

Stereotyping on the slopes

During a recent ski trip to Colorado — wait a minute, that sounds a little too pompous considering the fact that I had never skied before and all that I ever did on a pair of skis was ski-reeeaaam!

It was anything but a mere ski trip. It was a trip of clear blue skies and majestic mountains — my first vista of the awesome Rockies, my first-ever sight of snow-capped mountains.

On the big day, after all my born-to-ski friends disappeared in all possible upward directions, I was left wondering what to do. Skiing was simply out of question. I just couldn't stomach the idea of striving to stay up on a pair of runaway legs. Or the thought of not being able to control where my legs were headed. If humans were meant to ski, we all would have had feet like ... well, skis.

But my curiosity and the urge to experience something new helped me overcome my fear. I decided to check out the ski school, but not without misgivings. Level 1, for people who have never skied before. Hey, that could be me.

So with optimism and a spirit of adventure, I enrolled for the group instruction class, and in no time I was fitted with a bulky pair of boots designed for maximum discomfort. My hands were filled with the ungainly skis and poles.

Off I went awkwardly ambling along, lugging my extra baggage, with the rest of the group up the gondola (the last time I heard of gondolas, they were a type of boat in Venice).

Finally our lesson began. After several unsuccessful attempts at trying to scamper up a 6-foot slope slanted at an impossible 1.5-degree angle, the fun turned into frustration. I was ready to give up. So was my instructor.

I was lagging so far behind the rest of the group, our instructor



Vennila Ramalingam

quickly unloaded me off to Tony, a private instructor, so that I could get some "special help". Tony and I hit it off immediately, thanks to the Big Red factor — he had gone to school here in Nebraska. There is nothing like football to bind people.

After I learned to sidestep successfully in an impressive span of 60 minutes, he said, "You know I have noticed that a lot of Indians find it hard to ski."

He proceeded to elaborate on his theory. "Indians are a highly intellectual people. Especially the ones who come to the U.S. are the cream of your country, and most of them are in the thinking professions, and so they tend to analyze instead of learning by feeling. What do you think?"

Tony was stereotyping. Type-casting all Indians (at least most) to be intellectuals. Had he known me better, I am sure he would have changed his mind. Either that or I am an extreme exception. But that's besides the point. The issue here is Tony's benevolent and well-meaning stereotyping.

It's hard not to generalize. Also the fact is that it IS possible for us to categorize people into some broad descriptions. Black people do have curly hair. Scandinavians are taller than most others. Japanese are shorter.

And this is where stereotyping should stop — at the very basic factual level. When it spills over subjective characteristics, like

"Latinos are great lovers" or "Blacks are great dancers," it does not work too well. Not to mention negative stereotypes.

Not only that, stereotyping is at its worst when there is wrong or uninformed "reasoning" behind it. Take for example, the stereotype about black people being great dancers — it is true that there are a lot of black people who can dance very well, like they were born with some special dance genes. Hmm, a predisposition to boogie! Hold it right there. The reasoning associated with the stereotype couldn't be farther from the truth.

The real reason could be that culturally and historically, dance plays a big role in many black peoples' lives, and those who dance well are those who practice well. The earlier mention about dance genes is very wrong and uninformed, like Tony's reasoning.

This was my reply to Tony, "You are probably right, but could it be a factor that most of us Indians have never seen snow, let alone tried skiing? Even similar activities, such as rollerblading or ice-skating, are simply not part of our lifestyle." That could be reason enough for how Indians usually can't ski.

Problems arise when stereotypes are taken as a golden rule. Individuals of any specific background should be considered as individuals first, with the possibility that they may or may not have some of the characteristics that the group as a whole has.

Going back to my skiing story, by the end of the day, I absolutely hated those deplorable boots. I was thoroughly convinced that all the ski-crazed people milling around me were a bunch of masochists.

Will I ski again? Someday.

