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## WHILE YOU WERE GONE

*“Real travel in itself is often a matter of life and death – or – at least I’ve thought so. One makes instant alliances on the spot to stave the latter off. I generally, arrive by air, in the modern manner, but without plans or reservations and usually after dark in a city like Dar es Salaam or Cairo or Khartoum, to see what happens and lend my first impressions an old-fashioned immediacy. Then I go by truck or bus or train. In Eskimo villages at 40-below, I have simply put myself at the mercy of the residents; help me or I’ll die. A selfish but effective method of learning how they live.”*

- Edward Hoagland

Well it looks like we’re all back where we belong. The President has returned from a day or two in Africa, and the college spring breakers have left Padre Island and portions of South Florida still standing. The cruise ships and the charter flights from Mexico, Hawaii, and the Caribbean have brought our neighbor’s home, and we’re all together, once again.

For those of you who were away, and from the look of I-88 that was about everybody, I thought I’d briefly recap the important cultural events you missed while you were out-of-town for spring break.

Last week, several media sources reported that the hottest television program in America is now the Jerry Springer show. Mr. Springer is currently getting higher ratings in many major markets than Oprah. Most of the young people who watch his show say they do so because they like to “watch the fights”. Mr. Springer acknowledges that he has no real talent and that he doesn’t even know the topic for the show until he shows up at the studio each morning. While you were gone, the Springer folks let it be known that their show is now in fifty television markets around-the-world. In countries on four continents, the locals are forming an opinion of Americans based, in part, on the America represented by the Springer shows.

This will, of course, have implications when we travel abroad in the future. Instead of building new hotels to put up American visitors in, say, Paris, hotel chains are in a mad dash to build trailer parks where Springer guest type Americans can stay in comfort, while hanging their laundry outside to dry. Budget and Hertz are working on plans to rent Chevy beaters to the Springer Americans in their locations abroad. Special rates if you can prove a blood link to your spouse.

And I understand that United Airlines is looking into scheduling Springer flights to Europe featuring all Jerry instead of the normal movie entertainment.

Now, I know what you’re thinking. You’re thinking that this does not bode well for America. You’re thinking that while you were gone on your spring break vacation another peg has been nailed in the coffin of civility and good taste. Did we sink another inch or two into the moral abyss while you were away?

But that’s not entirely the case. Because while you were out of town, it was also announced that CBS Television was going to offer Howard Stern a nationwide network platform to compete with Saturday Night Live.

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If this show is as successful as Springer's genetic version of "How Low Can You Go", then Stern will become a worldwide icon representing our country in Botswana, Bhutan, Belgium, and Barbados – wherever crowds gather around the flickering blue tube in the dark of night.

This all happened while you were gone.

But I don't want you to get depressed because there is something we can do about it. We can support the alternative. We can support Baywatch, the most shared experience in the English language on the face of the earth, at the moment.

That's a phrase, by the way, for which I can't take credit. Years ago, I was working with the cruise line that was enjoying incredible success as a result of its liaison with the new television series Love Boat. One year, at our annual meeting, the head of our PR department made a presentation that absolutely stunned me. He announced that Love Boat was, at the time, a top- ten television program in eighty-one nations around the globe. Sources in the television industry had indicated that more people were watching Love Boat than any other English-language program. In one night, it was pointed out, more people on earth had watched Charro, Red Buttons, et. al. than had ever read any of the works of Shakespeare. It was, we were told, "the most shared-experience in the history of the English Language".

I remember feeling a sense of corporate pride quickly followed by a sense of cultural depression. I wasn't sure that we should be exporting Love Boat, with its always-stupid husbands and all-knowing wives, latent anti-feminism, and racial stereotyping, to third world countries. It was interesting that the one country where Love Boat never caught on was England. But what would you expect from a country that actually sits around the telly watching a toothsome Nun in habit explaining the hidden meanings and nuances within serious works of art.

Of course, my view of Love Boat has changed. Far better to have the world see us as bumbling innocents than moronic, inbred, intolerant, predators.

Perhaps I worry too much about this. I keep hearing those statistics about the fact that kids spend an average of five or six hours per day soaking up role models and values from a television set and fewer than fifteen minutes a week in conversation with their parents. But this is not a phenon limited to the United States. Worldwide Wrestling is now global. In Japan and Italy, Hulk Hogan and his henchman (he's now a bad guy in case you're not up on this), are major American celebrities. I remember sitting in a Marriott in Germany one night switching channels. American wrestling with German translation was on two of the three major channels.

And now the freaks, the finks, and the phonies that populate the Springer couch and Stern's mind will be exported for all to see. They will watch our programs – and they will judge us as they perceive us to be.

And we will hearken back to a more gentle time not so very long ago. We will long for Love Boat and even Baywatch.

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