I was told—by questionable authority—that Adam told Eve, upon their eviction from the Garden of Eden, "This, my dear, will be a year of transition." Transition times have come as well to Florissant Valley. This year is the college's silver anniversary; we have a new president and a relatively new chancellor. This year brings our first visit from the North Central Association since 1978; it's our first year with a neighboring community college in St. Charles County; and it will be the first time our state government mandates systematic evaluation procedures to assess the learning of undergraduates. Because of all this newness, we find ourselves in an academic Wonderland. And we find as David Underwood would put it—that we'll all be going through the customary sniffing period.

Last May, in looking over the news release about Michael Murphy and listening to Chancellor Crawford's remarks about him, what caught my eye was not President Murphy's educational management degree from Harvard nor his doctorate in college administration from Indiana University but that he likes white water rafting, received his bachelor's degree in physical education, and has the name of a professional golfer. What does this mean for Florissant Valley? I don't know. But I've yet to know a P.E. person who can sit still for long. They all have hyperkinesia or something. Peters and Austin, in their popular text In Search of Excellence, applaud the walking administrator. What breed of administrator do we have in Michael Murphy? He doesn't walk; he rafts!

David Underwood was a walking administrator. Aristotle was also. Aristotle was called the peripatetic teacher—the name peripatetic, given to his philosophy simply means "strolling." He did much of his teaching walking around the grounds of his college. This implies that Aristotle was careful to keep his college—informal. Underwood liked informality. He regretted our getting too big—looking back to the Golden Days of the temporary shacks on the hill—when the college was small and everyone was of necessity more informal. Informality keeps feet on the ground and minds out of ivory towers. It provides an environment in which good things can happen and common sense thrives.

I met Underwood one day—strolling in the quadrangle. As many of you know, he was an ex-farmboy. Coincidentally, my in-laws work a dairy farm in northern Ohio near Lake Erie. After visiting them and returning to the campus on I-70, I sometimes suffered from urban shock, which made me as hyperkinetic as a P.E. major.

This particular summer I wanted to resign, move to Ohio, and be a gentleman farmer on five-acres. I expected Dave Underwood (the ex-farmboy) to agree. He disagreed. A few weeks later he sent me a poem by the Hoosier poet James Whitcomb Riley which he dug out of his trunk
of keepsakes in his basement. On the note that accompanied it, he
wrote, "In the main /this poem/ has some authentic qualities which are
easily recognized by those of us who grew up with backhouses (or
outhouses, as they were called in my territory." Implied in his
message was that I read this poem whenever I got lonesome for farm
life. But the poem was also a reminder that city life has some
valuable creature comforts. The poem was called "The Passing of the
Backhouse" and was first published in the Hobo News around 1945.

It began

When memory keeps me company and moves to smiles or tears,
A weather-beaten object looms through the mist of years
Behind the house and barn it stood, a half-mile or more,
And hurrying feet a path had made straight to its swinging door.

So he had sent me a poem about a Backhouse. As I mentioned, he loved
informality and I suspect that the Backhouse may have something to do
with his love of walking.

The verse continued

All day fat spiders spun their webs to catch the buzzing flies,
That flitted to and from the house, where Ma was baking pies,
And once a swarm of hornets bold, had built a palace there,
And stung my unsuspecting Aunt—I must not tell you where

But I still marvel at the craft that cut those holes so true,
The baby hole, and the slender hole that fitted sister Sue.
That dear old country landmark; I tramped around a bit,
And in the lap of luxury my lot has been to sit;

But ere I die I'll eat the fruit of trees I robbed of yore.
Then seek the shanty where my name is carved upon the door....

I remember Dave Underwood as the walking, peripetetic administrator. I
remember him as the ex-farmboy who sent me "The Passing of the
Backhouse" when our family was thinking of moving to a farm community.
Above all, I remember his common sense or horse sense. It's
especially to him that I dedicate my topic today—the common sense of
excellence.

