

The Master of Ceremonies Program

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Well, I found my notes, but I haven't located the actual "speech," yet.

It was on 3x5 cards and must be around here somewhere...

It doesn't matter, though: The speech was just a blur - like riding in a car at 70mph, while looking straight down at the highway pavement through binoculars.

But at least I can refer to my notes for the event - the Fall Festival where I was the last-minute replacement MC. They say I've recovered enough to write about it now, so here goes.

It was the year 1987. I belonged to a small, community choir called the Minnetonka Symphony Chorus, where I sang Bass and Baritone. We gave about 4 to 6 concerts per year, usually with the Minnetonka Symphony Orchestra.

There were lotsa "Minnetonka" names. In fact, there were a half dozen or more groups all under the same umbrella: Choirs and orchestras for young and old - and those in between. I had never paid much attention to the other groups or their names - and their names changed every few years, as I recall.

So one year, they decided to hold a fund raiser for all the groups, which would be called the Fall Festival. It would be held on a Saturday evening in November, in the gymnasium of the school where we were headquartered, and all the groups would play or sing.

My section leader, Robb (a pseudonym), was to be the Master of Ceremonies. Robb was a good choice: He worked in sales, and was a very smooth and unruffled speaker.

One evening, during a rehearsal break, he said to me, "Y'know that Fall Festival I'm supposed to MC in a few weeks? Well, there's a slight chance I won't be able to make it. I might have to take my son deer hunting that weekend. If we go on our hunting trip, do you think you could fill in for me as the MC?"

My throat dropped into my stomach because sometimes I get very nervous when speaking in front of a large group. It's unpredictable, but when it happens, it's bad, and sometimes I even shake. I said, "Yes, but I **really** hope you can make it to the Festival."

He said, "Well, don't worry. We probably won't go, but if we do, I'll leave you all my notes. All you would have to do is read them."

I still felt as if the sword of Damocles was hanging over me, supported

by a micro-thin wire, but said nothing. I should have just said "No."

A few weeks later, on a Thursday evening - 2 days before the Festival, I had a message waiting on my answering machine. It was Robb. He was just calling to let me know that he and his son had unexpectedly decided to go deer hunting after all, and that all his notes were at the music office. All I had to do was to go pick them up, and use them on Saturday evening. He wished everyone good luck and wished he could be there.

I immediately called his domicile. His wife answered. She informed me that the pair had escaped hours ago - mid-afternoon.

It was around 9:30 PM. I called the music office and let the phone ring 525 times. No answer. They too had escaped.

In about 46 hours, I was supposed to MC a music program, had no notes, and didn't even know what was on the program or who was performing it.

The next morning, after a few fitful hours of rest - possibly even some sleep - I called the music office and asked them if they could gather up Robb's notes, and I would drive over and get them that evening.

"What notes??" Again, my throat sank to my stomach which was now doing glissandos on its internal keyboard.

"Robb's notes for the Fall Festival tomorrow night. He was going to MC the program, and said he left his notes with the office for me to pick up. I'm filling in for him. He unexpectedly went deer hunting."

"Just a minute..." There was muffled conversation with several people, then she came back. "No one here knows what you're talking about. You say he left his notes with us?"

"Well, that's what he claimed... I'm in a real jam, here. How am I going to MC the program when I don't have any information? I don't even know the names of all the groups!"

"Come on over tomorrow morning and we'll see what we can find for you to use."

I drove over to the office Saturday morning in a record 35.1 minutes, and walked down the long hallway to the office in a record 1.3 minutes.

The office ladies were very helpful. They handed me stacks of literature about each group, the history of the umbrella organization, etc - each one the size of a corporate report.

There was only one problem: I didn't know what pieces were to be performed by what groups in what order - ie, the meat of the

message. They said, "No one knows that except Roger, and he has all that information in his head. It's not written down anywhere."
Roger was the Music Director for the organization.

I said, "Well, let's find Roger and get the information."

"Oh, that's impossible: He's in rehearsal until 2pm.
You know all about the raffle prizes and drawings, right?
What they are and who draws them and when and what for?"

The doctors say that's probably when I began to exhibit the first signs of combat stress, coupled with minor overtones of light schizophrenia and deja fugue - or something like that.
I concur.

