



THE CHRONICLES OF SEMINARNIA

By Bill Byrne

Ever since I attended my first professional seminar, I've been a captive audience and a critic of their worth. The inherent promise in these short and intense gatherings is that you will come out of the experience a changed person. Typical hype goes like this: "You will leave this seminar with the confidence to slay any giant, tackle any obstacle and go farther, faster. You will accomplish things you didn't know were possible." In essence, you will be privy to knowledge reserved for the chosen few, delivered in a u-shaped meeting room with the best sweet rolls and cold cuts the hotel kitchen can provide. Can I then call myself a "seminarian?"

I have been in the sit-down and stand-up end of many of these goings on. On more than a few occasions, I've been the eager sponge, and at other times, the leader that stirs the seminar drink. I've endured some that went on far too long, ones in which all you can do is surrender to a sort of captive prisoner mentality and agree to everything being offered, just to get relief from those naugahyde covered chairs. An inside joke, certain to be brought up by someone, is "millions of *naugas* were sacrificed to upholster these chairs." Can you develop naugahyditis as a result of too long seminar sitting?

Seated in front of my computer, I googled "seminar franchises available" and the hit total was 957,000. Not content with that, I then googled "seminar opportunities" and proba-

bly would have to spend the rest of my life investigating the 37,000.000 “opportunities” at my disposal. That led me to wonder if the seminar business is the equivalent of the fast food industry, promising to feed our psyches with only a very modest investment of our time.

Oh, the places I traveled to in search of psyche satisfaction. The retired (tired?) ocean liner Queen Mary is a floating hotel permanently anchored in Long Beach, California, a Hilton Hotel property when I roomed there. I occupied a stateroom on the “Old Lady,” caddy-cornered to a very active bridal suite. Folklore has it that ghost passengers roam the ballrooms and passageways. I so wanted to meet a few, but had to settle for a meeting room that had an upward draft and sideways list, making sitting and standing an adventure in maintaining your equilibrium. At OpryLand I was overcome with Country Western inspiration. I wrote my unpublished country classic, still in search of my composer son’s musical genius. It starts:

“I’m stuck right here between boredom and beer
In Anytown U.S. of A.
I look for a face in this countrified place
For anyone going my way.’

What started me on this journey of remembrance was an invitation I received via the mail. Seems that these days my post person delivers mainly credit card applications, long-term health insurance tenders, and wealth management seminar invitations. The latter and latest of these included a “Special Guest VIP Ticket”—a little bit redundant that—to attend a day with “The Donald” without “The Donald” of course, but with his good friend, George Ross. The seminar, or as a colleague of mine was wont to mispronouncedly say, “seminauer” (must have been the Germanic equivalent) was entitled “Getting Wealth the Trump Way.” The letter was addressed to “Bill J. Byrne,” a combination of both the informal and formal ren-

dering of my name. A conscious attention grabbing hook, I think.

The generous offer to waive (wave?) the \$149.00 fee in exchange for my attendance was tempting. It got a little better, this generous offer, because it included a free copy of Donald Trump's book, *TRUMP Style Negotiating*. Purportedly, I would come away from this all day (8:00 am to 5:30 pm) bottom-testing learning event with one or several ways to "find income producing properties the Trump way." Also, I would "cash in on the new trillion dollar booming foreclosure opportunity" waiting for me. If I garnered "just one new idea," and there were bound to be a treasure trove more of good ideas, I would be on my way to riches. In a twinkling, I would be able to trade my professorial image for that of an Enron/WorldCom predator on the less fortunate.

I pondered both that prospect and the accompanying brochure, heavily promoting Trump-advice. Doesn't the word "trump" connote something of an aggressive tactic? Hah, I trump you! I'm the great trumper! Take that! Egad, I've become "The Donald," minus the hair. The opportunity to be schooled by George Ross, the good friend and confidant of "The Donald," was intriguing, but I decided to put my possible attendance on what I refer to as my "backbyrner." I need to attend a "You Can Be Anybody You Want To Be and Here Are Your Choices" seminar first.

Memories light some dark corners of my seminared mind. There was the presenter who made a point with our eager assembled group by toting a pitcher full of water up an eight-foot ladder in the middle of the hotel meeting room, - a sort of Jack and Jill seminar-opening gambit. Shock and awe was the intent, I suppose. Having reached the ladder's top, or at least as far as he dared to go, he then proceed to pour the water onto the carpeted floor of the room. The point he was making escaped me then, as it does now -something about wasting personal resources, maybe. I've always wondered if the hotel personnel ever could figure out where all that water on the rug came from.

Among the materials and handouts that are a part of every seminar leader's stock-in-trade is his cache of humor. Generally it is a joke with a point or a witty rejoinder to a participant. A feature of a widely promulgated seminar is the inclusion of a joke sharing time, *usually* right after the oatmeal cookies. The mission statement of the founder of Esalen has it that, "The Esalen Institute exists to promote the harmonious development of the whole person. It is a learning organization dedicated to restricted exploration of the human potential, and resists religious, scientific and other dogmas except for gestalt psychotherapy, which permeates all levels of the community based staff and business model." If that piece of hyperbole weren't funny enough, some of the sessions were conducted in the nude. Courtesy of one presenter, who had done the "Esalen thing," is the story of an attendee who was asked what impressed him most about the experience. His reply, "the seats on the cane chairs!"

