



It's August. It's hot. Stay "cool". (in more ways than one.)



Jeanne Robertson

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Do you remember that sick feeling you had inside when you were in a high school or a church play and it was your turn to say a line . . . and the line was gone? Your family and friends knew it instantly and almost fell over into the aisles. They knew all the lines. (My mother used to come wearing an identical costume. Just in case. You never know when you'll get your "big break.") Then, right before you literally passed out in front of your hometown, the prompter - standing on a stepladder behind the curtain and holding the script - whispered a cue to you and you were back on track. I'm going to give readers of SE Gazette a cue word from this month's story and from this day forth it can be your cue to see the humor in stressful situations. Your cue to stay "cool." Why? Because the word will remind you of an eighteen-year-old young woman I saw in a small town in North Carolina. If she could see the humor in what I saw happen to her, the rest of us should be able to see the humor in most situations. Your cue is: "Baton."

I was in a small town in eastern North Carolina in the early seventies (last millennium) to emcee the annual local beauty pageant. The night of the rehearsal, I asked one of the contestants, "What do you do for your talent?" She said "I twirl the baton."

All I could think was, Oh no. Not another baton twirler. Can you imagine how many baton twirlers I had seen while emceeing pageants, even by that early point in my speaking career?

I don't know anything about twirling the baton. I spent all my spare time growing up playing basketball in Graham, NC and shooting hook shots. We asked if I could shoot hook shots for my talent in the Miss America Pageant. My Daddy told pageant officials, "We'll bring a portable basketball goal and sandbags to hold it in place to New Jersey in our truck. When talent rolls around, you put in on stage and Jeanne will come out and shoot hook shots for three minutes. She can hook right-handed. She can hook left-handed. If she hits them, you might want to name her Miss America. If she misses, we'll put the ball, the goal and the sandbags in our truck and come home." Pageant officials politely said it wasn't possible. They politely explained that we didn't know how long it takes contestants to perfect talents such as singing and dancing. This told us that someone in New Jersey at the Miss America Pageant didn't know how long it takes to perfect a good hook shot. I think my Daddy told them that. Politely.

Now I'm older and wiser. I've been judged at the Miss America Pageant three times and I understand these things. They were afraid I would win. The headline would have read: "Hooker Wins Miss America!"

Let me take back something I just wrote. A few lines back I told you that I didn't know anything about twirling the baton. That's not exactly true. I know two things. No. 1, a baton doesn't just fall in your hand and start twirling itself and pulling your arm through the air. It has to go in and out of your fingers some way. And No. 2, twirling the baton

is like most things in this world. It may take years of practice to get it just like you want it. Years. Unfortunately, this contestant had only two weeks.

She decided to be in the pageant at a late date and almost backed out when the officials reminded her that she had to have three minutes worth of talent. But she thought about it, and remembered that her sister had a baton in the second grade. She would borrow the thing and twirl it.

The music she had selected was a hit of the day: "The Hustle." Remember it? Dun,dun,dun, ta-dun, ta-dun, dun dun. The night of the rehearsal she got out in the center of the stage and she didn't twirl the baton at all. She held it smack dab in the middle and twisted her wrist back and forth, back and forth, back and forth as fast as she could move her arm, trying to make it look like from a distance -- in a dark auditorium -- that she was twirling the baton.

When I saw what she was doing, I quickly stepped backstage to one of the sponsoring Jaycees and said, "I've got to talk to someone. She's not twirling the baton."

He said, "Well, we know that," and added, looking out at the contestant in the center of the stage, "but isn't she purty?"

I swallowed hard and said, "You don't understand what we're doing as it today and pageants in general if you think being 'purty' as you called it is the main thing. She's going to embarrass herself tomorrow night in front of her hometown."

I don't never forget his response. "No, Jeanne, I think you're the one who doesn't understand the world as it is in this town. You just breezed in here tonight as an out-of-town expert. We've been working with her for two weeks. Don't you come in here and mess her up. She's got more personality than most of the other contestants put together. She just doesn't have any talent! Leave her alone and let her do what she can do."

Then he said something about her that I want people to say about me after every speaking engagement. Something I believe most of us want people to say about us. He said, "After working with her for two weeks, all of us backstage have decided that we want her to win. She's so pleasant, we know we'll enjoy working with her for the coming year."

What a compliment. He didn't say, "She'll be Miss North Carolina." He said, "She's so pleasant, we know we'll enjoy working with her for the coming year."

This contestant had one teensy, tiny hope of gaining any points in the talent competition. A minute and fifteen seconds in her three-minute routine, she reared back, and got ready to toss that baton up into the air. Once. She had no control over where it went. People who had been at rehearsals for two weeks knew. Duck when she gets ready to throw the baton! They came in old football helmets. When it was time for the toss, mothers put their hands on their children's heads and mashed them down into their seats. Then, wherever the baton went, the contestant went after it. If she caught it and happened

to be facing the back of the stage, that's the way she faced until the music ended, moving her wrist back and forth, back and forth, back and forth.

You were not there. I was there. But let me describe the situation and you think back and see if I haven't "been there." We've all been there.

It was summer and it was hot. It had been almost a hundred degrees that day. Outside. We were in one of those old, wooden, elementary school auditoriums. No air conditioning. Sticks were holding open all of the windows down the sides of the auditorium, which I thought was interesting because all of the windows were broken out.

Eight hundred people were jammed inside and the place only seated six hundred and fifty. People were everywhere. A woman in the front row had one of those curved, Popsicle-stick, cardboard, "luneral home fans" - this picture of Heaven on the backside - and she was fanning her chest. Never missed a beat. I could barely emcee the pageant for watching her bionic arm beat her chest.