Ramalingam is a graduate student in computer science and a Daily Nebraskan columnist.

Advice for diners: Beware of the mints



Mike Royko

It's been a few days since the last terrifying food report. I believe a study showed that eating too much turkey can cause severe sneezing attacks if you fail to first remove the feathers.

So if you are looking for something to worry about, you might consider the concerns of Hank Blumenthal.

The Blumenthals dine out a lot, and Blumenthal says he has noticed something that bothered him enough to bring it to my attention and suggest that the public be made aware of it.

"Have you ever gone to the men's room in a nice restaurant," he says, "and observed how few men wash their hands before leaving?"

"I became aware of this situation recently when, after I washed my hands, another gentleman who had just zipped up exited the men's room at the same time as I, but stopped at the counter for a handful of candy before leaving.

"I have since become aware of this practice by some of my fellow diners.

"A fair percentage of them wash their hands first, but others don't.

"As a result of my observations, I now skip the mints unless they are wrapped. I would just as soon stop somewhere else and buy myself a Snickers bar.

"But I thought you might be interested in following up my observations with an investigation.

"You might get a half-empty dish of candy from a few restaurants and have them examined by an independent laboratory and publish a urinalysis report on the findings."

Yes, I suppose an investigation of this sort could result in a potentially sensational headline: "Wee-Wee Germs Found on Bistro Mints! Dining Slobs Blamed!"

But there could be other headlines too: "Columnist Caught Lurking Near Restaurant Washrooms!" Or, "Columnist Seized Stealing Restaurant Mints!"

After I spoke to Blumenthal, I passed along his concerns to a restaurant operator, Sam Sianis, of the Billy Goat.

Sianis nodded and said: "I never eat mints in a restaurant."

Because you fear that they are contaminated by the fingers of those who don't wash their hands?

"No," he said, "because mints make me burp."

Although he does not provide

free mints, Sianis said he once had a problem with his mustard, which he puts out for hamburger-eaters, along with onions and pickles.

"This woman is standing by the counter, and she asks me if I have any Grey Poupon. I told her I have American yellow, and it is better than Grey Poupon.

"So she puts her finger in the mustard pan. I ask her, 'Why you do that?' She says she wants to know how it tastes before she puts it on a hamburger. I told her that she shouldn't do that because I don't know where that finger has been.

"Her boyfriend says, 'Are you telling my girlfriend that there is something wrong with her finger?' I said, 'I don't know where her finger has been, and I don't know where your finger has been.' Nowadays, how do you know? So I have to put out a whole new pan of mustard.

"So the girlfriend said, 'I have never been talked to that way before.' And I told her, 'Well, you go around putting your finger in other people's mustard, and you'll get talked to that way a lot, and maybe you will also get a broken finger.'

"So the boyfriend says, 'Are you threatening my girlfriend?' "And I picked up my biggest knife and said: 'No, not your whole girlfriend; only her finger.'

"After that, neither of them put their fingers in the mustard again. See, you explain things to people nice, they understand."

How true. In the meantime, though, we might be wise to skip the mints.

But Blumenthal, a man with sharp powers of observation, also said: "I sometimes wonder if the same threat exists with the bartender who tops off my vodka martini with a lemon twist.

"Of course, the alcohol would probably kill any germs. That's one of the benefits of a martini."

Advertising men can feel free to use that thought in a commercial.

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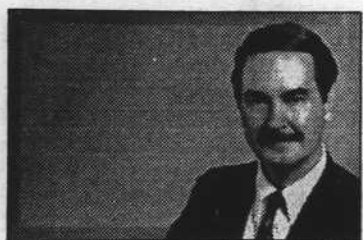
GOP agenda addresses today

In his filibuster-length State of the Union address, President Clinton spoke of a "new covenant" with the American people, a phrase he employed at the Democratic convention in New York in 1992. Is this the new old covenant, or the old new covenant? It doesn't matter. The new Republican majority in Congress is about the business of fulfilling its contract, not the president's covenant.

