

STRIKE WHILE THE IRONY IS HOT: HUMOROUS PROVERBS

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One of my pet linguistic peeves is the widespread misuse of the adjective *proverbial*. Consider a recent example, from a magazine profile of a government whistleblower: "When she grabs hold of something, she is like the proverbial dog with a bone in its teeth." Of course, this expression is not a proverb; it's a metaphor or simile. Or, less charitably, a cliché or bromide.

Permissive dictionaries have shamefully capitulated, sanctioning this popular solecism. But let us be prescriptive. A proverb communicates a truth, principle or moral lesson in a pointed and pithy style: "Out of sight, out of mind." "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree." "Politics makes strange bedfellows." Whether adage, aphorism, apothegm or axiom, it contains a nugget of wisdom, expressed incisively and memorably.

Wolfgang Mieder, a prolific scholar of the genre, persuasively argues that, far from being obsolete, many traditional proverbs (such as those quoted above) remain relevant and ingrained in our culture. What's more, new ones are constantly being created. For example, "Garbage in, garbage out" and "Different strokes for different folks" are relatively recent coinages.

Proverbs are usually didactic, or at least serious in tone. A humorous proverb or epigram is equally profound, succinct and catchy, but possesses the additional virtues of wit and bite. Its ingredients may include satire, cynicism, irony or paradox: "The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it" (Oscar Wilde). "It is a sin to believe evil of others, but it is seldom a mistake" (H.L. Mencken). Remarriage is "the triumph of hope over experience" (Samuel Johnson).

Then there's the irresistible urge to give a new spin or a funny twist to a well-known adage: "Every crowd has a silver lining" (P.T. Barnum). "Absinthe makes the heart grow fonder" (Addison Mizner). "Familiarity breeds" (Anonymous).

Sadly, being an aphorist is often a thankless endeavor. We are not always credited for our original coinages, which circulate, unattributed or misattributed, via mass media, Internet, e-mail and photocopier.

Cases in point: For 34 years, a Honolulu executive named Kent M. Keith saw his inspirational maxims attributed to everyone from Karl Menninger to Mother Teresa—until last year, when he published a book that finally set the record straight. Professional epigrammatist Ashleigh Brilliant routinely threatens legal action when his coffee mug and refrigerator magnet quips are appropriated without consent, credit or compensation.

Aside from irrefutable proof of authorship provided by documented earliest publication (one of the purposes of this article), I have devised an ingenious solution to this problem. If I'm in an airplane or elevator, for example, and overhear someone complain about being bored, I declare: *"When you have something to read, you're never without a friend."* Aphorism copyright © 1997 Don Hauptman. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced without permission." Unfortunately, this procedure has the effect of bringing conversation to a halt, as listeners scurry for the exits.

Below, a sampling of platitudes with attitude. As for originality, they are all my own, insofar as I can determine from a cursory search of the Internet, quotation anthologies, and all fortune cookies ever baked.

Stagger your deadlines—before they stagger you.

Those who worship sacred cows may soon be dead meat.

If you have to start on a shoestring, pull yourself up by your bootstraps.

Buy Persian carpets; there's always a floor under your investment.

Open a can of worms and you may wind up in a fine kettle of fish.

We anticipated the dawning of an age, but instead we may be witnessing the aging of a dawn.

A man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a metaphor?

And here are a few familiar proverbs, reformulated or fractured:

The meek shall inherit the earth, but they won't avoid probate.

One man's trash is another man's rubbish.

I cried because I had no shoes—until I met a man who had no socks.

He who wears his heart on his sleeve receives humongous dry cleaning bills.

A watched clock never boils.

To the passionate epigrammatist, the tribulations of romantic relationships are fertile territory:

There's nothing worse than unrequited love, except a margin call.

Self-deception is a splendid thing, but it only gets you so far.

If she can wrap you around her little finger, you're probably under her thumb.

A male with high standards is in trouble only if she has them, too.

You might be lonely, miserable, depressed and suicidal, but none of that matters—as long as you're happy!

I hope these provocative precepts have brought you some comfort or amusement. Cynics insist that all proverbs are useless and hackneyed—in other words, just a lick of the trite. But for the perspicacious reader who values a well-expressed dictum (and those who've picked 'em), I shall conclude with this trenchant truism:

You don't need to find the meaning of life, as long as you find a life of meaning.