We tried to locate the custodian (Denny), but he wasn't in the "warm room" or anywhere else. I tried the microphone at the lectern on the gym's stage, but it didn't work. My notes say that circuit breaker switch 27 should turn on the mike, but something was hosed up...

I drove back home and began writing down ideas of what to say.
I can hardly believe what I wrote down as possibilities:

Name Tag: Dave Morton, Bass. And I'll try to live up to that name..." [really bad - I didn't use it]

Roger: A lefty from Gray's Bay conducting a left-handed orchestra.
[I don't think I used that line, either]

Look, Mama, it's Coco! [I have no idea what that means]

Cindy Larson's brandy snifter. [???

Some of the music tonight represents work in progress which will be further honed and polished under the guidance of Mr. Hoel. [Too complicated, and not complimentary...]

I drove back to the office, arriving around 3pm. The ladies gave me a typed listing of the pieces, the groups which would be performing them, and in what order. Also listed were all the prizes, and a note to hold a drawing for 2 prizes between each group's presentation. Thank you, ladies, and God bless you!!

And there at the bottom of the list is the reason I wrote that "work in progress" line which I didn't use:

"We want to deemphasize the concert aspect of this program since we are not as well rehearsed as we would be for our regular concerts..."

I guess I must have sensed that before receiving the official word. Now I have the program notes, but it appears that we shouldn't even

have a program since we're not ready for it! How did I get into this mess?

"On this list you gave me, what are these people's titles?" I asked.
"Okay: Jackie is past President of the organization, Cindy is the current Pres and 2nd violinist in the main orchestra - but she won't be there, the Civic Orchestra will be performing different pieces than are shown - I'll give you those before you leave, and will be conducted by Mark Czech, but his last name is pronounced "Zek"...."

My eyes were glazing over like a windshield - fixed, uncomprehending, lifeless...

I drove back home and started writing. Let's see: A title should probably go at the top... "FALL FESTIVAL MC NOTES" - just in case I lost them in the building. I chuckled at the pathetic, visual pun: McNotes... I could only hope to aspire to the level of writing "McNotes" in the space of 1 hour. It was already 4pm. The performance started at 7, I had to be there by 6, I had barely started on my notes, and still had to iron a white shirt and drive over there.

I finished everything and arrived back at the school about 6:05. Finding the custodian in the warm room, I told him of the problem with the microphone on the lectern. He said it was broken, and gave me a portable mike to use which plugs into the floor in the middle of the gym. My base of operations would no longer be a stage, a lectern, and a backstage where I could hide: It would be a folding chair in the middle of the gym, isolated from all the performing groups, with no shield and no place to hide. Kind of like sitting in an "interrogation" chair with bright lights above, and hundreds of mean-spirited interrogators in front of me.

The audience and players and singers began filing in around 6:30, as I sat on my interrogation chair, watching.

Musicians from the two orchestras began tuning up and practicing short phrases from tonight's music. Some French horns were running scales, while the trumpets were reviewing a 10-measure, difficult passage. The trombones just played loud notes - very loud - like tugboat horns clearing the way through the harbor fog. The triangles were tested with klings, and the cymbals with klang, and the timpanis were slowly tuned by tapping with the fingers, as the timpanist leaned over and placed his ear next to each drum.

The oboes, as usual, rehearsed snake-charming passages that sounded like a scene from the movie Frankenstein when Igor (the doctor's assistant) would appear, mysteriously sitting in a window frame. And of course, the flutes played passages which

must have been written for the first day in the life of a butterfly - racing to the treetops, and diving to the ground. Add to this the violins, violas, cellos, double-basses, clarinets, pianos for the choirs - all rehearsing at the same time. It sounded like a musical popcorn popper running on High Volume, and it was fun and exciting to listen to.

The choir members - hundreds of them - gathered near their chairs in front of the orchestras. My own choir had the singers dressed in semi-formal attire - dark suits and white shirts for the men, and black skirts and white blouses for the women. The kids had their own choir, and were dressed in special "kid" uniforms. Patty, our professional accompanist, wore a full-length black dress, and was warming up on the ivories.

The audience was assembling in the bleachers, and making quite a racket as friends greeted each other and shrieked appropriately. In spite of the noise, you could always hear, "How ARE you?!" from someone. Little kids were playing tag in front of the bleachers, darting to and fro, as their parents occasionally cautioned them to be careful and to slow down.

