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Reciprocal Magic: When a Folklorist Meets a Sideshow Talker

BY STEVE ZEITLIN

Just recently, I received an email from David Bloodgood, whom I had heard from—as a carnival pitchman might say—not just 5 years ago, not 10 years ago, but more than 45 years ago. It was way back in 1979. At the time, David was running a costume photo booth at carnivals, when he saw an ad in an entertainments magazine called *Amusement Business.* The ad had been placed there by myself and the folks at the Smithsonian's Festival of American Folklife; we were looking for old-time medicine show performers. He responded, suggesting we contact his father Fred, who worked from 1928 until 1939, as a medicine show doc throughout Georgia, Mississippi, Alabama, and Texas. He also worked as a carnival "geek" show pitchman in the North during the off-season. A geek show featured a seemingly deranged man who would bite off the head of a snake or a chicken as part of the show.

David Bloodgood's email read: "I doubt that it will come as a surprise to you to know that my father, Fred Foster Bloodgood, considered you to be one of the most important people in his life. As he might have said: 'I will always measure time first from the period before I knew you, and then everything that came thereafter. . .' Now, as I myself reach nearly 80 years of age—which is around the time he began to resurrect the med show and tent show performances—I have come to realize what a remarkable gift it is to have some part of your early life acknowledged, honored, and re-lived as you enter old age. You brought him great happiness, and you validated his pride in a part of his life that, both when experienced originally and for many years thereafter, was demeaned and disparaged by many people. That is an amazing gift. One that you shared freely, graciously, and often patiently. Thank you."

While it was deeply gratifying to hear that the programs that we worked on together had such a positive impact on Fred, I was also led to reflect on the rich impact that Fred Bloodgood had—and continues to have—on my life. Fred talked poetry. The many letters he wrote to us were poetry. I write poetry as a daily practice, and from Fred Bloodgood, I have gathered a wide variety of imagery and ideas that informed my own poetry.

The Geek, 1950. *All photos courtesy of Fred Foster Bloodgood/City Lore.*

Fred was once described as "a master jeweler in the timeless language of the pitch." He was fond of stating the pitchman's credo:

Fred Bloodgood performing his medicine show pitch for the documentary *Free Show Tonite,* 1980.

"Never, never use one word when four will suffice." The medicine shows were always presented "free, gratis, and for nothing." A sucker for alliteration, he presented "glittering galaxies of gorgeously gowned girls" and featured, among others, "Tillie Tashman, that teasing, tantalizing, tormenting, tempestuous, tall, tan torsotwister from Texas." I certainly consider him one of the most inspiring, incandescent, irreplaceable, inventive, and absolutely inimitable (as Fred might say) collaborators in my life.

I recall a program officer at the National Endowment for the Humanities once advising me that for my grant proposals, I should go easy on the superlatives to describe our programs. Fred reveled in superlatives and hyperbole. Superlatives and hyperboles were his phrasing of choice. All of his attractions were billed from the bally platform as "the most interesting thing you've seen in all your life." From Fred, I learned the power of the pitch, how to use language to engage and hold an audience—whether I am doing a workshop or writing a grant proposal. Fred taught me to understand a friend's sardonic description of life in our country: "No matter where we start off in American culture, we always end up in sales."

Fred, like other sideshow artists, used similes to compare the outrageous antics of their attractions with the mundane, everyday experiences of their audience. He described the wounds inflicted by "venomous reptiles" on his beleaguered geek, a local drunk who was paid to bite off the head of a chicken or a snake: "You will see the blood course from those wounds, just as you'd pour water from a glass." Standing on a raised platform in front of the geek show tent, he'd announce:

When I throw that live chicken, you see me now holding,
Down deep into that steel-bound cage,
You're going to see a most amazing change come over the old woman.
The eyes will dilate, the pupils glow just like two red-hot coals of fire.
You'll hear her emit just one long, soul-searing scream,
And then she'll leap clear across that steel-bound arena,
Catch that bird between those massive jaws,
Bite off the head with those long and tusky teeth.
And then, ladies and gentlemen,
You'll see her suck, drain, and draw
Every drop of blood from that bleeding, throbbing, quivering, pulsating body,
With the very same relish as you or I
Would suck the juice of an orange.
It's one of the most disgusting,
One of the most repulsive,
Yet, I'll say one of the most interesting sights
You've seen in all your life.

The first program in which we featured Fred at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival was the 1979 Medicine Show. The next year, we brought him back to perform in American Talkers, a program that featured carnival sideshow pitchmen, street criers, and auctioneers. Fred performed his pitches for the Geek Show, and two other pitchmen, John Bradshaw and his mentor, Bobby Reynolds, represented carnival sideshows. John's girlfriend, Diane, played the role of the woman who lay in the sword box while John appeared to cut her into pieces, by thrusting "steel blades" into the box. Diane, however, arrived a day late for the festival, so my wife Amanda, who went on to write her dissertation about sideshow talkers, street criers, and auctioneers, had to play the part of "Serpentina, who twists and turns her body around those sharp steel blades like a giant snake or reptile."

