

Looking Into “What’s My Line?”

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When I was a kid, around eleven or twelve I suppose--this was way back in the 1950s, Saint Paul, Minnesota--in an upstairs room Mother and Dad and I rented in Mr. Jensen’s house—he and his family lived on the first floor--all alone, I watched a game show called “What’s My Line?” on CBS at 9:30 p.m. on Sunday nights on our 17-inch black-and-white Zenith television set that looked like a small refrigerator, never missed the show.

I never thought about what I was doing, or why, and with what effect, sprawled out as I was on the couch staring at the fuzzy black-and-white images of “What’s My Line,” which was happening 1,500 miles away and had absolutely nothing to do with me. (Now I sit rather than sprawl, and it’s a laptop and not a television set, but the couch and looking at something is still the core activity in my life.) As I watch kinescopes (pre-video tape recordings) of the show online now--Google “What’s My Line 1950s”--it hits me how truly remarkable it was, bordering on bizarre, and how that weekly activity said a lot about what my life was about in those years and what it’s become since.

I assume you don’t know about “What’s My Line?” Now days, half-hour game shows are syndicated, not on a network, and shown on local stations at 7:00 or 7:30 in the early evening. “What’s My Line?” was a prime time—eight to eleven p.m.—network show. And it was very popular. Though I didn’t realize it, I was far from alone watching it. Just now, I checked, and in 1952-’53, “What’s My Line?” had the 20th highest rating of 35.9—35.9 percent of all of the television sets in America were tuned in to that show. People watched a lot of television in those days. In 2018-19, the 20th highest rated show, “Gray’s Anatomy,” had a 6.5 rating compared to the 35.9 “What’s My Line?” attracted. The number one show that season was “Sunday Night Football” with a 10.9. “I Love Lucy,” the number one show in 1952-’53, had a 67.3.

The premise of “What’s My Line?” was that four celebrity panelists would try to guess an everyday person’s occupation (line). That’s it--a hit prime time show--people trying to guess what someone does for work. In addition to the “line guessing,” there was a “special feature,” as it was called, which took up the last third of the show and had nothing to do with occupations. The panelists put on blindfolds and tried to guess the identity of a “mystery celebrity,” usually an entertainer of some stripe. The job-holding contestants and mystery celebrities sat next to host John Charles Daly, who counseled them in their answers, called on the panelists in turn to ask yes-or-no questions designed to ferret out the line or identity, whichever it was, and flipped cards for each “no” answer to a panelist’s question--\$5 a no, ten no’s, \$50, and the panel loses the game. Every Sunday at 9:30 p.m. in the Midwest, there I lay motionless and silent watching middle-aged New York types engaged in this activity.

Some things I’ve picked up about the show this time around:

“What’s My Line?” was 26 minutes in length as opposed to the 22 minutes of modern half-hour shows. Four more minutes of commercials these years.

The four panelists and the host were in evening dress. I never consciously noticed it back then. Floor-length ball gowns, often with gloves, for the women; black tie or tuxedos for the men--most often the panel was two men and two women. Why were they doing this? I suppose to set themselves off from the unwashed masses and impress them. And yes, the message got through to me: lying there in my itchy sweat socks yellowed from endless washings, it was clear to me that I was in the electronic presence of my betters.

Their manner was oh-so-grand. They shared a smiling, genteel, superior, vaguely condescending persona. Most all of them were in the entertainment field, and reading their Wikipedias, they weren’t exactly Mayflower descendants, but they came off as if they were socialites from the upper East Side or the Hamptons (I lived at 354 Duke Street, wedged between the city hospital and a beer

brewery). Indeed, these were finer folk and well deserving of plebeians' time watching them play a parlor game on a par in seriousness and weight with Sunday afternoon croquet.

The host of the show, political commentator John Charles Daly, had three names while I only had two, and my first one was oddly, as I thought about it later, shortened to Bob. No Bobs on "What's My Line?" And really, no verbal references to first names at all: it was Miss Kilgallen and Mr. Cerf and Miss Francis. Of course, nobody called me Mr. Griffin. And my dad wasn't mister either. He was Walt, the barber—"Short on the sides and back, Walt." Host Daly was particularly good at the snooty self-presentation that characterized "What's My Line?" In contrast, in those years, I was given to nasal bursts of the "Where you guys goin'?" sort.

The panel was fed occupations and celebrity identities ahead of time so they'd look good. This was when the quiz show scandals were headline news—contestants in prime time big-money quiz shows knew answers in advance. "What's My Line?" with its top prize of \$50 never got caught up in that. I recently read that the producers of the show owned up to what was called "gambiting," feeding panelists lines of questions that were humorous or mild double entendres but not telling them the occupation. But looking at the show now, I've come to the conclusion that the show went beyond that; for sure, it was rigged.

