

THE SOCIOLOGIST AS ENTERTAINER

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. "It just doesn't pay to be nice to people," said Lenny Bruce. I recalled that remark when invited to be the principal speaker and guest of honor at an Awards Day banquet for a war veteran lodge. They were honoring firemen (mostly volunteers) and city and county law enforcement officers. The event offered a free dinner prepared by the women's auxiliary and me. The owner of the local radio station was invited to be the MC (master of ceremonies). We had never met, but immediately established cordial relations. They said I would not have to remain for the award presentations, which made it convenient to leave by the back door after I completely bombed out.

. All of this came about by personal invitation of the president and his entertainment committee who visited with me in my office after a telephone call. I accepted since our campus encourages positive community involvement along with sophisticated recruiting of students, wherever they may be found. I learned later how my name came up, since I have very little experience with public events, other than promoting our hit-and-miss sociology club. An English professor, recognized for his near professional staging of plays and public events was asked first, but had a previous commitment, and recommended me. For a couple of weeks I mulled over what kind of material to present, along with routine academic tasks such as final examinations, conferences, and committee meetings.

. How may police officers and firemen be honored without making it seem trite and meaningless? I considered several approaches, listened to Johnny Carson's latest jokes, noted what colleagues were laughing at, and even plugged into what students were laughing at other than idiosyncracies of professors and administrators which I know all too well.

. An American Indian student suggested that I tell about the Indian brave who went left as all others went right around the wagon train. He was left-handed! There was a good one about a little old man who wanted to buy a half-head of lettuce, but I excluded it because of its four-letter words. The one liner: "Show me a home on the range, and I'll show you a dirty home!" is always good for a chuckle.

. Next thing I knew, I was dressing in a red tie, white shirt, and blue suit to attend the big event. My wife was invited, but excused herself because she was exhausted from the return drive from a visit to her mother in Arkansas. Hence I did not need the proffered baby sitter. If my 6½ year old daughter had been there, I might have given a superb performance. Maybe it was better that wife and child remained at home: they had no cause for distress about my image.

. The dinner was tasteless, but most people seemed to enjoy it. I sat at the head table next to the MC who was friendly, but not fully supporting of my position of honor. His attitude was: "Move it right along," and "you'll have to sink or swim." The President appeared once or twice, looking warm and sweaty. An electrical contractor by trade, he had been moving bingo equipment aside so members, wives, guests, children, and babes in arms could reach seats. He seemed slightly intoxicated. Drunk or sober, he was friendly and somewhat disappointed that I did not bring my family. There were about 100 persons in the hall, a one-floor concrete block structure built by a meandering creek in the center of our small city. I was in a blue suit; the MC was in a gray suit; policemen were in uniform; our firemen do not have uniforms; most people were in sport shirts, plain dresses or pants for the ladies; and children did not appear to be in

their Sunday best. It looked more like a picnic crowd than a banquet audience. (Like a true sociologist, I was always observant.)

. I remember a polite matronly lady offering more coffee. I was anxious for a taste of coffee, but one swallow proved that something was wrong with it. I had no support but my own adrenalin with a brain which seemed vaguely vacant. Then it happened! "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Veterans' Loyalty Day Banquet. We will present awards to police officers and firemen who are being honored this year, but first, let me present our honored guest and speaker, Professor Freedman, a sociologist at the University." Close by I could hear a muted conversation: "What is sociology?" "I don't know, but I think it's something like psychology!"

. The MC listed my humble credentials: schools attended and taught at, articles, books, and special interests. Actually, it sounded good, as I rose and walked to the microphone. I thanked the MC, complimented his innovations in regional broadcasting, and there I was, looking at the audience and searching for away to start. There was a long pause ...

. "Ladies and gentlemen, I am happy to be with you tonight, on behalf of our president and faculty, I am honored to represent our University at this most important occasion. I will speak briefly on loyalty .. some comments on loyalty .. which I hope you'll find interesting.

