

THOUGHTS ON TEACHING

On Truthiness, Wiki-ality, and Driving on a Treadmill

BY BOBBY ANN STARNES

THE DRIVE between Lame Deer and Havre is a long one. Montana is a big state. Lame Deer is the largest city on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation and home to its government. I'd come to the reservation for a couple of meetings that morning and had to be in Havre, more than 400 miles north, later the same day. What's more, I'd just flown from Kentucky to Montana the day before and was suffering a serious case of jet lag. Pulling away from Chief Dull Knife College, I knew it was going to be a long, hard day. The trick would be to keep my mind busy, I thought. At first, that was easy.

The drive west from Lame Deer toward the Little Big Horn Battlefield and the Crow Reservation is a beautiful one. As I drove through the green rolling hills, I imagined Custer and his men riding foolishly into the history books, Sitting Bull and his men shaking their heads in disbelief at the great military "genius," and the Crow scouts begging Custer to rethink his plan of action. Yet onward he went, too few men in an ill-advised action against an underestimated enemy. It felt eerily familiar.

After about 45 miles, a sign welcomed me to the Crow Reservation. Soon after, I drove past the entrance to the Little Big Horn Battlefield National Park. Stopping to fill my car with gas before I began the hard drive north, I noted that people were still winding down from Crow Fair, which had ended the day before. This annual event brings more than 80,000 folks to the Crow Agency for five days of celebration, camping in

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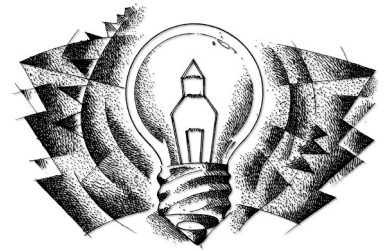
tipis, parades, rodeo, and powwow.

With a super-gigantic black coffee and a 16-ounce can of Wired nestled snugly into the cup holder at my side and a fresh bottle of NoDoz on the dashboard, I headed north. Interrupted only briefly by Billings and a left turn in Round Up, the road seldom seems to veer more than a couple of feet to the right or left. While it is beautiful country, you've pretty much seen all there is to see within the first dozen miles north of the Billings city limits. The road just goes on and on, with the only break in the monotony in the form of an occasional car speeding past. There is just so much my mind can do to create interesting thoughts about wheat fields and cows, and the coffee, Wired, and NoDoz weren't doing the trick. I decided to give the radio a try.

Out there in the middle of nowhere, it picked up only one station, and, just my luck, it couldn't be NPR, an oldies station, rap, country, or even a greatest-hits-of-polka station. No. It was talk radio. And not just any talk radio. It was Rush Limbaugh. Soon Rush began to explain that minimum-wage workers are just uninspired and lazy — or they are high school students trying to earn a little spending money. "Hey, even in the throes of boredom, I have standards," I thought, as I turned the radio off.

As I drove on, I began to wonder whether the car was really moving. The speedometer read 75 mph. I was pretty sure the wheels were turning, and I could see that the gas gauge was slowly moving downward, so I seemed to be using fuel. But in front of me, behind me, and as far as I could see out both side windows, nothing changed — just endless golden fields of wheat. Maybe it was a hallucination from an overdose of caffeine, but I began to wonder if I was driving on a treadmill.

Although I was distracted by that thought



for a few minutes, I soon decided to relax my high radio-listening standards and tuned back in. Soon Rush turned the microphone over to Sean Hannity, who announced that his special guest for the day would be Ann Coulter. A few days earlier I'd heard Coulter explain that Bill Clinton was gay — a fact he certainly went to great lengths to hide. She had also posited that the Jersey Girls (widows of the 9/11 attack) would probably have ended up divorced if their husbands had lived. She had no facts to support her statements, of course, but in her world, none are needed.

"Holy yikes," my mind screamed as the theme song from "The Twilight Zone" played in my head. "Limbaugh, Hannity, *and* Coulter! I've hit the triple crown of truthiness." Someplace in the back of my mind, I heard Rod Serling announce that "the signpost ahead reads Wiki-ality." Wiki-ality and truthiness are notions that explain a lot about life in the 21st century. Both words were coined by Stephen Colbert.

