



UP front

On Saturdays, particularly this time of year, the square that I describe as "mine" bustles. Visitors linger. Locals detour a few blocks out of their straight-line ways to pass under its majestic oaks and by a proud, unwavering James Oglethorpe. Outdoor seats at the corner coffee shop and the nearby ersatz English pub don't remain empty for more than a few minutes after they come free.

Musicians busk, their guitar or banjo or violin cases open to donations. Artists paint, with intentions to send tourists home with impulse purchases inspired by vacation-bliss that, unfortunately, is harder to preserve than it is to hang a picture on a wall.

Last Saturday, one of the "regular" painters was sporting a new, royal blue smock-vest. Big blaze orange letters dominated the garment's back. "NO BENCH QUESTIONS," it demanded. Which bench, you wonder? Forrest Gump's. It was in my square – Chippewa – that Forrest sat, waiting for a bus, and narrated his life story, making the surrounding acre (ish) famous.

Some of the Chippewa painters are...eccentric...either moderately annoying or charming, depending on my mood. The vest guy? He's different. He's not a colorful character. He's a man on a merchant mission. I've never seen him smile.

His new vest suddenly amplified my distaste for him, to something that felt like hate. I thought, "Does he not recognize the hypocritical irony of his new catchphrase?!" It's BECAUSE of the bench-that-shall-not-be-discussed that he erects his easel a pitching wedge from my front door. Thanks to the bench, he has a self-replenishing and undrainable pool of potential marks to whom he can peddle his unremarkable landscapes. Unlike the aforementioned coffee shop owner and pub proprietors, not to mention my neighbors and me, he pays no rent, mortgage, property taxes or utilities, for his prime location. He just parks his minivan nearby, seamlessly sets up shop, and pockets unreported cash. But don't disturb him with your troublesome Tom Hanks inquiries, he's busy brushing an egret into a 12-by-16 marsh.

I thought of these things, with the vitriolic tone you infer, and then I felt ashamed. "Sure, he's a hypocrite," I began my internal monologue with self-indulgent qualification, "but so are you ('you,' in this case, meaning me)." Like the vested painter, I don't have claim to the park or its surroundings, yet I benefit from it in many ways. I'm in the middle of everything. My world is within walking distance. The same things that attract the tourists and the painters and the moviemakers make me happy every day. I didn't create the square nor do I maintain its lush and varied flora...others do that work for me. Granted, some days, unprompted, I ask map-readers where they're headed; but there are many times when I offer them little more than a dirty look.

So, the smock-man is a hypocrite (and a bit of a creative hack), but so am I. So are we all, actually. That's the theory that began to coalesce in my head.

Typically, when being superfluously cerebral, I examine my words. Etymology. What did the ancients choose to call a thing, how did the thing's name evolve, and how does that choice and evolution impact our ability to communicate today?

The word-history of HYPOCRITE, per Merriam-Webster: "...came into English from the Greek, hypokrites, which means "an actor" or "a stage player;" the Greek word itself a compound noun that literally translate as "an interpreter from underneath." Actors in ancient Greek theater wore large masks to mark which character they were playing and interpreted the story from underneath their masks. The Greek word came to refer to any person who was wearing a figurative mask and pretending to be someone or something they were not. This sense was taken into medieval French and then into English. In 13th Century religious texts, it refers to someone who pretends to be morally good or pious in order to deceive others. In the 1700s, it morphed into the usage familiar to us today: "a person who acts in contradiction to his or her stated feelings or beliefs."

So, a hypocrite is a liar, of sorts, holding the rest of the world to more rigorous standards than he holds himself. Sadly, pointing out hypocrisy has become the currency of modern debate. Consider opinion commentators...so much of the "substance" of their arguments can be reduced to highlighting their opponents' hypocrisy. Same for politicians and policy-makers. Same for academics. Same for you and me. Why? Because it's easy. It's intellectually lazy. Research and suasion...these can be tiresome and hard. Logic and the vision to project a decision's long-term impact...these are barriers-to-entry to the realm of true intelligence, hurdles that a keyboard or a megaphone or a cable show or support of a sympathetic and/or manipulative super-PAC enable opinionistas to run around. Explaining why someone else is an idiot is a lot easier than convincing someone that you yourself are smart.

When might we approach the best version of our society? When we return to advocacy-based dialogue, where we argue *in-favor* of ideas, rather than focus on our opponents' positions' imperfections, which likely exist in similar numbers to our own.

Back to the original BENCH QUESTIONS...there's irony in their answers, too. The truth: The Forrest bench isn't in Chippewa Square anymore. It hasn't been there for almost 30 years. And then, it was nothing more than a movie prop. Manufactured for a particular purpose, like so much outrage is today.

And, paraphrasing Forrest quoting his Mama: This column is like a box of chocolates; you never know what you're gonna get.

Scott A. Lauriat

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Congratulations, CLASS OF 2021!

The annual rite of spring
that has become
The Skinny Graduation Issue
is fast approaching.



Send us those high school senior photos and a sentence or two about your plans for the future, where you plan to attend college, what high school you are graduating from, and we will be happy to include them as part of our salute to the Class of 2021.

Email your submissions to mail@theskinnie.com or drop them by our office: 15 Lake Street, Suite 280 (across from Publix).

HURRY! DEADLINE IS JUNE 11!