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**Snooki is no bridge**

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—I got in a little needed bridge maintenance on Labor Day just before rain washed me inside and into the roiling murk of daytime television.

If “reality” programming reflects America, we have become a Nation of gluttons, dieters, neurotics, charlatans, screamers, louts, loafers and females mentally disabled by silicon chest weights.

I lasted about one hour and then sought refuge in the rain.

Our farm driveway crosses a spring-fed brook, which has never knowingly babbled in its life. Channeled beneath Wimer Mountain Road, it empties into a sediment catch basin, which empties into our non-verbal swimming pond, which empties into Key Run (a collection of hibernating rocks that when moistened leap awake and mate like fairy shrimp in the desert), which empties into the South Branch of the Potomac River, which empties into the Chesapeake Bay, which empties into the Atlantic Ocean, which evaporates and then rains on me in Blue Grass.

I rebuilt this bridge 25 years ago soon after buying the farm. I reasoned that my life would be better if I did not drive over a structure whose secret celebrity ambition was to join Snooki in the Great Atlantic floating trash island off the Jersey shore. (In preparing this column, I learned that Snooki and the cast are now available as talking bobblehead dolls. This is incontrovertible proof that we have entered -- and may never leave -- the feared double dip.)

A bridge is a simple thing in concept. It is suspended over trouble of one sort or another. It connects two places and is anchored on both ends to something solid. It must be stout enough to do its job.

I tore out everything but the concrete abutments on either side. This was easy enough since the old wooden planks and girders when touched disintegrated into stuff resembling granola and powdered milk.

I laid eight, 10-inch-by-12-inch locust girders across the nine-foot span and tied them into the abutments on which they rested. I planked the girders with pressure-treated 4-by-4s that I spaced three inches apart to keep our cattle from mistaking asphalt on the other side for the greener pastures they always seek.

This bridge has carried as much as 40 tons, which isn't bad for a home-made job by a guy with too much college.

You can't cheat on bridge-building unless you're betting that it will last long enough for the next guy to fix it.

Building a bridge and writing a news story have some common features.

First, you have to have adequate anchors on both ends. Neither a bridge nor a story goes anywhere you'd want to travel without sufficient foundations.

Second, both bridges and stories have to end up in a solid place. Neither a bridge nor a story can just hang out, wagging in space. A bridge started has to connect to something more than nowhere, and a story without a conclusion is just a wander in the ethers. Stretching is an exercise for the gym. It doesn't belong in either civil engineering or journalism.

Third, neither a bridge nor a story should be expected to carry more weight than it's designed for.

Finally, both a bridge and a story have to be trustworthy. No one wants to cross a bridge that you can't believe in.

Political speechwriting, which I've turned my hand to in the past, should be constructed like a

bridge—reporting at one end, analysis at the other and advocacy spanning the two.

Speeches I've heard recently more resemble the "modified reality" of daytime TV.

Bridges are old school; Snooki is hooky.

Do you get the feeling every so often that you're being thrown off the Island?

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