

# modern muse

## REALITY, WHIMSY AND THE AGE OF HYPE

By Layne Longfellow

I'm writing this by the ocean on a sunny day, actually on a working vacation. So I'm feeling less polemical, more whimsical, less constrained to develop a tightly reasoned narrative, more accepting of the titillation of mind-play and stream-of-consciousness. That's my way of explanation, maybe apologizing, up front; of saying, "I hope this will be as good for you as it is for me."

When I was a boy, we cracked each other up with non-sequiturs like, "My brother was an only child," or "What's the difference between a duck?" These were guy lines, and usually yielded condescending grimaces from girls. Probably the most frequently used was, "Sure, I know him. We went to different schools together." In this one, as it turns out, we were prescient. We anticipated by many years the adoption of this technique as a standard marketing tool for professional speakers.

This new promotional version goes, "...has shared the platform with...!" This phrase will always be found in materials describing someone whose identity is at best vaguely known to you, and whose expertise and credibility are only established by association with someone else, as in, "Jessica has shared the platform with Dr. Stephen Hawking, Reverend Billy Graham, and General Norman Schwarzkopf." or "Kevin has shared the platform with Mother Theresa, Ms. Billie Jean King, and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher." You get the idea.

The converse never occurs. Notice of the appearance of a well-known presenter is never accompanied by a list of lesser lights who happened to appear on an undercard, as in, "Lisa Marie and Michael have shared the platform with Joe-Bob and Mary."

Well, I have "shared the platform" with Walter Cronkite, Charles Kuralt, "Tip" O'Neill, Ellen Goodman, Mark Russell and Dear Abby. Have I met any of them? No. Have any of them heard me speak? No. Did I work with any of them to pool our ideas, stimulate each other's thinking, and broaden our mutual con-

tribution to our audiences? No. These are the 90's, and the era of Doublespeak Hype has arrived.

"Shared the platform with..." means "Was listed in the same convention program as..." or "Spoke to 25 people in a discussion session on Wednesday afternoon following the famous person's keynote address to 2500 people on Monday morning."

So when Dear Abby and I "shared the platform," many years ago at the start of my speaking career, I sat at a luncheon table with seven others in a sea of tables and was green with envy. I envied her not because she had a larger audience, or held them rapt, or had them convulsed in laughter when they weren't dabbling at heartfelt tears, or because she received a standing ovation. I envied her because of her wealth of material and the ease of her preparation—all she did was read letters she had received over the years. It was "The Best Of 30 Years of Dear Abby," which is to say the best of American concerns, because she read not her replies but the entreaties themselves.

Here's the only one I remember (I am not making this up): "Dear Abby, My husband burns the hairs out of his nose with a lighted match, and he thinks I'm weird because I voted Republican. What would you do?" The audience and I spent the next several minutes in hysterical realization of the incendiary nature of political differences. I was thinking, "When I first heard John Prine's song, 'Signed, Dear Abby,' I didn't yet know that reality is more whimsical than fiction."

I have, from that day forward, longed to find myself in a position in which I could simply present some of my favorite lines from other people. Herewith, then, my own "Best of Whimsical Reality."

"No matter where you go, here you are."

—Buckaroo Banzai

"Reality is for people who can't handle drugs."

—the 60's.

"Reality is frequently inaccurate."

—Douglas Adams

"Too many people use reality as a crutch."

—Dr. Joe Schaffer

That last is, for my money, one of the wisest funny lines ever delivered. It should find its way onto bumper stickers everywhere. It calls attention to the loss of the sacred, the evanescent, the invisible, the magical, the metaphysical—all sacrificed to the demands of the mundane, the pedestrian, the ordinary. The psychological term is "consensual validity," or "consensual reality," which translates as "the lowest common denominator," or "that which is so accessible, so easy to bring into awareness, so simple, that we can all experience it, agree on it, understand it, and perceive it in the same way."

Shared reality is a good thing—affirming and relaxing and fun. It's what defines in-jokes, melds friends and identifies colleagues. That's on the micro-level. On the macro-level, shared reality defines the culture within which we live, shapes its direction, determines our attitudes toward ourselves and toward life. Unfortunately, we currently take the lazy man's path to consensus—the lowest common denominator.

But there is a longing now, a palpable one, for the great teacher, the great writer, the great orator, the great statesman to draw aside that thinnest of veils that separates us from a deeper sensibility. We long to be shown the next higher, or expanded understanding of the way things are and could be. There, again, we could regroup into the comfort of consensus and catch our breath for the next leg of the ascent to the higher reaches of human nature and of civilization.

Well, enough whimsy for one day. If only I could stop my brain from singing to the swaying banana palms above, "Yes, we have no consensus. We have no consensus today!"

Signed, Dear Abby. ■