

FREUD, SKINNER, ROGERS (AND A CAST OF THOUSANDS) FISTFIGHT IN PURGATORY: THE HUMAN BEHAVIOR CURRICULUM AS REALITY TV

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In the pantheon of "what is funny," therapeutic humor stands upon an exalted plane. Its lofty goals are to make us laugh and to help us heal. In this article, the authors offer a broad parody of the mental health field, its founders, its academicians and practitioners, and, of course, its all too easy targets: television, movies, and big business. If laughter indeed is therapeutic, who better to parody than ourselves and our need to compartmentalize the vibrant and complex human heart into humorless theoretical language, dry diagnostic categories, soulless technical jargon, and trendy academic debates about which human behavior theory is most relevant in the post-modern era?

Authors' Note: This narrative was submitted to *Reflections* just a few days before the September 11th terrorist attacks rocked America. This tongue-in-cheek parody was intended to humorously reflect on the authors' experiences of the lengthy and sometimes overly serious debates that often occur among academic types regarding what (or whom) to include/exclude in the human behavior curriculum. Despite the terrible tragedies at home and the resulting war and conflict abroad since September 11th, the authors hope that there is room left in the hearts and minds of professional helpers for humor. Our inspiration for the following imaginary narrative comes from movie producer and humorist Mel Brooks, whose broad parodies highlight the eccentricities and absurdities of life. Humor, we have found, is an essential antidote for academics who think too much and play too little.

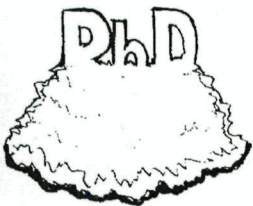
Surviving Reality

Reality TV shows have been the latest rage for sometime now—*Survivor*, *Temptation Island*, *Big Brother*, *Mole*, *Weakest Link*, *The Chamber*, and so forth. Of course, we're not admitting to having watched any of these trashy and exploitive shows. However, as esteemed university professors (or "steamed," as the case more often seems to be), it is our sworn scholarly duty to be on top of current cultural trends,

even if those trends are taking us further into the vast wasteland which former FCC Chairman Newton Minnow used to talk about. (Or was that *Mad Magazine's* Alfred E. Newman?) We shoulder this heavy burden in order to fulfill various roles of wise sage, iconoclast, soothsayer, and cynic (job descriptions which pay little to nothing, by the way). Commenting authoritatively on things we know little about is what we in academia do best. A Ph.D. is not jokingly called "piled higher and deeper" for nothing.

Leaving aside the ludicrous notion that these TV series have anything remotely to do with reality, "did you ever wonder," as Andy Rooney says, where the idea for the progenitor show of reality TV, the CBS program *Survivor*, came from in the first place? A good guess by learned folk might be that it's adapted from such classics as *Robinson Crusoe* (Defoe, 1862), *Lord of the Flies* (Golding, 1962), or possibly even a derivative of the old sitcom, *Gilligan's Island* (Schwartz, 1962). Is that your final answer? Sorry, Skipper, but the truth is much more disturbing (and shallower) than that.

A little-known fact is that the idea for *Survivor* actually came from an academic refugee from the helping professions who drew on his long experiences in making curriculum and program changes. The process is very much the same—which human behavior theorist/psychotherapy guru gets to



stay or be booted out of the curriculum. It's just like members of the TV tribes voting to decide who can stay or who has to leave their little island. Should we boot Freud off for his misogynist ways? Trade Kohlberg for Gilligan? Can Michael White (a real Australian) and his band of down-under narrative therapists out-duel Stephen DeSazar's American tribe of solution-focused gurus? Eliminate Erik Erikson in favor of Milton Erickson (or maybe just do self-hypnosis and forget the both of them)? Or perhaps, the divine ya-ya sisterhood of empowerment/feminist/post-modern/social constructivists will at last vanquish the Rocky Balboa research-types ("yo Adrian")—those nasty quantitative/evidence-based/logical positivist/dust bowl empiricists? (Should that happen, kiss not only reality TV shows goodbye, but objective reality as well.) How satisfying it would be for them to finally say to male patriachs everywhere, "You *are* the weakest link! Goodbye."