I'm exaggerating to keep things brief here, but it would go like this. The occupation, the studio audience and we viewers at home are informed, is "grows and sells dill pickles." The panel is told that the guest is self-employed and deals with a product.

"Is the product made of metal or steel."

"No."

Daly flips a \$5 card.

"Is this a plant or animal?"

"Yes."

"Is it a plant?"

"Yes."

“Do you grow the plant?”

“Yes.”

“Do you also sell the plant?”

“Yes.”

“Is this something that when eaten is usually a side dish, not the main meal?”

“Yes.”

“Is it dill pickles? Do you grow and sell dill pickles?”

“Yes!”

Applause.

The dill pickle person leaves his seat next to John Charles Daly and walks over to shake the hands of the four panelists, the men standing, the women remaining seated, and then exits to rejoin the vast herd of nobodies from which he or she came, never to be seen again.

The celebrity guest is Lana Turner, a big movie star back then.

“Are you in the entertainment field?” a blindfolded panelist asks.

“Yes.”

“Are you in the motion picture industry?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have a film now playing at a Broadway theater?”

“No.”

“One down and nine to go.”

“Were you in a film with John Garfield (the reference is to “The Postman Always Rings Twice”).

“Yes.”

“Are you Lana Turner?”

“Yes.”

Applause. Handshakes. A commercial for Stopette deodorant. I didn't know what a deodorant was.

What did I pick up about me this time around?

How directionless and adrift I was as a child. No goals, nothing I was trying to get done. I went to school every day, but I

had no connection to it, no investment in it. I had no friends that meant anything to me. I rode my bike to Palace playground and drank an endless number of sugary Cokes for five cents each from the Coke machine that couldn't have been good for me and played third base for the Palace Peewees baseball team a few Saturday mornings. Besides that, I can't remember what I did at Palace playground. Nobody asked me to do any of it whatever it was or cared not a whit whether I did it or not. The only thing I remember was that they couldn't find a Palace Peewees green and white hat big enough to fit my head and I had to wear my own blue hat, which was so small for me that it gave me headaches and left a ring indented in my forehead. I wished I had a head the size of the other kids'.

I was basically a feral child. Mother did keep my clothes clean and provided food to me I ate on the couch—I wasn't invited to the dinner table, Mother and Dad preferred their privacy--and I had a roof of over my head, though my bedroom was an unheated back porch, which in Minnesota can get scary cold. In the winter, I slept under mountains of blankets in coats and stocking caps and wore wool socks. I was isolated from human contact and care and concern. I had been traumatized—I won't go into details--leaving me frozen, deadened. In recent years, I looked up the word “dissociation” to see if it fit what was going on with me in those years; it seems to.

I watched “What's My Line?” with the same not-connected numbness that I did everything else. The television set was right there, so I clicked in on and stared at its images virtually uncomprehendingly and then watched the next show, whatever it was. Saturday mornings I would start with the “Sky King” adventure show and it went all day until the late evening--the ballgames in the afternoon, the Jackie Gleason show in the evening, and late-night movies on WCCO-TV in Minneapolis. Whenever I wanted to, I went to bed. Nobody paid any attention to when I went to bed or whether I made my bed (I didn't). I didn't know to brush

my teeth. I never went to a dentist or a doctor except when I broke my collar bone when I was about ten, I don't remember how.

“What’s My Line?” contributed to the idea, reinforced by all the other shows, that there were insiders—these upbeat, comfortable-looking celebrities in their evening dress, for example—and there were outsiders—the anonymous people in everyday clothes with off-beat occupations who made brief appearances before their betters, and of course, me. There were doers—like these panelists—and watchers of the doers, like me.

I recently read a book by one of the teenagers who danced to recorded music on Dick Clark’s “American Bandstand” show out of Philadelphia, which I watched every afternoon. It turns out these were working class kids who went on to become hair dressers and hardware store employees, but to me they were on a higher plane of existence than I was because they were on television and I wasn’t. A lesson of television is if you are on television, you are something special.

The memory of me sitting there alone in the late weekday afternoons watching teenagers dance to popular music—the same moves over and over and over again—when there was schoolwork to be done—I had a good mind and could have done well in school, but nobody informed me of that--and fine books to be read and self-expressive things to be written and scenic trails to be hiked leaves me sad but also proud I am of how, with the help of a some people, I turned my life around and, I must say, made something out of myself I feel good about.