I recently read Peters and Waterman's In Search of Excellence and
the sequel by Peters and Austin Passion for Excellence. Now, one
of the key qualities of excellent organizations is common sense. In
Peters and Austin's words, "Common sense has not been practiced much
lately in most of today's businesses. We suspect the same is true in
schools...." As a writer of our North Central Self-Study, I found it
gratifying, but not surprising, that we possess, despite past adverse
conditions, most of the same key qualities that these writers
identified in excellent organizations.

What is common sense? Common sense is kind of figurative middle term—to the extreme right of it is excellence and to its immediate left is nonsense, with its sometimes tragic or comic results. Some people never possess common sense. I'm told that St. Peter gave an English teacher three questions to answer before she could pass through the pearly gates to her heavenly reward.

The first question St. Peter asked her was, "How many days of the week start with 'T'?" She responded, after a short pause, "That's easy. Today and Tomorrow!" Puzzled, St. Peter remarked, "That's not quite what I was expecting but in a way you're right. Let's try the second question.

How many seconds are there in a year?" To this she exclaimed, "Now that's a tough one. I'll have to think about this one." Several minutes later she blurted out, "I've got it! It's twelve!" St. Peter scratched his head and asked, "How—for heaven's sake—did you get twelve?" She answered, "Well, there's January second, February second, March second....

St. Peter in desperation gave her the third question, "How many d's are there in "Rudolf the Red-nosed Reindeer?" Now she thought long and hard about this one before she answered with glee, "I've got it! Three hundred and fifty-four!" St. Peter by now was perplexed and asked, "What do you mean 354?" To which she answered in a rhythmic cadence, while counting out on her fingers "Dee-dee-dee-dee-dee, Dee, Dee...."

If there are any male cynics here, I guess they might impulsively conclude that women English teachers have little common sense. But the more spiritual-minded among us might conclude that the real point of this mental joke is that human beings need some common sense to pass through the pearly gates. Like this fictional English teacher, people without common sense are intensely literal, having not the faintest awareness of what they are doing.

C.S. Lewis comments that the old psychologists gave man five "outward" and five inward senses. The five outward are what we call the five senses today. The five inward were originally memory, estimation, fancy, imagination, and common sense. By the time of Robert Burton, seventeenth century English clergyman and author, the list had been reduced to three, with common sense still one of them and Burton's account of it was that "common sense was 'the judge or moderator of all the rest.'" Almost two centuries later, Noah Webster defined common sense as "good sound ordinary sense...free from emotional bias or intellectual subtlety...horse sense." As the common saying goes, "Experience is the best teacher." But while some people carefully learn from the mistakes of others, it seems clear others act as if
they can live long enough to make all the mistakes themselves.

To use common sense seems simple. Why then are there so many examples of its not being used? Let me start with two nit-picking situations in my field—English—which unfortunately offers a wealth of examples. For more outrageous examples, I'll pick on the worlds of business, government, and education.

As an English teacher, I suppose I'm what William Safire, author and New York Times journalist, considers a Keeper of the Flame: I'm supposed to notice the niceties, the precision, the impeccable sense of grammar. And grammar is a subject which people hold very dogmatic opinions and defend with considerable emotion.

If I answer my office phone and someone on the other end asks me, should I capitalize the word Manager when referring to my boss?" How do I respond?" If I'm a purist, I'll answer: "Capitalize only proper nouns, not manager." But if I choose to use some horse sense, I'll answer, "If your boss wants it capitalized, capitalize it." Why worry about correctness? Bergen Evans, former English professor at Northwestern and a usage expert, says that we don't hold up a mouse and ask if it's a correct mouse. Besides as Don Bush, former Senior Technical Editor at MDG pragmatically observes, "Few managers are going to be satisfied with a lower case title...They will probably demand capital treatment."

Now a related problem surfaced when writing a draft of the North Central Self-Study Report. Personal names were left out of the body of this report but not titles. Some departmental self-studies were capitalizing the title "Acting President" when referring to John Robertson and the title "Chancellor" when referring to Michael Crawford.