The whole place was alive with the buzz of humanity and music. For a while, all was right with the world. I had nothing to do, so I just sat there, awaiting my execution. My only faint hope, during this time, was that the Governor would call and give me a reprieve, but I didn't see a telephone anywhere in the gym.

Finally, at 7:13 sharp, Roger stood up and gave me the nod to begin.

I rose from my metal, folding chair in the middle of the gym, gripping the hand-held mike like a club.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to the annual Hopkins High School Dance in the Gym." I figured if I made them either laugh or wonder if they had the wrong night, my task might be a bit easier. There was muffled laughter. Maybe it was just "snickering", but let's say it was muffled laughter.

"Tonight we are pleased to present the first, annual Fall Festival..." My voice droned on for a few more milliseconds. Then I announced the first numbers which would be performed by the Civic Orchestra under the baton of Mark Zekkkk.

Bam. I sat down and tried to look invisible until the drawing. Couldn't do it: My foot was shaking, and everyone was staring at me. I know what they were probably thinking: *"Who is that guy, and why is he sitting in the middle of the gym holding a microphone like a club???"*

Finally, the first performance ended, and it was time for the prize drawings.

"Thank you, Mark. Now it's time for our first prize drawings, and boy, do we have some good ones! The first one is a 25-pound Salted Nut Roll, and the second one is a brunch for four at the Seasons in the Park. Will Jennifer Johnson from the Children's Choir please step up to our raffle bin and draw the first prizes of the evening."

No one moved and nothing happened. All the people were frozen like hardened taffy. The only thing you could hear was the soft whirring of the ceiling fans high above us - normally an inaudible sound - slowly twisting in the wind... I looked up to watch them turn, just to be sure I hadn't become part of a glass casting of an interesting scene. I was right: The fan blades were turning slowly, and nothing else in the gymnasium was moving.

Someone in the school walked down the hallway, past the sets of open gym doors. At each doorway, she peered into the gymnasium at this surreal scene: About 400 musicians were seated on the gym floor (on chairs), and another 500 audience members were seated in the bleachers, but no sound was emanating from this tableau, as if they'd all been the victims of a mass hypnosis. Just nearly perfect silence, the soft whirring of ceiling fans, and about 900 interrogators staring at me.

This was material for Salvadore Dali, I thought, with softened watches draped over the school walls, and half-melted fan blades thinning out all the way to the floor of the gym, forming a little prison cell of narrowed, fan-blade bars. Perhaps the 900 people would be represented by dozens of animal eyes staring out of the gloom, waiting for me to weaken and fall, so they could attack me with greater safety.

The doctors differ in their analyses, but they generally agree that the "whirring of the fans" probably explains why I usually go into a catatonic trance when I'm around quiet fans of any kind. One specialist explained that not all fans are bad, and some are even good. He's probably on **their** side. I just try to shut out their sound. That's how I cope.

"Apparently Jennifer is playing hooky, again. Could someone else step up to the blaffle brin? Otherwords, I'll have to pull for the prizes over there... Oh good then... Here comes someone, it looks like... No - they're just changing seats... Would you like to volunteer to draw some names, ma'am? No? Anyone else?"

The entire evening went like that. Sometimes I would begin announcing the next group, and sit down before I had finished the last syllable of the announcement. Sometimes my foot would shake so badly that I'd have to grab it like Dr. Strangelove did with his mechanical, gloved hand. Since half the prize drawing people were apparently missing, we all got better at

improvising an alternate plan, and that part went better as time went on.

The only other part of the evening I can remember is when I was finally done with this evil experiment. I announced with confidence, "Thank you all for coming, and good night!" I switched off my microphone like it was a nuclear device on a timer, and returned it to the empty custodian's office. Free at last, free at last... I went home and hid in a dark closet for a few hours.

At the next choir rehearsal, Robb, who sat next to me, said cheerily, "Well, how did it go on Saturday?" Frankly, I was speechless, and could do nothing but stare at him for a few moments. I was incapable of answering his question, and was locked up like Fort Knox at midnight in a thick fog. He's probably the one who turned me in...

The moral of the story is this: If someone asks you to volunteer for something you really don't want to do, just tell them you might have to go hunting that weekend, and they should find someone else.

If that doesn't work, just say, "Look Mama, it's Coco!"
The world will be a much better place.