

Humor Me

By Ronald P. Culberson

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“Does One Bad Turn Deserve Another?”

At a recent party, I was engaged in mandatory chit-chat with a friend of a friend of a friend. I only knew a couple of people so I was forced to carry on a conversation about not much of anything with someone I didn't even know. We went through the usual commiseration about the biblical amount rain that had fallen, the disgusting worms that someone ate on reality TV, and we were just about to discuss the latest celebrity trial.

Then, our conversation merged into the topic of transportation. I'm sure we were belaboring the lengths of our commutes or the obscene price of gas. I took advantage of this new conversational traffic pattern to move in a more positive direction. I declared to my new friend that I have a motorcycle and that I really enjoy getting away from the traffic by riding my bike on the beautiful rural roads in western Virginia. I gave a pleasant smile as if to convey the Nirvana of two-wheeling in the country.

My new chit chat partner said, “Oh you have a motorcycle? A friend of mine lost an elbow, five toenails and part of his left earlobe on a motorcycle.”

My smile faded rather abruptly.

I was amazed that she would say something like that especially since we had just met. I wondered to myself if she would do the same thing to someone who was overweight. Do you think she would say, “I had a cousin who was fat. He exploded.”

What's crazy is this is not the first time this has happened. People seem compelled to tell me about a friend or relative who lost a limb, a major organ, or even died in a motorcycle accident. I figured I couldn't be the only person to have experienced this so I started paying attention to other conversational patterns. This is what I discovered: We love to out tragedy one another. It's like an addiction.

For instance, if an acquaintance has the flu, we're liable to tell him about the time we were in bed with a cold for six years. Or if a friend has a fender bender, we explain how we barely escaped a 43 car pileup that totaled our SUV. And if a relative from Arizona mentions the temperature, we are required by law to tell her how lucky she is that it's a dry heat. Of course we all know that it's not the heat, it's...well, you know.

We routinely exaggerate details to make our experiences more dramatic. In reality, the cold lasted two weeks and the car accident only involved us, one other car and a very unlucky turtle. And heat is heat is heat for gosh sakes.

Are our lives so uneventful that we have to *tragedize* things to get attention? I think we need to battle this addiction and I've got an idea as to how to turn this whole thing around. Instead of over tragedizing, we must over simplify. The road to recovery requires the use of three simple words. They are "Wow", "Really?" and "Unbelievable".

Here's how it works. Let's say your sister tells you that her youngest child used spray paint to decorate the new leather couch. Rather than telling her how your house burned down a few years ago, simply say, "Wow." If a friend tells you that his pet hermit crab ran away, instead of explaining how your fourteen year old blind, crippled dog died three weeks earlier, simply say, "Really?" And if a colleague tells you that she just spent \$2000 on a losing PowerBall ticket, say, "Unbelievable." Not only will this technique put an end to your own tragedizing, your friends and family will find it less satisfying to tragedize to you as well.

Can you imagine the effect if everyone battled their tragedy addiction this way? Heck, we might be able to solve the problems in the Middle East and at the very least eliminate domestic problems such as Martha Stewart's appeal. The possibilities are endless.

By the way, when the woman at the party told me that her friend had lost body parts in a motorcycle accident, I responded, "What a coincidence. The last person I met at a party spontaneously combusted." Obviously, I still have recovery work to do.

Until next time, just Humor Me.

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Ron Culberson, MSW, CSP, CPAE is a speaker, humorist, and author of four books including "Do it Well. Make it Fun. The Key to Success in Life, Death, and Almost Everything in Between." His mission is to change the workplace culture so that organizations are more productive and staff are more content. He shows people how to have more FUN while preserving the integrity of the work they do and the lives they lead. For more information, visit www.RonCulberson.com.