In fact, as the following narrative demonstrates, the original TV pilot for *Survivor* was, in fact, called *Freud, Skinner, and Rogers Fistfight in Purgatory*—a title obviously based on the executive producer's familiarity with the works of noted American Indian author, Sherman Alexie, particularly his collection of short stories, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993), which later became the basis for the Sundance Festival award-winning movie, *Smoke Signals* (Eyre, 1998). Although we risk being expelled from our lifetime membership in the exclusive "White Male Club of Privilege" for bringing you this inside information, our

dedication is to bring the readers of *Reflections* the truth, as we co-construct it.

A Hollywood Scene

At the Copycat TV Network, a program concept meeting is underway. All the players are present. (To protect the guilty, the names have been made generic.) Professor Sabbatical Moonlight, erstwhile faculty member from the Celestial School of Bio-Psycho-Social Therapeutics, Magic, and Metaphysics at Hollywood University and producer-wannabe (known as "Sab" in the show biz community, but called "Sob" by his remaining friend in the academy), the last to arrive, rushes in.

"Since our time is short," begins Sab, "let me pitch you this idea I had about putting all the world's greatest psychotherapists on one island and letting them fight it out regarding whose theory of professional helping is the best."

The deep rumble of Mr. Moneybags, senior marketing vice-president of *Mindless Entertainment* (ME, Inc.), a potential corporate sponsor for the show, echoes off the smoked glass and lacquered wood of the paneled office. "Liked your concept paper, son. But can't figure out how you plan to do that, since those therapists are all dead."

"That's our new wrinkle—human cloning," replies Sab. "We'll get DNA samples of dead therapists or theorists such as Freud, B.F. Skinner, Carl Rogers, Melanie Klein, Karen Horney, and a bunch of others and grow them just for this show. We'll pit the clones against each other in a psychotherapy showdown. These guys are all dinosaurs anyway; it'll be better than *Jurassic Park*."

"Not bad," Ms. Network Executive (known as "Xnet" to 500 of her closest friends) responds, "but here's an even better idea. Let's get your *Jurassic Park* therapists cloned as one tribe. Then we'll get a bunch



of living professional helpers as the other tribe. They can battle it out, T-Rex style.”

“Who would we try to get?” says Sab.

“Oh, my analyst is always foaming at the mouth about some ‘empowerment and strengths’ people who are just *ruining* the psychotherapy market. Maybe we could get them,” replies XNet.

Jowls shaking in time with his head nodding, Mr. Moneybags affirmatively chimes in: “This will be great! Call ‘em *The Pathologizers* versus *The Strengtheners*.”

XNet looks uncertain. “Not sure we can get the cloning past the network censors.”

Patting her arm, Mr. Moneybags reassures her. “Like the name *Strengtheners* a whole lot. My company could tie that in with a new denture adhesive we’re ready to market.”

Sab jumps up from the table. “Hey! We could get some drug companies to sponsor the *Pathologizers*. Maybe that wonder drug, PERMANAP, could be the sponsor.”

“People, people!” chides XNet. “We’re getting off track. Sure, there’s easy money to be made. Big money. But, let’s get back on task here and remember what we’re all in this for.” Picking up her minidisk recorder, she speaks: “Memo to Marketing: Each of the tribes has its own corporate sponsor.”

Salivating, Mr. Moneybags agrees. “It’ll be like the cola wars. Maybe even bigger than *Star Wars*.” Moneybags pounded the table. Organic muffin crumbs spray everywhere. “Gotta have big names, people! Gotta push the product! If I get my sales people on this, they gotta have some kinda angle to wrangle. Can’t send ‘em out there without a carrot.”

“Well, Oprah is more than we can afford,” Sab whines. “But Dr. Laura and Judge Judy are both available. Of course, if we really want sleaze, we could try Montel, Ricki, or Jerry.”

“It’s a start,” replies XNet. “Have your people get in touch with my people. We’ll lay out a story line, mock up a set, test the concept in a few key markets, then see about

moving into production. I gotta feeling this could be early retirement.”

“Great, babe. Kiss, kiss. Love ya. Ciao, baby,” says Sab, exiting the office, stage left.

Scene One—*The Pathologizers*

Three months later, on the remote desert island, Purgatory, somewhere south of the Galapagos, the *Pathologizers* gather together for the first time. Austin Powers, international studio page boy of mystery, scurries among the stars. “Dr. Freud. Dr. Freud. Paging Doctor Sigmund Freud.”

Pausing between cigar puffs, Freud looks up. “Vat is it, mein good man?”

