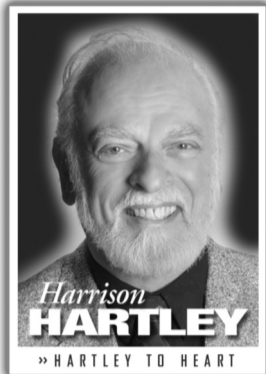


The Great American Myth Machine

What do Sarah Palin, Betsy Ross, Ronald Reagan, Abe Lincoln, and Jesse James all have in common?

They're all Americans and all subjects of the Great American Myth Machine. In other words, you can't believe somewhere between half and seventy-five per cent of anything you hear about them.

Americans are, however, largely mythological creatures themselves. Who is the "average" American? There are average incomes, average educational levels, average numbers of average meals eaten per average day (or per week or per month or per year and so on) but these averages are only average in certain average places. (The number of meals eaten per day, on average, in Missouri is probably about the same or somewhat less than the average for, say San Francisco; but the average QUANTITY consumed per average meal by the average person is much greater in Missouri, and the proof of this is that the average weight of the average Missourian is a good bit more than it should be according to healthy height-weight medical averages, whereas the average San Franciscan is at or below the desired average weight. Maybe that explains why some Missourians tend to attack "San Francisco values." They're jealous of the other aver-



Harrison
HARTLEY
» HARTLEY TO HEART

age.)

All this is not meant to imply that averages are useless, or without meaning, or mythological. It is to say, however, that averages can only be applied accurately to themselves and (if some accuracy is to be maintained) only selectively and in part to individual persons. In a way, it's the old "forest versus tree" problem. There are people who can't see the forest for the trees, but there are increasingly large numbers who can't see the trees for the forest. This seems to be a convincing argument for judging each case on its own merits, and (by extension) for stripping away

the decorative layers of rhetoric public figures pile onto themselves (like so many hermit crabs hiding from the truth) or that adoring or despising observers pile onto them (as an exercise in embellishing their own love or hate). This brings us back to Sarah, Abe, and Jesse.

Consider Jesse. If Jesse Woodson James had done everything he is supposed to have done and robbed everybody he is supposed to have robbed and been everywhere he is supposed to have been, he would have needed to be quintuplets. He was a sociopathic murdering thief who has been transformed by The Great American Myth Machine into "the Robin Hood of the Old West!"

Well, maybe, if "he robbed from the rich and gave to the poor" means that every hardscrabble frontier farmer who put his meager savings into the local bank was "rich" and Jesse James was "the poor" to whom he gave his booty.

In Jesse's case, we have raised the despicable to near heroic levels by means of myth. In Abe's case, we tend to take the really exceptional and tragically heroic and praise it as "average," and in Sarah Palin's case, we have elevated the average to nearly heroic levels by the same means. But this is to be expected. After all, we did the same with George W. Bush, and in point of fact, we have been in the process of elevating "The Average" itself to the position of highest American virtue for decades while at the same time pretending that the exceptional is really only the American average.

Garrison Keillor has great fun with this lamentable fact in his Lake Wobegone monologues. In Lake Wobegone, you know, all the children are "above average," which is curiously just what the American average is said to be: above average. (Try half-dozen local high school cheerleading sessions as a test. All of them will announce boisterously and with absolute conviction, "We're number One! We're Number One!" and in the cosmic scheme of things, they probably all are.)

Not that making it up as we go along is anything new. Remember Parson Weems and his George

Washington tales? Or Lloyd Lewis' Myths After Lincoln? Richard Hofstadter wrote about it eloquently in *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, and more recently, among others, Chris Hedges (*Empire of Illusion*) and Susan Jacoby (*The Age of American Unreason*) have chronicled its lamentable progress. Nothing gets right to the core as powerfully, however, as *Idiot America* by Charles P. Pierce. On page 66, Pierce gives what he calls "the money quote" for the whole problem, and indeed it is. Speaking to reporter Ron Suskind in 2004, a person high in the Bush administration (almost certainly Carl Rove himself) said that Suskind represented "the reality based community," or people who believe "that solutions emerge from judicious study of discernable reality.... That's not the way the world works anymore." There's myth making for you – right in the seat of power!

Joseph Campbell, the great 20th Century comparative religion scholar, taught that myths were signposts whose proper function is to guide us psychologically and spiritually; he did not say they should replace reality. Unfortunately, thanks to the Great American Myth Machine, that's exactly what is in process, and the results will be awful. It would be a lifesaver if somebody could throw a monkey wrench in the works before it's too late and we can't tell the difference any more.