We brought Fred back to the festival for a third time as part of our Celebration of the American Tent Show, which included Chautauqua performances, Toby Comedy Shows, Melodramas, and even old-time magicians, Ken and Roberta Griffin, who performed large-scale magic tricks such as levitation, a stunt also known as "The Floating Lady."

Fred was not only a consummate poet of the pitch, but someone who spoke in conversation with a wry humor, expressed in a gracious, old-fashioned, poetic vernacular. He was dear to me, not only because I reveled in his art and in his presence—but also because he brought out poetry in me, inspired some of my favorite poems. For myself, a key way of giving life meaning is through poetry—both poetry that I chronicle in the voices of those I work with as a folklorist and in the poetry I write—so often inspired by those voices.

Fred Bloodgood with the author's son, Benjamin Zeitlin, 1981.

Just a year after the Smithsonian festivals with Fred, when my son was born via C-section, I wrote:

When they sawed Amanda in half
And pulled a rabbit from the hat
The magician said,
"It's a boy, it's a beautiful boy,"
Who five years later asked his dad,
"If it's a trick,
Is there no such thing as magic?
Only tricksters, no magicians?"
And can it be that life
is all we know of miracles?

Many years later, now in my 70s, as I faced open-heart surgery, images from those days came back to me, as I pondered my own mortality.

Learning to Live with Spirits

Upon my death,
I bequeath to each of you who loved my disappearing soul—
a magician's cloak—to conjure me in memory.
Proceed with a light touch—
tip your hat, wave the cloak across the table—
like a bouquet of roses, my recalcitrant spirit reappears,
leaving the audience of mourners astonished, hushed.
Invoke our favorite punch lines
with a magician's sleight of hand.
Levitate a memory till my spirit lingers in the air

The set up for Fred Bloodgood's Geek Show. The Geek was named Neola because the sound of those vowels would, according to Bloodgood, carry long distances up and down the midway.

(the secret to the trick
is that we loved each other so, so much).
Though the swords of death skewer the sword box,
My spirit lies curled around the blades, untouched.

For myself, and for the artists with whom I've collaborated, both folklore and poetry play key roles in the process of meaning creation. My hope is that the work I've done has inspired the people that I've worked with, as much as it has inspired me. I hope it has brought out their creativity, as much as it has brought out mine. I never ran away to join the circus, but I felt like I did when I worked with Fred Bloodgood.

When you communicate deeply with kindred spirits across difference, there is indeed a reciprocal magic that ricochets back and forth. Being a folklorist has given me the opportunity to collaborate and connect deeply with folks, such as Kewulay Kamara, a Sierra Leonian epic poet; Marjorie Eliot, who offers free jazz concerts in her living room; Moishe Sacks, Rabbi, baker and homespun philosopher; and Tony Butler, a poetic and philosophical homeless man who lived in the subways. Meeting and bonding with people drastically different from ourselves can inspire us in unexpected ways.

I think of Fred each time we run a public program at City Lore, the nonprofit cultural center I direct on New York's Lower East Side. When I stand at the door wondering if we'll be able to attract an audience—when the crowds are not necessarily flocking—I often think of Fred, who would stand in front of the gathered crowd on carnival midways, holding a chicken in the air to attract his audience, then saying, "We are going to feed the geek this chicken you see me here now holding, whether one of you comes, all of you come, or none of you come."

Fred and I had a running joke that every few years, I'd bring him out of retirement to perform his pitches "one more time, with feeling." Each time Fred performed for us, he would address the audience by saying, "Here, we are presenting what conceivably may be the last, the final medicine show that the world will ever know. The quaint rhetoric you hear will vanish, like the medicine show people themselves, vanish into a thousand yesterdays." We cannot bring it back, he would end, quoting the poet Kahlil Gibran, "to cancel half a line."

The phone in my office rang in 1997, and Fred's wife, Mary, told me that Fred had passed away. There would be no more medicine shows and no more Fred Bloodgood. He had stepped out of retirement for the last time. I stood, closed the door of my office, and wept.

Steve Zeitlin is the Founding Director of City Lore. His latest book is *JEWels: Teasing Out the Poetry in Jewish Humor and Storytelling.* You can watch Fred Bloodgood's medicine show pitch in the documentary *Free Show Tonite* at Folkstreams.net. Part of this column was developed for a Botkin Lecture at the Library of Congress, "The Poetry of Everyday Life: Reflections of an Urban Folklorist." Photo by Amanda Dargan.

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