“Are you Herr Doktor Professor Freud? Groovy, baby!” says Powers.

“Yavol. Vat? Do I look like dat meathead, Skinner?” barks Freud.

“They’re ready for you on the set, Dr. Freud,” replies Austin.

Looking severe and darkly foreboding, Skinner set down his pet pigeon, Pavlov, and arches his eyebrows.

“OK, Sigmund, that’s it! Maybe your name’s really ‘Sick-mind.’ Not that I believe in any such idea as a ‘mind.’ Not that I have ‘beliefs,’ for that matter. You’ll pay for that smart remark. Got some nice little contingencies here in my fist that you’ll be learning from real soon, you neurotic twit.”

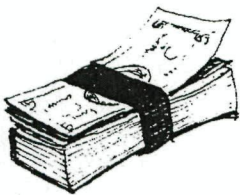
“Skinner, you asinine American pellet head.” Freud spits back. “I haf no time for your reinforcement fantasies.”

Jumping between them, Carl Rogers attempts to get them to cool it. “Can’t we all just get along? Can’t we self-actualize, together?”

“Bah, Rogers! You and your stupid push for growth,” snaps Skinner. “I hope Mazlow’s pyramid falls on top of your bald head.”

“Now Biff, you needn’t be so cold. I was just trying to say ...” replies Rogers.

“Don’t call me Biff!” screams Skinner. “That’s a character from *Death of a Salesman*, you moron. Do I look like the



pathetic son of a pathetic salesman to you? It's 'B. F.!' The whole world knows it's 'B' (as in Burrhus), 'F' (as in Frederic)—Skinner!"

"Skinner, you dolt! It could be 'B.M.' (as in bowel movement) for all dat I care," mocks Freud.

"Typical bathroom humor remark, anal face. Maybe you should go sleep with your mother, you perverted Victorian prig," says Skinner.

"Ooooh, vas dat an adjective, Biff?" taunts Freud. "I thought everything vas 'strictly behavior' wit you. No adjectives allowed! How could anything be perverted, den?"

"There's perverted *behavior*, that's how!" spits Skinner.

Freud replies, "So, how vould you operationalize dat, pigeon-boy?"

"Isn't it obvious, you rip-off artist of the Judeo-Christian ethic," snorts Skinner. "It's anything a pigeon vouldn't do, even if given the chance."

"Who you callin' a rip-off artist?" challenges Freud.

"Everyone knows about the struggle between the flesh and spirit. You just gave 'em new names and tried to pass it off as science instead of religion. I think you got messianic fantasies, boy," says Skinner. "Not that I really believe in anything like 'fantasies.'"

"Actually, I have a lot of unconditional positive regard and empathy for both of your approaches," interjects Rogers.

"Oh, shut up, Carl," replies Skinner and Freud simultaneously. "Go talk to the dolphins and whales. You never say much anyway."

Turning back to Skinner, Freud chides, "Maybe you should go sleep wit your pigeons. Or is dat one of those things a pigeon vouldn't do?"

"Your momma," replies Skinner.

Roused at last by the increasingly intense mother-bashing remarks, Karen Horney suddenly commands, "Grow up, will you, little boys? This is not a phallic contest! No one's

got a tape measure. Both of you act as short on brains as you are on your other favorite organ. Classic case of *womb envy*, if you ask me."

Startled by Horney's loud voice, Melanie Klein jolted awake. Still disoriented to time, place (and, of course, always to persons), she comments to no one in particular: "It is the feces in their mothers' breasts that keep them detached."

"WHAT!?" shouts Freud, Skinner, Rogers, and Horney in unison. Immediately, they vote Klein as the first one to be kicked off the island.

From the studio control booth, Sab yells in triumph. "See! I told you this vould work. This is colossal! Huge! Mega-huge!"

"Groovy, baby," says Austin, as he leads a weeping Melanie Klein from the set back to her trailer. "Should I pop in for a sec and see if your lights still turn on? Yeah, baby! Let's hop on the good foot and do that bad thing."

Nonplussed, Klein responds, "Oh, behave!"

Wearing her black mini-skirt, 3 inch Manolos, and fishnet stockings, XNet shakes her head, "That's just the trouble with neo-Freudians. No matter what they say, it's still always about sex." Pulling out her minidisk recorder, she pushed the record button, snapping, "Memo to the therapists. Boundaries, people. We need boundaries!" Turning to Sab, she ordered: "Make sure Anna Freud gets the memo, too. And get some PERMANAP for Skinner. He really needs to chill."