Curiously, these same reports were decapitalizing the title "chancellor" when referring to our past chancellor and the title "president" when referring to our past president. Should an editor capitalize all references to president and chancellor? What's the excellent choice to make here? Well, I saw clearly only four options. Option 1: I could apply the purist rule about titles like "president" and "chancellor" and capitalize none of them. Option 2: I could use the principle of consistency and capitalize all references no matter who they referred to. Option 3: I could pull out all the stops and capitalize my favorite two. Now Option 4 was—I could do all of the above. So I chose it—until a math teacher, two secretaries, and an English teacher appealed to my common sense and convinced me to be a purist and capitalize none of them. Since I've been told by people with common sense that the North Central Self-Study is approaching excellence—thanks to the dozens who have worked on it—I suppose the capitalization is too.
Now people with horse sense know when to quit an endeavor or else they may eat crow. For example, when I first saw the abbreviations EMT in the campus newsletter this past year I thought they referred to "end of magnetic tape" or "emergency medical technician" or even "electrical metallic tubing"—all legitimate translations in the dictionary. Carol Edwards whispered to me during a meeting one day "it's executive management team," "Oh," choked I. But I secretly wondered what was wrong with "Chancellor's Council." Now, I'm not displaying much common sense in bringing this matter up—but I know when to eat crow and when to quit. Knowing when to quit is a mark of common sense.

Looking beyond the use of common sense in these monumental matters of capitalization and abbreviations, what is the common sense of excellence in business? Preliminary research on evaluating excellence among Fortune 500 executives published this summer by researchers at Yale and Florida State indicates that when it comes to business savvy, street smart managers appear to outshine those who were academic superstars. Managers with high IQ's "tend to rely too heavily on their extraordinary analytical powers, thereby neglecting important advice from others." For them it's as if the seeking of advice is an admission of incompetence.

Now street smart managers are common sense people. And so are street smart teachers. What makes a person street smart? Waterman, Peters, and Austin say, "Staying in touch." Instead of taking an apple a day, they take a daily dose of reality, knowing that it might not always be ego-enhancing. They deliberately seek out criticism. In Peters and Austin's words, "Being visible takes guts." And the principal means of staying in touch according to them is MBWA (Management by Walking Around). Sound like the walking Underwood or the peripatetic Aristotle? MBWA is the substance of common sense. No surprises here. The authors state that those with the passion for excellence

Maintain face-to-face contact with other people, namely, customers and colleagues. They won't retreat behind office doors, committees, memos or layers of staff knowing this is the fair bargain they make for extraordinary results.

Peters and Austin cite one manager as saying that MBWA in his company means bathroom breaks at most. Thankfully, SLCC, in the 1985-86 academic year, liberalized office hour requirements, giving faculty more opportunities to MBWA on our campus. One of the pearls developed this year on our campus is Time Out, Inc. which broadcasts the achievements of staff members and more importantly provides an informal atmosphere for staff from all departments to keep in touch.

This issue of excellence has surfaced even in children's literature.
In a pro-business children's book called *Ernie Discovers Excellence* (1984), Ernie has a nightmare that he'll be another cruel businessman like Scrooge when he grows up. (Now I can think of a lot more interesting dreams that little boys might have.) But he wakes from his dream with heart pounding and sweat streaming down his forehead and says to his father at the breakfast table:

I don't want to grow up, Father. I don't want to go into business and make money. Last night I dreamed I did, and it was really terrible....

Ernie's father responds,

You had a bad dream....Where I work, it's a team effort. Each of us makes his special contribution, large or small, and we try to win....We make money, lots of it....but excellence in business is more than making money. It's thinking big, daring to be creative, taking chances with exciting new products, and guessing correctly what the future holds.... Always make excellence your goal, Ernie.