This was before cell phones but someone had come through town selling walkie-talkies and every Jaycee had one on his hip. Jaycees stood four feet from each other backstage saying into those walkie-talkies, "Can you hear me? Can you hear me? Let up on the button, Bubba!"

The stage hands rolled a piano out on stage for one contestant who stood next to it and announced to the crowd, "I'm going to play a medley of Gerstwin tunes that I wrote." (I can't make this up.)

During the years I emceed pageants I normally stood at a lectern on the side of the stage, introduced each contestant, and then got off stage. This night, I wouldn't have left the stage for anything. I had to see with my own eyes if she could fool a person.

"The Hustle" started. Dun,dun,dun, ta-dun, ta-dun, dun dun, Dun, dun, ta-dun, ta-dun, dun, ta-dun. Back and forth, back and forth, back and forth.

Eight hundred people sat in total disbelief. I knew they were in shock because they all leaned forward in their seats at the same time. It was an 800-person jaw drop. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the woman in the front row slowly put down the luneral home fan.

But did they burst out laughing? No. See, they didn't know what they were supposed to do. It was as though all those people said, "We'll help you but what do you want us to do? Give us a clue." "Is this comedy? Tell us now. It's this comedy?"

I maintain that in every situation when there is more than one person involved and something happens that is a little unpleasant, stressful, awkward or embarrassing, people stand around and wonder if they're supposed to get angry, people can sure do it. If the cue is to fall apart, they can do that too. But if the cue is to see the humor in the situation, they'll pick it up and run with it.



See me in action on



For one minute and fifteen seconds this contestant stood in the center of the stage with the baton in her hand, twisting it back and forth, back and forth, and the people in the audience held back the laughter. It wasn't easy. Judges broke their pencils. Mothers slid their hands over their children's mouths. They had mentally told themselves they could hold back anything for three minutes. But they didn't know about the big toss. At a minute and fifteen seconds, the "twirler" reared back. Jaycees backstage started mumbling prayers. "Let her catch it. Please. Don't let her knock somebody out." And in front of all those people, she tossed that baton up into the air... and it didn't come back down. It just did not come back down.

The music didn't know it hadn't come back down. The music never missed a beat. "Dun,dun,dun, ta-dun, ta-dun, dun-da." And can't you see her? Sure you can. A young woman looking all around on stage. She looked over at me. I mouthed, "I don't have it." She looked out at the audience and it was as though everyone in the auditorium, at the same time, shrugged, "We don't either." The baton was lodged up in the curtains and it wasn't coming down!

Pageants take a lot of criticism. Some of it is justified but much of it isn't. But if you're eighteen years old and

have made the decision to be in one, and if you are on stage twirling a baton in front of your hometown and you don't have a baton? Well, you tell me what could be more important?

Remember, this happened in a small town. The kind of town where, when this contestant was eighty-years-old she could leave the grocery store and someone would say, "Do you remember the night she was twirling that baton?"

If that had been I, I would either have fainted or I would have pretended to faint. A group of people would have had to drag my body right off that stage. But at age eighteen, she had what I love to remind people and myself. She had the ability to see the humor in a stressful situation, stay cool and keep going.

She also had the same choices right then and there that we have every day. She could have stomped off the stage in anger and right before she disappeared behind the curtain, turned to the audience and spat out, "Those Jaycees!" People pick up on cues so quickly that half of the audience would have immediately assumed the Jaycees had done something. The Jaycees hadn't done a thing. They didn't have a man up in the curtains who reached out and grabbed the baton as it went by.

She could have burst into tears and run off the stage. Remember, she was

only eighteen. Everyone would have shaken their heads and said, "What a shame, what a shame." But they would have had that sick feeling we get in our stomachs when we know a person didn't handle a situation the best way possible.

But this young woman decided to see the humor in it. When she did, I stood on the side of the stage all those years ago and watched her literally influence eight hundred people to see the humorous side of the situation with her.

She looked up and saw that the baton was caught in the curtains and it wasn't coming down. She jumped up and down on the stage a couple of times - boom! boom! - trying to jar the auditorium. Sticks fell out of windows. Dirt fell to the floor. But the baton was not coming down.

She looked out an audience of people who were about to explode, but doing their best to hold back their laughter. She heard the music, knew she had about a minute left, and made a snap decision to see the humor in the situation. She suddenly gave her best beauty pageant smile and started pantomiming a baton routine, the likes of which you have never seen in your life. She pretended to toss a baton up into the air and faked catching it behind

her neck when it supposedly came back down. She pretended to twirl it around her waist. People went berserk!

She had them in the palm of her hand. Why stop? She pretended to toss the baton up a second time and when it was supposedly in the air, she rolled her head around and mimicked watching the baton take loops in the air. I looked out, and eight hundred people were looping their heads as though watching the same thing. Just before it would have hit the stage, she reached under her leg and pretended to catch it.

By now mothers were throwing their babies up into the air! But did she leave well enough alone? Seldom when you're on a roll and never when you have 'em in the palm of your hand. Still pretending to twirl the baton in one hand, she danced to the side of the stage and acted as though someone off stage tossed her a second baton which she faked catching with her empty hand. When the music ended, she was back in the center of the stage, pretending to twirl two batons as fast as she could.

A man in the back row said to his wife, "She's twirling 'em so fast, I can't even see the batons!"

Write down the word... BATON. And stay cool.

2017
Jeanne Robertson
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