. As I began to talk, a new group of police officers trooped in, and another group trooped out, like changing of the guard. It was disturbing, like students straggling into class after you've given the preview of your lecture. Moreover, I found that I could not adjust the microphone. The MC was short, and had it set up in advance. I was almost a head taller, and had to bend far to my left in order to use it. Without it, my voice did not carry well enough. I pulled out my 3

note cards with scribbling on both sides - important topics underlined in red, and first lines of jokes which I thought fitting.

. Suddenly it occurred to me that I could establish rapport as a veteran of World War II. I said: "Are there any Seabees in the audience?" No hands went up. My Seabee stories died, and I bowed out by saying how proud I was of my old outfit, the 11th Special USNCB, serving 3 years in the Pacific, including the Okinawa invasion. Being cut off in that direction, I asked how many had flown in an airplane. "Folks, I feel like the pilot of a charter flight who says on the intercom: 'This is your pilot speaking. I have good news and bad news. First the bad news. We are lost! Now, the good news: we are making excellent time!'" A few laughs followed. The beginning was over and I had to talk.

. The room was then quiet, and the audience was in a serious if not disconcerted mood. Thanks to Eric Partridge's Encyclopedia of Words (Macmillan 1958) I was ready to tell them about the origin of the word loyal, which is related to legal, and police has a common origin with polis, the Greek city-state. They were amused to know that words such as politician, policy, and polite also shared this common origin. I said "See! Police officers are nothing but politicians in disguise!" Partridge failed me on firemen, but sheriff and mayor were interesting. Shire means official business, and mayor shares origin with master, major, and mister. This flash of euphoria was soon over. Another joke met with few chuckles. It was about the little old lady seated to the rear of the church who said "Amen" to the preacher's denunciations of backsliding except when he came to "those of you who are dipping snuff" to which she replies, "There he goes meddling into our affairs again!"

. I compared loyalty of public servants in the community to that between husbands and wives. There was some interest, but it

struck me that heavy stuff was out. No logical propositions! Just some accolades and a quick, graceful ending. At that point, a couple of little boys aged 9 or 10 began chasing one another around the tables. The President and Committee members stopped that game. By then, the President was hardly able to stand. I could see him on the slant, as I held on to the microphone, aslant, as if on a sinking ship, unable to swim.

. Feeling that it was time for more humor, I determined to get at least one more laugh before I bolted for my station wagon in the parking lot. With several bald heads gleaming at me reflecting the 200-watt light bulbs, I said: "Have you heard about the World War II veterans who met and said that those saltpeter tablets they had to take in 1943 in the Pacific had finally started to work?" One old timer smiled. Some women showed scorn, as if to say "He has the nerve to pull that shoddy stuff in front of women and children!"

. Winding up, I said that loyalty is supported by our most important values. Morale, I noted, is a complex of values. I caught myself going into the intervening variable bit, but stopped in time. I did say morale could be different for different groups. Later, a police officer said he thought he knew what morale was until he heard my speech.

. Toward the end I said that in totalitarian societies loyalty is direct, whereas in democratic societies, it is indirect. Here I cited the Joe Louis quotation, that he realized that there were many social problems in America, but Hitler could do nothing to improve them. I cited the story of the loyal dog who waited at the main Tokyo railroad station for 7 years for his master to return from the army. He died waiting, and now there is a statue of a dog on the spot where he waited.

. I compared loyalty to health, that we may not miss it until we lose it, when it may be too late. I pointed out some manifestations

of loyalty: good morale, cooperation, enthusiasm, state of well-being, without envy. But it was too late to win them over. Success went glimmering, with the interruptions and my limits as an entertainer. Last, I said that honor and loyalty go together. If we do a good job, we feel better about it, even if means risk and pain. Since I had done poorly, I was no longer genuinely interested in honor or loyalty.