The "Stella" Awards for 2009

My thanks go out this week to reader Louwane of White Cloud, KS. who sent the "Stella Awards" to us.

It's time again for the annual 'Stella Awards'! For those unfamiliar with these awards, they are named after 81-year-old Stella Liebeck who spilled hot coffee on herself and successfully sued the McDonald's in New Mexico, where she purchased coffee. You remember, she took the lid off the coffee and put it between her knees while she was driving. Who would ever think one could get burned doing that, right? That's right; these are awards for the most outlandish lawsuits and verdicts in the U.S. You know, the kinds of cases that make you scratch your head. So keep your head scratcher handy.

Here are the Stellas for the past year:

SEVENTH PLACE

Kathleen Robertson of Austin, Texas was awarded \$80,000 by a jury of her peers after breaking her ankle tripping over a toddler who was running inside a furniture store. The store owners were understandably surprised by the verdict, considering the running toddler was her own son. Start scratching!

SIXTH PLACE

Carl Truman, 19, of Los Angeles,

California won \$74,000 plus medical expenses when his neighbor ran over his hand with a Honda Accord.

Truman apparently didn't notice there was someone at the wheel of the car when he was trying to steal his neighbor's hubcaps.

FIFTH PLACE

Terrence Dickson, of Bristol, Pennsylvania, who was leaving a house he had just burglarized by way of the garage. Unfortunately for Dickson,

the automatic garage door opener malfunctioned and he could not get the garage door to open. Worse, he couldn't re-enter the house because the door connecting the garage to the house locked when Dickson pulled it shut. Forced to sit for eight, count 'em, EIGHT days and survive on a case of Pepsi and a large bag of dry dog food, he sued the homeowner's insurance company claiming undue mental Anguish. Amazingly, the jury said the insurance company must pay Dickson \$500,000 for his anguish. We should all have this kind of anguish. Keep scratching. There are more....

FOURTH PLACE

Jerry Williams, of Little Rock, Arkansas, garnered 4th Place in the Stella's when he was awarded \$14,500 plus medical expenses after being bitten on the butt by his next door neighbor's beagle - even though

the beagle was on a chain in its owner's fenced yard. Williams did not get as much as he asked for because the jury believed the beagle might have been provoked at the time of the butt bite because Williams had climbed over the fence into the yard and repeatedly shot the dog with a pellet gun.

THIRD PLACE

Amber Carson of Lancaster, Pennsylvania because a jury ordered a Philadelphia restaurant to pay her \$113,500 after she slipped on a spilled soft drink and broke her tailbone. The reason the soft drink was on the floor: Ms. Carson had thrown it at her boyfriend 30 seconds earlier during an argument. Whatever happened to people being responsible for their own actions?

SECOND PLACE

Kara Walton, of Claymont, Delaware sued the owner of a night club in a nearby city because she fell from the bathroom window to the floor, knocking out her two front teeth. Even though Ms. Walton was trying to sneak through the ladies room window to avoid paying the \$3.50 cover charge, the jury said the night club had to pay her \$12,000....oh, yeah, plus dental expenses. Go figure.

FIRST PLACE

This year's runaway First Place Stella Award winner was: Mrs. Merv Grazinski, of Oklahoma City,

Oklahoma, who purchased new 32-foot Winnebago motor home. On her first trip home, from an OU football game, having driven on to the freeway, she set the cruise control at 70 mph and calmly left the driver's seat to go to the back of the Winnebago to make herself a sandwich. Not surprisingly, the motor home left the freeway, crashed and overturned. Also not surprisingly, Mrs. Grazinski sued Winnebago for not putting in the owner's manual that she couldn't actually leave the driver's seat while the cruise control was set. The Oklahoma jury awarded her, are you sitting down? \$1,750,000 PLUS a new motor home. Winnebago actually changed their manuals as a result of this suit, just in case Mrs. Grazinski has any relatives who might also buy a motor home.

I hate to criticise, but come on. What ever happened to common sense?

I'm thinking that maybe the judicial system might want to ask potential jurors a couple more questions.

A hectic schedule is causing us to run behind getting the Telegraph out this week. I appreciate your patience.

VERSE of the WEEK

Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful.

— LUKE 6 : 36