

## "THE WHOLE KETTLE OF FISH IN A NUTSHELL": MIXED METAPHORS REDUX

DON HAUPTMAN  
New York, New York

In our previous episode on the subject, "Ironing the Bugs Out: Mixed Metaphors" (*Word Ways*, August, 2001), I recounted egregious and amusing real-life illustrations of this popular solecism.

Unfortunately for the cause of literacy but fortunately for the cause of entertainment, I have since discovered many new specimens. Ironically, mixed metaphors occur with unusual frequency among professionals in the arts, sciences and media. They should know better. Another trend is the apparent reluctance of some to be satisfied with *one* mixed metaphor, preferring a string of them.

Quick refresher: A mixed metaphor is a combination of figures of speech that creates an incongruous or absurd image: "He's out of the frying pan and into hot water." "The sacred cows have come home to roost." "His victory is a springboard to rekindle his campaign." As these examples demonstrate, the colliding tropes are often idiomatic expressions or clichés.

The following new batch has a heavy New York City emphasis, reflecting my own location and reading habits. As always, text not within quotation marks is a paraphrase of the source.

- A billionaire made a \$12 million donation to a museum, obtaining certain concessions from the institution in return. The museum director, speaking of the philanthropist, said, "It is his job to nail me down, but we are on the same page." (*The New York Times*, December 4, 2002)
- A report on Caroline Kennedy's progress in her job raising funds for New York City's public school system was headlined, "Kennedy Seeks Her Footing as Schools' Rainmaker." (*The New York Times*, June 4, 2003)
- The head of a cultural organization, on the budget constraints he faces: "We operate close to the bone by the skin of our teeth." (Local TV news report, New York, May 8, 2002)

For some reason, mixed metaphors seem especially prevalent in media coverage of the media industry.

- Condé Nast launched a magazine for teenage girls in the face of declining circulation and advertising revenues for this type of publication. A report informed us: "Teen Vogue is late to a party that may be losing steam." (*The New York Times*, January 13, 2003)

- A magazine industry executive, commenting on the blurring line between editorial and advertising—areas usually kept separate for ethical reasons: "In a small, entrepreneurial company, we don't think of 'church and state' in the traditional sense. We try to pull everybody in to bake that pie." (*The New York Times*, September 8, 2003)
- Yet another magazine executive, on why he decided to invest his own money in the publication despite its financial problems: "We are in ... a butt-ugly ad recession right now, but we are seeing enough light at the end of the tunnel ...." (*The New York Times*, February 11, 2002)

Now for a choice selection of those *multiple* mixed metaphors:

- When the hit TV show *The Apprentice* was in the planning stages, NBC announced that the program's contestants will "be forced to think outside the box in order to outshine each other to get to the top." (*The New York Times*, June 22, 2003)
- Following Michael Bloomberg's election as mayor of New York City, an article on his career described his first job, at Salomon Brothers, the Wall Street brokerage firm, where he worked for 15 years and then was fired. Reminiscing, he said, "I had stirred the pot, lost the battle, and was paying the price." (*The New York Times*, November 7, 2001)
- In an article about the rosters of acknowledgments that authors include in their books, Henry Alford opined, "The book acknowledgment as a literary form is now in its full efflorescence. Once the dowdy, benighted foot-soldier of an author's arsenal ...." (*Village Voice Literary Supplement*, June 2000)
- Columbia University and the New York Public Library had battled for years before coming to terms on the construction of a dormitory that would incorporate a library branch. Observed a neighborhood activist: "It was a major deal to get in bed with Columbia. I mean, this was to lie down with snakes. But there's been a real sea change there." (*West Side Spirit*, a Manhattan community weekly, October 18, 2001)
- "No one wants to say the sky is falling, but in this instance I am afraid the emperor has no clothes. Despite Herculean efforts by the Council and Council staff, we are still only dealing with the tip of the iceberg." (Attributed to Charles Millard, a New York City councilman, in a press release; cited extensively on the Internet)

To conclude, a brief mention of a related type of error. This species is not the standard mixed metaphor like those above, but more of a metaphor malapropism, which has been dubbed a *malaphor*. Examples: "He has a mind like a steel sieve." "Now I've given the cat away." And this priceless recent gaffe:

- In a report on attempts by pharmaceutical companies to create a version of Viagra for women (*The New York Times*, February 28, 2004), a clinical psychologist commented, "The idea that there is some normal level of sexual functioning drives me up the creek."