I love Stephen Colbert (pronounced *colbear*), or at least the character he plays on TV. "The Colbert Report" (pronounced *repor*) is on Comedy Central, Monday through Thursday nights, and my day simply isn't complete until I've watched his take on the day's events and the issues of our times. Since October 2005, Colbert has hosted the show, which parodies such cable personality fests as "The O'Reilly Factor." Colbert's overconfident character is a blustery right-wing pundit — fashioned after O'Reilly himself — who

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spends much of each show celebrating himself and his rather interesting view of reality. Seldom right, but always certain, he inhabits a world where things are never gray or complicated or multidimensional — a perfect take-off on the likes of Hannity, Coulter, and Limbaugh.

On his first show, Colbert explained the premise of the program. He would speak to his public “in plain, simple English.” Evidence of that was contained in his debut segment of “The Word,” a daily slice of wisdom much like O’Reilly’s “Talking Points Memo.” The word for that day was “truthiness” — a word he claims to have invented and a word that only three months later would be named Word of the Year by the American Dialect Society (who knew there was such an award?).

In his introduction to truthiness, Colbert’s character explained that he is “no fan of dictionaries or reference books. . . . They’re all fact, no heart.” So even if the “word police, the ‘wordinistas’ over at Webster’s” say truthiness is not a word, it expresses the tenor of our times. “We are” Colbert argued, a nation divided between those “who think with their heads, and those who *know* with their *hearts*.” He promises that, on his show, he will tell the truth he knows in his gut regardless of what logic, reason, or mere facts might indicate to the contrary. And although he may have invented the word, he did not invent the concept, as my brief encounter with Limbaugh, Hannity, and Coulter on that day demonstrated.

Colbert also coined the word “Wiki-ality,” based on Wikipedia, the popular online encyclopedia. Boasting millions of entries, Wikipedia seems far more concerned with quantity and democratic fact-making than accuracy. In Wiki-world, users can add and edit information. And regardless of evidence to the contrary, if enough users agree that something is true, it becomes truth — at least on the Wikipedia website.

On a recent show, when the word for that day was Wiki-ality, Colbert edited a Wikipedia article, changing the entry on elephants to report that the African elephant population had recently experienced a large population surge. Praising the website for its commitment to truthiness, Colbert explained that he thinks the real world should work like Wiki-world. That is, truth should be determined by consensus rather than fact. After all, he pointed out, “if enough people believe something, it must be true.”

If only Wiki-ality were limited to real and parodied talk shows. But it isn’t. I feel like I’m constantly meeting people who live out their lives in Wiki-ality. For them, perception is everything. If they just say something often enough and with enough certainty and conviction, it will become true, even when there is clear evidence to the contrary.

Truthiness and Wiki-ality seem to be everywhere. Our children are doomed — because we agree that they are. Our schools are failing — because we’re told over and over that they are. The NEA is a terrorist organization. Teachers can’t be fired because of tenure. Standardized tests measure something worth knowing, and No Child Left

Behind really will leave no child behind. Being opposed to vouchers is “soft racism.” Abstinence is the answer to sex education. Stickers and certificates enhance self-esteem. There is no such thing as white privilege, and all poor kids have to do is pull themselves up by their bootstraps. Everything will be fine if only English is our national language, or if we adopt a national curriculum, or if we buy Reading First products or Success for All.

We know all of these things because we’ve been told they are so by Fox News or CNN or by media commentators paid for by federal tax dollars funneled through the U.S. Department of Education. And maybe all of them are true — in some reality. Maybe in that same reality where cars drive on treadmills, Ann Coulter has something to say, and No Child Left Behind is fully funded.

The trouble with Wiki-ality is that it assumes that there is no true knowledge and that anyone who believes himself or herself an expert is one. The Bush Administration assumed the same thing when it created No Child Left Behind. The experts they forgot to consult — the real experts with real-world knowledge — were teachers. And because of that, no matter how “truthi-*esque*” the name, children are being left behind, and tests — not the schools — are failing.

As much as I hated listening to Hannity and Coulter, I certainly stayed awake. And as my car finally passed the sign welcoming me to Havre, I breathed a sigh of relief. I realized that, as complicated as my world is, it is better than Wiki-ality. Later that night, I eased myself into a hot tub under Montana’s big sky, watched the clouds move across the moon, and sipped a glass of wine with my friend Shirley. I took solace in the realization that I had not been driving on a treadmill and that in my reality — here on planet Earth — things are more complicated, facts are still facts, and the chances that Bill Clinton is gay are pretty slim. **K**

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