Now this may sound too preachy for most of us--something that should be catalogued in the library under "Capitalism for Kids." But the parallels between *Ernie Discovers Excellence* and *Passion for Excellence* and *In Search of Excellence* are clear. We may not like common sense costed in business terms, but excellent organizations tolerate risk-taking and possible failure. They don't shoot down the pioneers who fail. Excellent organizations have no rigidly followed chain of command--work undertaken is a team effort. No one can complain of NETMA--"Nobody Ever Tells Me Anything." The language in excellent organizations is team-oriented--you're an "associate" a "crew member"--and the assumption is that no one knows the job better than those close to it.

Now I ask--what could be more common sensical than saying: we have to talk to each other and share ideas to be excellent. We have to encourage risk-taking and innovation to be excellent. And we mustn't "departmentalize" information like Admiral Poindexter if we want to remain excellent.

What is the common sense of excellence in government? The Pulitzer Prize winning historian Barbara Tuchman in a major text *The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam* tells how the lack of common sense contributes to failure. She refers to this lack as "wooden-headedness," the tendency to assess a situation in terms of preconceived notions while ignoring or rejecting any contrary signs, the tendency to continue to believe in the essential excellence of a policy despite what experience teaches. She states that learning from experience is a faculty almost never practiced. She asks
Why did the Trojan rulers drag that suspicious-looking wooden horse inside their walls despite every reason to suspect a Greek trick? Why did successive representatives of George III insist on forcing the American colonies rather than pacifying them? Why did Charles XII and Napoleon and successively Hitler invade Russia despite the disaster incurred by each predecessor? Why did Lyndon Johnson insist "I am not going to be the President who saw Southeast Asia go the way that China went?"

She concludes in her epilogue that

Practitioners of government continue down the wrong road as if they had no choice....There is always freedom of choice to change or desist from a counter-productive course....Yet to recognize error, to cut losses, to alter course is the most repugnant option /to them/.

Tuchman's book was published two years before the disaster on January 28, 1986, which lasted only 73 seconds and stunned the American public, government officials, and the nation's school children. It was the fiery explosion of the Challenger space shuttle. Now the technical cause of the explosion was pinpointed in the Report of the Presidential Commission (the Rogers Commission). They concluded

The specific failure was the destruction of the seals that are intended to prevent hot gases from leaking through the joint during propellant burn of the rocket motor.

However, the Rogers Commission identified as contributing cause of the disaster the flawed decision-making process: "Testimony reveals failures in communication that resulted in a decision to launch the Challenger based on incomplete and sometimes misleading information." Ignored were memos written months before the disaster. Engineer Roger Boisjoly of Thorton Thiokol wrote that if the seals are not improved, "The result would be a catastrophe of the highest order." Another engineer wrote, "The O-ring seal problem has lately become acute."

The night before the launch the engineers, worried by anticipated cold temperatures on the launch site which could only aggravate the seal problem, recommended not to launch the Challenger. In the final decision, the engineers were not polled and a management decision was made to launch. The advice of those closest to the situation was ignored, common sense considerations for safety first were overlooked, and the flow of negative information from lower levels to higher was aborted because of social, media, and commercial pressures: social
pressure from the thousands of school kids watching for the first school lesson from space; media pressure for fear that if they didn't launch, the press could unfavorably report more delays; commercial pressure from the Europeans who were putting objects in space at lower cost. Ironically, one professor of crisis communications observed that the Challenger disaster occurred because NASA officials had ignored what made their successes in the past—their common sense goal to accomplish every mission safely.

What is the common sense of excellence in government? Too often, Barbara Tuchman tells us, it is that we don't learn from our experience.

A timely subject for us today is what is excellence in education? The subject of excellence in education is inappropriately high on the national agenda. The 1986-87 Books in Print listed 32 titles dealing with excellence—19 of these on educational excellence. There were some 30 major reform reports since the 1983 publication of A Nation at Risk. These reports are in solid agreement that education in public schools, in colleges, and in universities falls short of providing students with what has become known as "excellence in education."