Clinton spent a lot of time talking about the future and the past. He said nothing about the present, the only moment in which we live. That was left for what turned out to be the most inspiring and cogent moment of the evening. New Jersey Gov. Christine Todd Whitman said more in about 20 minutes than Mr. Clinton said in 90 minutes.

She spoke of a "revolution" sweeping America that began in the states, not in Washington. She drew contrasts between big government, represented by Clinton Democrats, and smaller, less costly government represented by Whitman and other Republican governors. She slammed the "arrogance of bigger government" and then mentioned the word that seems to stick in Democrats' throats: freedom.

Clinton can keep his covenant, she seemed to be saying. Republicans have an agenda. Not only is it written down, it is being done. It



Cal Thomas

isn't about tomorrow; it's about today. It isn't a promise for the future; it is unfolding before our eyes on the evening news and on the front page of today's newspaper.

"There is nothing virtuous about raising taxes," Whitman said. In that one sentence she undermined the moral authority Democrats have claimed for themselves since the New Deal as they have bled the taxpayer under the misguided theory that in government should we trust, the only source of redemption.

"There is nothing virtuous about wasting other people's money on big-government spending sprees," she said. Other people's money. Your money. My money. Money we earn and government takes away to give to other people who don't earn it — many of whom can work, but won't; who engage in reckless behavior not in their or the nation's interest that government subsidizes instead of penalizing; who demand

subsidies for things they say is "art" or "history" or "culture," but turn out to be quite different from what we expect and too often quite distasteful.

Whitman said that "success is not measured in the number of laws passed, but in results," and she cited her own pledge to cut New Jersey's taxes 30 percent by next January.

Sounding like a prophetess, Whitman said the November election wasn't the end, just the beginning, and she pledged that by the next State of the Union, "we'll have lower taxes, more efficient government, a stronger America, more faith in politics and in America."

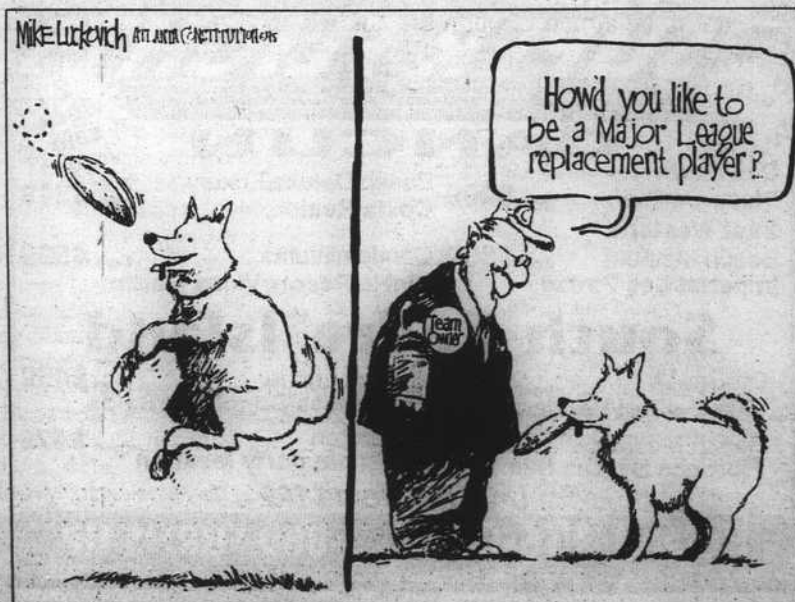
The people are beginning to understand that their government isn't broken, but that politicians have messed it up. The system works when the right people are in charge.

The '60s slogan "power to the people" is about to be realized as power flows away from Washington, back through the states and into the minds, hearts (and pockets) of individual Americans. That's where the Founders intended it to be when they laid the cornerstone of government with the words "We the People." That's the only covenant we need.

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Mike Luckovich