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A writer needs to be enhanced, less

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—I clip articles from newspapers, and I print stuff from Internet sites. I see nothing inherently bad about this habit that I've had for many, many years.

Once the clips are in hand, however, I round a corner into one of life's badlands—a very bad, dreadful and awful place.

I stash the clips in folders and piles that can go undisturbed for decades. After a month or so, I forget what's where and why. I am really and truly reluctant to trash something I once thought very, very valuable.

I also send clips to friends who I think will be enthusiastically interested. I even send a few out in paper envelopes with adhesive stamps using either print or cursive writing. Local postmasters cheer loudly and greedily when I come through the door. It makes me feel really good, truly it does.

Before sending a clip to a friend, I must decide whether the friend will really like what's being sent. I don't want to be seen as a really annoying pest. I want to be seen as a fellow traveler sharing life's unsolvable mysteries.

I also like to receive clips.

I like friends to email me jokes, even bad ones, even ones that I find offensive, even ones that I would not repeat and certainly not forward. Making a joke is like batting in baseball: When you hit safely one out of three times, you're a star.

Jokes are based on commonly experienced situations. So sharing a joke usually makes me aware that others in the same soup have been swallowed, digested and excreted in the same way.

Nobody sends me fashion tips, for which I'm undeniably grateful. I'm not sure that my wardrobe could be improved piecemeal.

A couple of friends send me memory photos, which I like—old cars, old buildings, old people, old wisdoms.

On Facebook, I get cellphone photos of restaurant food and homilies.

I'm very happy for those eating whatever they're photographing. I truly am.

I gladly read the homilies. Maybe they will lead me to a more joyous and virtuous life—it's way too early to say one way or another. So I won't say, either way.

Reading the above, I decided that my writing was too, too wordy by a lot. My writing performance needs to be enhanced.

So I called my friend Dipstick, a fellow who used to play third base for the New York Yankees, a good semi-pro team with the second-highest payroll in Major League Baseball.

"Dip," I said, "I need your help."

"Shoot," Dip said. "That's what I've done when I needed help."

"My performance needs to be totally enhanced."

"Enhanced! So you're looking to get more taters?"

"No," I said.

"Longer taters?"

"No. Are you now a food writer?" I asked

"You don't eat taters, fool. You hit 'em."

"Hit potatoes with what?" I asked.

"You don't hit *potatoes* with anything, except ketchup. You hit *taters* with your stick, the lumber you bring to the dish."

"Dip, you misunderstand. I'm not calling about assaulting tubers on a plate. I don't want any taters."

"Everybody wants taters. Oh, wait a minute. I get it. You want more stuff on your heat. Can do."

"I don't like spicy food," I said.

"You don't want taters, and you don't want heat. Wait! I get it now. You want literary growth hormone. You'll be amazed at what will come out—big, fancy words in big, fancy sentences."

“No, no, no. I want to enhance my writing. I want to use fewer words, not more. I want to be shorter, not longer. I want simple, not complex.”

“Oh man. That’s like awesome reverse spin, dude.

“Here’s what I mean. ‘Spot barked.’ is a perfect sentence. No extraneous adverbs. Perfect clarity. Balanced. Even lyrical.”

“Who’s Spot?” Dip asked.

“Spot is nobody.”

“If nobody barked, what are you complaining about?”

“I’m not complaining about Spot barking. There is no Spot. There is no barking.”

“I have a dog,” Dip said. “I named him ‘Beast.’ He’s a Chihuahua. He barks too much, too.”

“Dip, hold everything. I’m going to press your overload/reset button. Now. I need the number of the guy who can supply me with...you know...the ‘medications’ to enhance my performance.”

“You want to bulk down, not up?”

“Now you’re moving in the right direction.”

“I dunno,” Dip said. “Like when you walk up to the batter’s box in the bottom of the ninth in the seventh game of the World Series with two out and the winning run is on third, you’re telling me you want to face their closer throwing 105 on the gun with the smallest stick in the bat rack, like a pencil?”

“I want to write small and carry a big stick,” I said. “I want to write leaner prose.”

“We’re all pros at my level,” Dip said. “Fat guys, lean ones—all of us. That’s why we take the steroids, human-growth hormones and testosterone.”

“Your source must have some performance enhancement that works with writers. There must be something that can make my writing more economical.”

“I got it!” Dip said. “How about an eraser?”

“Amazing! And you don’t even have to inject them.”

“Of course not,” Dip said. “You just chew ‘em.”

“How much will eraser medication cost?”

“My stuff ran about \$12,000 a month.”

“Done,” I said.

“And the best thing is,” Dip said, “you don’t play in a league that tests. You’re home free.”

““Home free,”” I said. “Great sentence.”