That education in the U.S. needs improvement is not a new idea. At the 1916 National Council of Teachers of English Convention in New York, a speaker complained "over 80 percent of our adult population read little else than billboards and the newspapers, and they do most unintelligently." When the U.S. last focused on the need for excellence in education during the post-Sputnik era of the late 1950s, the emphasis was on urging the best and the brightest students to meet the challenge posed by Soviet technology. Today's reformers, by contrast, are urging that all students be exposed to the best writing and thinking and that they be held to higher standards of performance.

Most of the leaders of the current reform movement by the way are representatives of major corporations and lawmakers. So we hear and read over and over what Governor Ashcroft comments... Dick Gebhart says... Secretary of Education William Bennett says... Or what Robert Anderson of Rockwell International says or John Burlingame of GE or multi-millionaire H. Ross Perrot of Texas says. With contributors such as this, one report America's Competitive Challenge unsurprisingly states that the function of the educational system is service to the economy. Here excellence is defined in terms of economic success.

Often, instead of cooperative ventures, assumptions are again made that people farthest away to the situation know the job better than those close to it. One benchmark for community colleges was suggested this summer by a member of the Missouri Coordinating Board of Higher
Education. Proposed was that we assess achievement for entering and exiting students with a single outcome measure—the ACT test scores. This efficient model was proposed even though the educational input for us (the students) is not controlled because of our open-door philosophy.

Given the heterogeneity of our student body, establishing some kind of state average on the ACT for success or excellence defies common sense. Besides, achievement tests cannot cover important educational concerns such as creativity, motivation, or a student's ethical sense. And I might add, achievement tests cannot evaluate their common sense. And these matters are important. Why, for example, did St. Louis-based General Dynamics, with its previous soak-the-Pentagon philosophy, distribute a 20-page ethics booklet to all 103,000 employees? I'm not interested in the ACT scores of Jim Bakker, Oral Roberts, Gary Hart, Ollie North, and Admiral Poindexter. But I would like to see their scores on a common sense test. One Fortune Magazine writer observed about the General Dynamics ethics booklet, "The rules borrow from the Ten Commandments, the Boy Scout oath, and common sense."

Outside the school doors, we can sometimes hear in this reform movement the deadly words of teacher Thomas Gradgrind in Charles Dickens' Hard Times,"Teach these boys and girls nothing but facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else."

One educator sarcastically observes of these reforms that the gray-flanneled managers of the U.S., the fellows who gave us Wonder Bread, the Pinto, acid rain, the Kansas City Hyatt, and $495 hammers are preparing to puff and blow the schoolhouses excellent.

Sometimes, educators can only hope we don't die from all the improvements.

Now, I'm not suggesting we aren't accountable for our teaching nor that we shouldn't have academic standards. But the reform movement will bring more harm than good if educators aren't actively involved in these standards. Common sense tells us not to ride out complacently the wave of these reforms and let others define our accountability. We may be in an academic Wonderland but that doesn't mean we should imitate Alice's behavior when she questions the Cheshire cat:

  Would you tell me, please, said Alice, which way I ought to walk from here?
  That depends a good deal on where you want to get to, said the Cat.
  I don't much care where..., said Alice.
  Then it doesn't matter which way you walk, said the Cat.
  ...so long as I get somewhere, Alice added as an
explanation.
Oh, you're sure to do that, said the Cat, if you only walk long enough.

Unlike thoughtless Alice, I hope the way we walk from here—in this year with a new president, with the upcoming North Central Visitation, with state-wide undergraduate student assessment a hot agenda item—is the way we choose to walk. And I hope along that way we hang onto the lessons of an informed common sense:
that we keep dialogue alive on our campus
that we stay in touch, especially through MBWA
that we assume those closest to the situation often know it better
that we show the good sense to know when to quit a poor policy
that we encourage our pioneers to take more risks
and that we remember the way to excellence begins with common sense.