to Getting Ahead*, you conclude with a section on the pursuit of happiness, appropriately enough. So I'm just going to throw this over to you. Of course, people should read the book, but if you had to encapsulate it, you had to just give a few bullet points that you think are the most important—that people are most likely to overlook, by the way—what would they be?

MURRAY: Well, the first thing they ought to do, Tom, is go read a book I wrote called *In Pursuit*, which talks about the pursuit of happiness in great detail. But short of doing that, there are a couple of things that I want them to understand. The first is, forget the money. Forget the celebrity. Yeah, I know. I wanted to be rich and famous when I was 23, 25, 27. I understand that. There are two things you need to accomplish, and everything else is rounding error. One is, find your soul mate. Find that person [who is] your best friend, your closest confidant, the person you love to sit quietly with as well as have fun with. You do that, that's part of it. The other part is find your vocation. Find something that you love to do, and the money will take care of itself, the celebrity will take care of itself. Mainly, you'll stop worrying about that after a while, and those are the principal sources of living a satisfying life. There are two other domains I talk about, and that is the domain of faith and the domain of community. All four of those domains—family, faith, community and vocation—are sources of deep satisfaction. You don't have to tap into all four of them. There are happy atheists. There are happy single people. But you'd better tap into a couple of those if you're going to reach the age of 70 satisfied with who you've been and what you've done.

WOODS: Well, I suppose after that answer, this consideration is a bit mundane, but I think there is a concern out there among young people that this is not the economy that you and I faced years ago, that I faced in the 1990s, for example, where it seemed that all you had to do was go to college, follow the traditional path, and you were practically guaranteed a pretty good job—even with a sociology degree you could get a good job, and you'd have a satisfying life. And today it seems that no matter what your degree is in—I suppose engineering might be an exception—it's very, very difficult out there. There are no guarantees. And people may say, this sounds like very good advice, and it might have helped me get ahead 20 years ago, but

today everything is so uncertain in the economy, it's so hard to get a stable career that I'm not sure this is quite enough.

MURRAY: Well, you know, in a way I think it's a lot more important to think in terms of vocation now than it was in the 1990s. You just said it. Yeah, you could major in sociology, and you could still get a good job just because you were smart and so the employer figured they could train you to do something. If you start out by saying, look, what are the kinds of things that give me satisfaction? And you start to focus in on a particular skill that you'd like to be good at. I got news for you. If it's a skill, there's probably a job market for that, and what you have a glut of on the market now are "smart" new college graduates who don't know a damn thing that's useful, and what is really rare is a college graduate who walks into the interview with something that he or she is good at. So maybe it's time to not major in sociology anymore.