

What Was I Thinking?

One of the surefire signs of growing older is a decreasing tolerance for hackneyed catchphrases.

I think “Been there, done that” has mercifully run its course, but there are plenty of other maddening phrases vying to replace it. For example, if I read one more opinion piece with the title “What were they thinking,” I may come unglued.

Even before I read the article underneath that particular headline, I’m thinking, “This was written by someone who didn’t try very hard to see the other side of the issue.” Worse than that, the phrase is dismissive – the literary equivalent of rolling one’s eyes. It implies that the people in question are idiots, or at best have taken temporary leave of their senses.

I’m somewhat famous for giving people the benefit of the doubt. Every time I hear something that seems totally ridiculous at first blush, my next thought is, “This makes no sense. There must be more to it than that.” Almost always, there is.

Author, writer, and radio/TV personality Andy Rooney probably has been the best at folksy, opinionated oversimplification. For example, he once wrote a column in 1992 asserting that it was “silly” for Native-Americans to complain about team names like the Redskins saying, “The real problem is, we took the country away from the Indians, they want it back and we’re not going to give it to them. We feel guilty and we’ll do what we can for them within reason, but they can’t have their country back. Next question.”

Not that columnists these days are much different. Few of them seem to present both sides of an issue fairly or give the opposition credit for any merit to their arguments whatsoever. It may make for stimulating (if polarizing) reading, but doesn’t do much to build consensus.

But back to “What were they thinking?” I’ll pick on fellow Writer’s Group member Bob Elliott, if for no other reason than he’s a tough old bird and can take it. Also, he and many others seem fond of that horrible phrase.

I've known and respected Bob for years, and he (like me) has an opinion on just about everything. But he consistently ranks a little low on my Empathy-O-Meter.

His column from July 2nd entitled "What were they thinking?" (argh!) implied that there cannot possibly be any reasonable basis for Iowa Governor Chet Culver to favor union labor in construction projects, for the Iowa City council to replace signs declaring Iowa City to be a Nuclear Weapons Free Zone, for Cedar Rapids to try to lure GoDaddy from Hiawatha or for them to spend \$2 million to preserve a "historic" 180-foot-tall smokestack.

I can make a pretty good case for all of these issues (with the possible exception of the nuclear weapons thing). Interestingly, even after doing my homework on an issue I often ultimately agree with Bob's general (if seemingly knee-jerk) positions. I just like to give a little more credit to the well-meaning and (hopefully) intelligent people on the other side of an often-complicated issue.

Some other projects I'm pretty sure Bob and many others have been critical of are urban chickens, restoring Sutliff Bridge, spending \$80K during a recession on public art and the "weeds" in the Mormon Trek median. I support urban chickens, agree on tabling the public art sculpture (although I'm a supporter), I was a coin-flip on the Sutliff Bridge, and I love the "weeds."

The "weeds" on Mormon Trek, as I'm sure Bob now knows, started out as a prairie restoration project that covered the entire median. There are easy-to-miss signs on each end that identify the project. Complaints about tall prairie plants hanging into the right-of-way caused mowing to occur on each side of the median, thus the moniker "Mormon Trek Mohawk."

The point I'm laboriously making is that we all will probably get along better if the phrase "What were they thinking?" sticks in our throats and ultimately just goes away. I guarantee we won't miss it. Been there, done that (and got the T-shirt).

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