You should also know that seminar "schtick" is de rigueur. A common ploy is to toss a hackysack to some unsuspecting sitter and then, after you knew enough not to duck, to be asked a question by the leader. The catcher in the "u" then either answers a question or volunteers some information and tosses it to someone else. At other times, it takes the form of some provocative statement or story, something to set the attendees on the edge of their seats, expectantly waiting for more pearls. Jackie Cooper, not the actor of the same name, but an automobile sales trainer of some renown, was full of "sayins " Automobile sales persons would flock to his "workshops" and later be so taken with him that they would have several of these quotes tattooed on their bodies, usually in obscure locations so as not to scare away a prospective client. I remember this nugget, "life is too short to drive a boring (borin) car." Words to live by or tattoo inconspicuously!

Gurus such as Jackie Cooper abound in the cottage seminar industry, and sometimes you come away with a little more understanding about life. I attended several company-sponsored seminars given by Dennis Waitley, described as "one of

America's most respected authors, keynote lecturers, and productivity consultants on high performance human achievement." What I came away with was not all that bad—"Expect the best, plan for the worst, and prepare to be surprised." From Larry Wilson, founder of a heavily weighted seminar company aptly named Wilson Learning, I've borrowed, "I have a great memory. Only it's short!" When I supervised a company's auto show program, I spent countless hours learning about professional automobile racing and its life lessons at the feet of Bobby Unser, three-time Indy 500 champion, as he lectured me and the crowds on behalf of the manufacturer. I understand him and why he would say, "Desire is the secret of every man's career. Not education. Not being born with hidden talents. Desire!" Easy for him to say!

Seminar talent doesn't come cheap. I remember one presenter telling me that his stated intention was "to deliver one hundred presentations a year and charge \$10,000 dollars per," effectively reaching the one million dollar goal he felt was within his reach. If he ever achieved that I don't know, but he was talented. In my corporate marketing days, I was asked to inquire on the availability of the prolific writer and lecturer, Dr. Dwayne Dyer, for a company motivation program we were mounting. I phoned his personal assistant, Maya—this was when he operated out of Miami, not the lavish digs he occupies nowadays in Hawaii—and was told the price would be a five-figure number for a half-day program, plus two first-class round trip tickets for him and his traveling companion, presumably the same Maya. Instead, we went for Lou Holtz, then coaching at Notre Dame who, as far as I know, didn't have a "traveling companion." He commanded a respectable but modest four-figure fee to entertain everyone with football lore and the "if-you-get-knocked-down, pull-yourself-up-and-get-back-in-there" stuff.

Evaluations, or "evals" in seminar-speak, conclude the seminar experience. I've never taken these very seriously. If the group is happy to get "out of jail" and has had a generally positive experience, these reviews will be good for the most

part. As a presenter, I always felt with Horatio that “there needs no ghost . . . come from the grave to tell” me how well or badly I’ve done. I pretty much knew. One presenter I’ve worked with had a different take on the subject. He saw evaluations as a report to his boss and a continued job-justifier. He would grease the process by concluding his seminar with words to the effect that “you (attendees) were the finest I’ve ever had the pleasure to lead.” Then, he would pass out the evaluation sheets, expecting reciprocal high praise. When he collected the evaluations, he would cull them and only send the good ones to the home office!

And let’s not forget that besides the psychobabble baggage we may leave with, there are the marketing materials. These include audiotapes, videotapes or DVD’s, pre, during or post-seminar workbooks, and loose-leaf folders that allow us to review what we learned and continue to live the seminar experience. They may or may not be included in the seminar price, but if not, are certain to be hawked as we exit the gathering place.

I’ve indicated at the outset that I’m ambivalent about the efficacy of seminar-ism. Still, there are several I would consider attending. One would definitely be an Anger Management offering, not because I’m prone to inordinate outbursts these days. Rather, I wonder what it would be like to be locked in a room with a group that sends out smoke signals in everything they do. The presenter in this tinderbox atmosphere is in the words of poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti, “constantly risking absurdity and death above the heads of his audience.” Still, it might be worthwhile to see him or her succeed or fail, to observe what techniques quell the rages or what flash points invite a group conflagration.

I need to understand more of the views of Lyndon LaRouche, and so, a LaRouche seminar is, to quote an over-used cliché, “on my radar screen.” I wonder if Lyndon is as pro-radar as he is pro-nuclear power and anti-global warming. Anyway, why I have to attend one of his group’s seminars is because of a brief encounter I had on my university campus. As the pro-

LaRouche minions were setting up to distribute his latest literature, I remarked to one set-up person in passing that I thought he was “a crazy.” The minion differed, indicated that I was being rude, which I was, and said “I should open my mind before I opened my mouth.” So, LaRouchers, after you read this, look me up and send me an invitation. I promise to behave rationally and politely.

Ever since I’ve read about them, I’ve wanted to go to a Pritikin seminar. Healthy eating has never been a strong point for me. For me, a beer and some pizza are as close to a gourmet meal as it gets these days. If ever I win the lottery, a Pritikin center will be my first stop. If there is a tough-love approach to eating healthily—Pritikin has that image for me—I’m there.

What I still have to figure out is how to act on my seminar wish development program and in what sequence. Will I fulfill my seminary journey and keep striving to transform myself into a newer, better version of me? Will I become the high-priest of healthy eating, turning myself into an angry, semi-starved acolyte of LaRouchism?. Will I reconsider my trumping of “The Donald,” get with the wealth program, not worry about winning the lottery, and pay my own way to Pritikin? Maybe a wait and see attitude may work best for me. Ferlinghetti’s poetic advice is to become “the super realist who must perforce perceive taut truth before the taking of each stance or step.” Sound advice, I think, for this closet seminarian.