I’ll mention two of those people here, this was in my late twenties, I wonder if they are still alive, Bill Hobson and Bill Gardner. While I’m at it, I’ll go back a decade from then and thank people whose names I don’t remember, if I ever knew them. I enlisted in the army at just-turned seventeen—I didn’t know what else to do. In those years, there was the draft, so many of the guys I was in the army with were college graduates of 23 or so. Bless them, they were kind to me and encouraging, something entirely foreign to me. I remember one of them saying, “You could go to college

and become a dentist.” Me? A dentist? He couldn’t have known, but he changed a person’s life saying that. We never know how what is, to us, an off-handed comment or suggestion or affirmation can have monumentally important consequences for another person.

“What’s My Line?” and other shows taught me that there were people graced to be center stage and what things were about and that I wasn’t one of them. I watched “The Roy Rogers Show” on television faithfully. Roy played a cowboy in the show (in real life, he was from Ohio) using his own name (his show business name, his real name was Leonard Slye). He was completely ordinary, and now I notice he sported a bad hairpiece that nobody on the show found remarkable—“What the hell you wearing that rug for, Roy?” But for some reason he was fated to dress in flashy clothes and get all the attention and deference. It was like he was anointed and that for some reason I was slotted to wear inexpensive tee shirts (which I have on at this very moment) and be ignored (which I am at this very moment).

“What’s My Line?” taught me that entertainers were big gigantic deals. Wow, it’s Lana Turner! Real name, Julia Jean Turner, high school drop-out, working stiff for a movie company that sold tickets by selling the notion that she was a star. A year after Lana’s “What’s My Line?” appearance, her teenage daughter knifed to death Lana’s gangster boyfriend who regularly beat Lana up.

“What’s My Line?” helped set a standard for what I was to accept as the pleasures and gratifications in my life. Mildly amusing and very slightly rewarding and time-killing activities were—and still are—my speed. It’s Sunday and I’ll set this writing aside in a minute to gaze at the dots on a lightbulb in the form of NFL football and eat a take-out subway sandwich and a bag of chips and wash it down with a Diet Coke (got to watch my weight). The higher-ups in life’s natural order like the “What’s My Line?” panel go sailing on Sunday afternoons, but that’s not for me. Roy Rogers rode his palomino (golden) horse Trigger and chased down bad guys on Trigger and knocked them out with one punch, while I settled for

watching the marching bands at halftime while munching on Old Dutch potato chips.

As I sit here long into retirement with the end coming right up, I ask myself, did something as intentionally trivial as “What’s My Line?” have a significant impact on my life? Did I learn anything, internalize anything, from the hundred or more episodes of that show I let wash over me? From this one show alone, I suppose not, or not much, anyway. But that show added to the many, many—many, many, *many*—such entertainments that occupied a significant portion of my young years, experienced as they were within the context of everything else that was coming at me—or better, wasn’t coming at me—I believe profoundly shaped how I saw myself and conducted my life both then and later on. I’ve concluded over the last few years that what happens to us in our early years--from birth to age fourteen or so—stays with us, stays in us, and directs our lives for all of our years. To put it simply, without consciously realizing it, we keep our early story going.

I see two major lessons to be drawn from this “What’s My Line?” inquiry.

The first is that everything in a child’s life is a teacher, not just teachers in school. Parents teach, peers teach, and so vitally important, communication forms teach. While my television watching was extreme, it wasn’t all that different from what goes on in many children’s lives today. It isn’t television for most of them but rather TikTok and Snapchat and FaceTime and texting, all day, every day. That activity is shaping them, conditioning them, and my major point here, it is not only affecting them now, it will continue to do so for the rest of their lives. We would do well if we could figure out the effects of social media on young people in this time. (I’ve made a beginning stab at it. See a couple of writings on this site: “An Educator’s Ten Concerns About Social Media,” 2013; and “Personal Computer Use in Our Time: An Addiction?” 2014.)

The second lesson, if you have contact with children—as a parent, sibling, relative, or schoolteacher—get across to them that

they matter; that they count for something, that what they do with their lives—now and in the future—is vitally important. Get across that you like them, and care about them, and value them, and appreciate them, and so important, that you believe in them. You want to be with them. You're there for them. You're on their side. You will do all you can to support them and look out them and protect them. Be an advanced scout for them; point out profitable directions they might go in their lives. Encourage them. Celebrate any success they have, no matter how small. The biggest regret of my life I experience now in very old age is that I didn't learn this lesson soon enough. Don't let yourself get old and have to live your last days with that realization.