



Jeanne Robertson

Have you heard the one about ...

Well, looky here. National Tell A Joke Day is August 16. I didn't know that. You might think that as a speaker who makes her living being funny, I know many jokes. Not so. I rarely tell a joke. My speciality is telling true stories from my everyday situations. Exaggerated some time? Yes. You might say that I agree with Mark Twain on that. "Never let the truth get in the way of a good story." But while I primarily tell life-experience material, having a few jokes stored in the back of my mind can pay off.

Now that you know I rarely tell a joke, it might seem strange to learn that I collect old joke books. Hundreds of them from the past 150 years are stacked around the house. First of all, I like pretty old books. Secondly, I read these old joke books and I study them. Sometimes, I mark in them lightly with a pencil. This is a sin. I will burn. Just can't help myself. Why do I study them? Because I never know when an old joke will trigger an idea or remind me of something true that happened in my life. Something I hadn't thought about as a possible story. And last but not least, if I study enough, an old joke might even lurk around in my mind and pop up when I desperately need it. Like one did that day in Nevada . . .

The client had booked me to be the "Keynote Speaker" during their Opening General Session at a convention in Reno. The session started promptly at 9:30am. I was to

be "on" at 11am and close out that session before the lunch break. When the president pounded the gavel eight times rather than once, we started running behind. From there, it went down hill.

Every person introduced felt obligated to "say a few words" whether they were scheduled to or not. Within minutes, people were looking at their watches. When you're the last speaker,

Power Point won't work. It's almost as much fun as when slides used to come on the screen upside down. I certainly had time in Reno that morning to sit there and try to pull up something to say when they got around to me.

That's when studying old joke books suddenly paid off. One of those old jokes I had read in a book popped into mind and made me look a lot sharper than that day than I actually am.

When I was finally introduced in Reno, I stood on stage quietly a few seconds and then opened with the following, still smiling:



"Sitting here this morning, I was reminded of an old story. A man was waiting to be introduced to deliver the keynote address at a convention, but apparently, the script called for the emcee and officers to introduce and thank everyone they knew in the room. To make matters worse, almost everyone who was introduced for any reason strode to the microphone and delivered an impromptu mini-speech. Award recipients thanked the world and told us about their lives. Outgoing officers reminisced and introduced their immediate and extended families. Foundation fundraisers begged for money. That's when the most people in the audience slipped out - in droves. Finally, only three people were left in the ballroom: the keynote speaker, the emcee and one other man sitting out among the empty chairs.

After his introduction, the keynote speaker stepped toward the front of the stage and said to the one lone fellow still there, "You don't know how much I appreciate you staying for my remarks."

The guy said, "Could you hurry it up? I'm the next speaker on the program."

It was the first time I received a standing ovation after telling only one piece of material and that piece of material was a joke.

August 16. National Tell A Joke Day. Go tell one! And remember, even an old joke is new if it's the first time someone hears it and it will usually work if it fits the occasion.

you tend to notice things like that. I sat there and did what I do well. I smiled and at least pretended to listen intently as committee chair after committee chair gave reports and people slipped out. Running behind actually happens more than you might think at meetings but as invited guests, speakers usually just smile and mentally start cutting their material. It goes with the territory. Unfortunately, this event wasn't just "running behind." It was backing up into the previous month.

By the time I was introduced at 12:15 rather than eleven, more than three-fourths of the audience had fled. Watching the slow, but steady exodus (and wishing I could go with them) I also started sifting through my material, searching for something to say or a story that might fit the situation. As a humorist, I viewed this as an opportunity. You have to understand, I sit at banquets and hope the banner peels off the wall so I can use a piece of material I have for when that happens. One of my favorite things is, when Power Point stops working. Oh, a humorist loves it when



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