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PERSPECTIVE

The beginning of the year positive alternatives

January 1, 2006

I'm a big believer in the value of demonstrating good behavior. That's why I'm sticking with my annual beginning-of-the-year tradition of offering positive alternatives while casting stones at some of the past year's most notable ethical lapses.

Technology can be transformational if you put your money in the right place.

In October, millionaire businessman Greg Olsen touched down after a rocket trip to the International Space Station, for which he paid \$27 million. That's one small step for, well, for Olsen.

Compare him to the wealthy people who funded a recent effort by the folks at the Media Lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge. Supported by millions of dollars donated by Rupert Murdoch, the founders of Google and others, they have developed a prototype for a \$100 laptop computer that would give low-income people around the world access to technology and Internet resources. It even features a hand crank so it can be used in villages without electricity!

It's still unclear which government officials leaked the undercover identity of former CIA agent Valerie Plame to the press, putting her and her colleagues at risk. No one has stepped up publicly to take responsibility or to disclose who leaked the information.

Compare that to Sen. John McCain, R.-Ariz., who, in spite of the fact that his party's president strongly opposed him, stood firm in calling for a law that would ban cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment of prisoners held by Americans. After the Republican-dominated House of Representatives endorsed McCain's efforts, the president backed down.

After the residents of Dover, Pa., ousted all of their school board members for having voted in favor of teaching "intelligent design" in the Dover schools, former presidential candidate and television evangelist Pat Robertson told his television audience: "If there is a disaster in your area, don't turn to God — you just rejected him from your city."

Compare this striking example of partisan rancor with that of two leaders whose initial relationship was built on differences of opinion. Together former Presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton spearheaded efforts to raise more than \$10 million for tsunami relief in December 2004 and more than \$100 million for the Bush-Clinton Katrina Fund established in September.

Unlike Robertson, they offer a prime example of different-thinking people coming together for a greater cause.

On the same note, there's buzz now about "compassion fatigue," supposedly felt by people turned off after too many calls for help on behalf of victims of tsunamis, hurricanes, earthquakes and the like.

I don't buy it. Sure, there may be a finite number of dollars that an individual can or will give, but that's only one measure of compassion.

Architecture for Humanity is a nonprofit set up to enable architects and designers to volunteer to assist areas in need. Like many other such organizations, it is helping to rebuild housing, community centers and schools in, among other places, Sri Lanka and India, both of which were hit hard by the Asian tsunami. Hundreds of similar organizations address other needs, and none show obvious signs of giving in to fatigue.

My readers were divided on whether Wal-Mart was out of line to try to "design all jobs to include some physical activity" in a veiled effort to contain health-insurance



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costs that might be driven up by having sick, older or overweight employees on the payroll.

"If employers want to hire 'healthy' employees in order to keep their costs down, they should be able to do so, as long as it does not discriminate," writes Tom Buick of Mission Viejo, Calif.

Emmanuel Tchividjian of New York disagrees, however.

"Wal-Mart's proposed cost-cutting strategy seemed to be a ruse to avoid respecting" laws against discrimination in hiring, he writes, adding that he believes that the move definitely breaks at least the spirit of the law.

"I think Wal-Mart got it wrong," writes Colin Ong of Singapore. "They should accept people of various proportion and disabilities. This effort will give these new employees a chance to give back to society and maybe encourage them to be Wal-Mart shoppers too!"

Do you have ethical questions that you need answered? Send them to rightthing@nytimes.com or to "The Right Thing," New York Times Syndicate, 609 Greenwich St., 6th floor, New York, NY 10014-3610.



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