. I told the story of Franklin Roosevelt's trip to Pearl Harbor in Hawaii when he was running for the 4th term. The polls had him in a precarious position so he met Admirals Nimitz and Halsey, and General McArthur. He needed McArthur's charisma, and wanted to be photographed with the military leaders, riding around Pearl Harbor in an open red touring car. There were two on the Island: an old, faded, badly dented car belonging to the fire chief, and a beautiful new car belonging to the madam of a local brothel. The president, informed of the choice, settled on the old car belonging to the fire chief. Once again, the women showed some disgust, but the men liked it. Most of the youngsters by now were sound asleep.

. "Thanks for inviting me, and I wish you every success. Please call on me if I can help you by explaining our programs at the University. As most of you police officers know, we have a new master's program in criminal justice. It will be my pleasure to attend (I did not say 'address') your banquets in the future." From politeness or custom, the applause was vigorous, but spotty.

. On returning to my seat, I could feel the strain of my twisted back and neck from tilting sideways to a short man's microphone, and I was soaking with sweat. The MC motioned that I could leave, and he followed. Organization officers gave out the awards. In the back corridor, the President slouched by the wall. He said "Thanks," and asked if I wanted a little something for my

trouble. I said "No", and he invited me to be a guest the next year. I hit the parking lot and fresh air. It was a relief to escape the spot where a celebrity had risen and fallen in less than 25 minutes.

. In the ensuing weeks, I asked myself how the veteran comedians did it. How could Bob Hope, Milton Berle, and Shecky Green stand up for hours and hatch such side-splitting laughs? Eddie Cantor appeared in 1948 before a packed house of 3000 in a municipal auditorium. He got laughs by rolling his eyes, and rambling on about Ida and his 5 daughters.

. There are many reasons why the transition from the classroom to the banquet hall is difficult. Teaching is largely devoted to thinking out loud before a captive class whom you meet regularly. With a class one can react in terms of where we have been, where we are now, and what we shall reach by the end of the course. This is of no great value for a one-time banquet audience. It seemed odd that no one was taking notes! Though Bennet Cerf gave many lectures around the country, he said that he never used notes. I never knew a professor who did not use notes.

. The next time Henny Youngman stands with fiddle in hand and talks about his mother-in-law, I shall listen more carefully. When I see Norm Crosby again, I will clock his timing on one of his favorites: "When you've seen one topless waitress, you've seen both of them." There is more to entertaining than meets the eye. Perhaps we can distinguish comedy of the middle range as opposed to grand comedy and operational comedy. Perhaps this was a good experience, and perhaps sociologists should do more of this.

. Sociologists lack universals that other disciplines have amassed. Margaret Mead, and other anthropologists offered unique and fascinating narrative and analysis of distant cultures. Freud and Jung gave psychology a syndrome of sexual intrigue which continues to

prosper. What do we have to popularize? Middletown and its transition are long past. Can we promote Durkheim either pure, or as interpreted by Parsons and his students? Can we cite Gans and the unhappy peoples of suburban Boston and Levittown? Can we claim interest in social problems, even if it means putting poor people on the dole? None of this is funny. It is serious business. Perhaps the business of entertainment reflects on sociology. Sociology is not funny, but there were some funny characters in its early stages. Persons like Sumner and Veblen did not mean to be funny, but they presented social institutions and customs in a light and entertaining manner.

. A sociologist may wish to make small of a meeting such as I have described. It is merely microscopic sea-borne flotsam. What difference does it make that they did not respond to a few jokes, and that their stereotype of the University as something foreign to them went unchanged?

. I say that it makes a big difference. A sociologist who could have been an entertainer did not respond to the occasion. A sociologist who could have won some friends and ancillary support was not able to take advantage of a golden opportunity. A sociologist who could have explained the difference between sociology and psychology did not do so. Would I return to the scene of my Waterloo? Yes!

. Given the second chance, I would be humble. When a joke was needed, I would say, "Folks, I'm no Bob Hope, but I have a funny story to share with you." I would explain briefly about the other social sciences. I would make them feel good about their organization. I would not bolt for the parking lot immediately at the end of the speech. I would mingle with the members and their families to reassure them that their choice of a principal speaker was a good one.