Scene 2—*The Strengtheners*

Meanwhile, on the leeward side of the island, the *Strengtheners* begin a slow, melodic, undulating dance around the leaders

of their tribe, Nick Potency and Victoria Powerdaughters. Led by the tribe's mascot, the diminutive Mini Me, the *Strengtheners* begin to whirl and twirl, hypnotized by the lush duet of Cher and Britney Spears, as they reach the top of their mountain lair, where they...

WE INTERRUPT THIS
NARRATIVE WITH AN
EMERGENCY BROADCAST
MESSAGE:

While fairness dictates that we should now parody the *Strengtheners* in an equally outrageous fashion, we're not sure this tribe has a sufficient sense of humor to appreciate the therapeutic and healing powers of laughter (much less get the jokes we'd make at their expense). Since our lawyers advise that there is less risk in making fun of the dead than the living, we leave to the reader's own imagination who from the contemporary strengths and empowerment helping establishment might constitute such a tribe and how they might interact during their stay in Purgatory.

This is a test. Had this been an actual exercise in the use of equal opportunity humor, you would have been instructed to tilt your head back and continue laughing (loudly, we hope). This is only a test. We now return you to your regularly scheduled narrative, already in progress.

.....Then, to the wild cheers of rapture from the *Strengtheners'* tribe, Victoria Powerdaughters finishes her speech. Lowering her voice to a whisper, she tells the assembled multitude:

"Now, here's the secret you should know about our group, which you must guard with your life. Though our concepts are all about empowerment, self-determination, and capitalizing on people's strengths, we actually

spend most of our time criticizing other people's theories and approaches for their faults and deficits. In literature, that's called irony. In the helping professions, however, it's viewed as an enlightened, progressive innovation. Never, ever reveal this secret—especially to the *Pathologizers!* They might figure out we're more alike than different. Let's just call it Victoria's secret, shall we?"

Scene Three: Fade to Black

History, as we all know, has a way of taking unexpected turns. Despite the fact that the *Strengtheners* routed the *Pathologizers* handily in the pilot episode, the network chickened out on the pilot version of the show. The network executives liked the sex angle, because sex always sells. Just not sex involving once dead therapists. "Too creepy, even for Hollywood" was the message Sab got. Also, the network's marketing department surveyed consumer focus groups about the pilot episode and discovered the *Strengtheners'* noble purpose and purity of heart didn't make them very appealing to television audiences, who identify more readily with Homer and Marge Simpson. However, Sab was able to negotiate a six-figure deal for the version of *Survivors* that the world now knows and loves (as long as the ratings hold), which, of course, we (truthfully) have never seen.

So all the players lived happily ever after. Even the academics in the helping professions were happy because they had found a kindred spirit in the entertainment industry willing to indulge their predilections for booting off anyone not agreeing with their favorite theoretical point of view. The only casualty was Mr. Moneybags, who was laid off when his company, *Mindless Entertainment*, a division of *Enron/WorldCom/Arthur Anderson Institute for Corporate Ethics and Creative Accounting*, a wholly owned subsidiary of *StarbucksDisneyMicroSoft-IntelAOLTimeWarnerMetLife-RJReynoldsOPECOil* merged with

MarthaStewartVerizonMcDonaldsDowJones
NASDQWallMart-OilofOlay. Fortunately,
however, his daughter, Miss Money Penny,
found work in a series of spy movies, flirting
with the actor formerly known as
SeanConneryRogerMoore-
(OneOtherGuyNobodyRemembers)-
TimothyDaltonPierceBrosnan. So, at least
Moneybags didn't end up as a sob story.

The Moral

To paraphrase an old Bob Dylan's song
(1968), the moral of this story, the moral of
this song, is simply that one should never be
where one does not belong. So, when you
see your colleagues carrying something, help
'em with their load. And don't go mistaking
Purgatory for the curriculum across the road.

Translation: No curriculum is perfect. See
the connections between seemingly disparate
theories and points of view. Keep an open
mind. Inject humor, humanity, and, gosh,
maybe even a little intellectual humility, into
curriculum discussions. Keep on dancing.
And, as Mel Brooks says in the movie
SpaceBalls (1987), "May the Schwartz be
with you!"

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