

And Now, Let's All Play "What's My Line?"

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ON 9 MAY 1961, at the start of his two-year stint as chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, Newton Minow gave a speech to the National Association of Broadcasters. One small phrase from it entered into the national consciousness and has resonated ever since, although it usually has been taken out of context. Minow allowed that

when television is good, nothing—not the theater, not the magazines or newspapers—nothing is better. But when television is bad, nothing is worse. I invite each of you to sit down in front of your television set when your station goes on the air and stay there, for a day, without a book, without a magazine, without a newspaper, without a profit-and-loss sheet or a rating book to distract you. Keep your eyes glued to that set until the station signs off. I can assure you that what you will observe is a vast wasteland. You will see a procession of game shows, formula comedies about totally unbelievable families, blood and thunder, mayhem, violence, sadism, murder, western bad men, western good men, private eyes, gangsters, more violence, and cartoons. And endlessly, commercials—many screaming, cajoling, and offending. And most of all, boredom. True, you'll see a few things you will enjoy. But they will be very, very few. And if you think I exaggerate, I only ask you to try it.

Everyone remembers the “vast wasteland.” It will probably be part of Minow's epitaph. Fewer people remember his praise of the new medium.

The terrain of that vast wasteland on the “boob tube” (itself a catchword dating from the mid-1960s) has expanded in the past half century. What else has changed? The comedic “families” have become more unbelievable; the formulaic processions keep marching, often to weirdly different drummers. Violence? Mayhem? Sadism? Cartoons?

Bring them on: the more, the happier the audience becomes. Family fistfights are today's bread and circuses for mainstream watchers eager for gladiatorial combat. And, of course, we have new subdivisions in the landscape. So-called reality television can seem totally confected and scripted, anything but real; commercials generate billions of dollars and are now considered an art form in their own right; channels previously unimaginable are available to suit practically all tastes.

Most viewers acknowledge the greatness of television drama, past and especially present. Of recent vintage we have the stories, characters, acting, and elegant, Dickensian cliff-hanging in serials like *The Sopranos* and *Mad Men*. Long before, we had serious, frequently live theater on *Kraft Television Theatre* and *Playhouse 90*. In the sixties, PBS cornered the market on highbrow, or middlebrow-aspiring-to-higher-brow culture with *Masterpiece Theatre* and other shows for Anglophiles. *The Simpsons* has captured the hearts and imaginations of more than one generation of viewers, and not only cartoon lovers. Television has always had a golden age. You just have to know how to separate the wheat from the chaff.

With regard to one specific genre, however, that golden age is gone, and little can replicate its unequivocal excellence. Consider talk on contemporary television, by which I mean prime-time, network TV: not a pretty picture or, a better phrase, not easy on the ears. Consider what used to be called the art of conversation, all but gone now from the airwaves. Consider *What's My Line?* This was a show with no claim to instruction, wisdom, enlightenment, or usefulness. It had nothing to do with world affairs, politics, or the life of the mind. Even "conversation" is too generous a term for what went on: "repartee," even "chatter," would be better. The program was sheer dross, but, paradoxically, it was far from empty or mindless in its techniques. It was like the best cocktail party you ever dreamed of attending, with people who had both savoir faire and kindness, sass and delicacy, celebrity and down-home ordinariness. It was as quint-essentially American—in the best ways—as apple pie or any other cliché you might wish to consider. It offered unintended lessons in manners and, consequently and unintentionally, lessons in civics. Walt

Whitman, poet of democracy and the working classes, would surely have applauded the civics lessons even if he probably would not have warmed to the show's urbane and sophisticated banter.



I'm in love with Arlene Francis. I never knew her. She's been dead since 2001. But she's the big sister or the elegant, arty aunt I always wanted. And although she was in the public eye for decades, her life as a film and Broadway performer was far surpassed by a decade and a half of doing nothing but smiling, talking, and charming her audiences on television, mostly in black and white, in a game show both mindless and consummately sophisticated. She is, like *What's My Line?*, dated and also forever young. The show's long run (1950–1967) is well worth remembering, savoring, and celebrating. It represents the American equivalent of the insouciance, sophistication, badinage, and quicksilver cleverness we associate with London coffeehouses and Paris salons in the eighteenth century, or the Round Table wits at the Algonquin in the 1920s, if not quite with famous talkers like Samuel Johnson and Oscar Wilde, parrying, thrusting, and skewering. It epitomizes public performance that never condescends to its audience. And much of its run was in the America of the much-maligned Eisenhower years, the age, so-called, of conformism, middlebrow culture, and mental paralysis. The wit of *What's My Line?* epitomized anything but the wasteland derided by critics.

Accuse me of nostalgia: I accept the charge, but only in part. The evidence is there for everyone to witness or revisit, courtesy of YouTube. Take a walk down memory lane to see and hear not only how people dressed (to the nines) and behaved (with deference but not sycophancy) but also, more important, how they spoke, on CBS at 10:30 p.m. every Sunday night. The children had been put to bed, but this was still prime time. "Game show" was the genre, if one wanted an excuse for categorization, but the genuine entertainment was provided by chitchat, wit, and puns, articulated elegantly in polysyllabic but unpretentious words rolled out in improvised, complete, often complex sentences. Although this was a quiz show, its nominal

challenge—to identify the “line,” the occupation of a guest, or the identity of a “mystery challenger,” whom the panelists, now blindfolded, questioned—paled in comparison to the intelligent fun and good cheer that were generously offered up as the true reason to watch it.

Does any commercial, mainstream television program today ask the founder of a major New York publishing house to become a weekly panelist? Bennet Cerf—the “Count of Monte Kisco” according to Francis, punning on the location of his Westchester home—was the anchorman of a quartet of worthies whose two other regulars were Francis and Dorothy Kilgallen, the columnist-who-looked-like-a-prom queen and who died under mysterious circumstances in 1965. Conspiracy theorists, even today, claim she had inside information about the JFK assassination. Other frequent visitors included Martin Gabel (Francis’s husband), Fred Allen (until he got his own television show), the young, unrelated Steve Allen, Tony Randall, Kitty Carlisle Hart, and a miscellany of other articulate entertainers. John Charles Daly was the quizmaster host par excellence: cordial, generous, consummately polite, understated, hospitable to his guests, and deferential but wry when joking with his panelists, especially Cerf. Like Fortitude and Patience, the leonine guardians at the main branch of the New York Public Library, or the Plaza Hotel in the heyday of Eloise, Daly and his cast became icons of Manhattan. When Harold Ross, the founding editor of the *New Yorker*, said in 1925 that his smart magazine was not intended for the “the little old lady from Dubuque,” he was wrong. She was precisely his target audience, because she was able to live vicariously as a New Yorker, through the *New Yorker*. *What’s My Line?* also offered a lifeline from Gotham to the provinces, where little old ladies and everyone else could catch a glimpse of a world about which they had only dreamed.

Articulateness was, especially in retrospect, the key ingredient. I’ve shown episodes to students and other people under thirty and it seems to these youngsters not only quaint but virtually unreal that the panelists spoke as they did, unscripted and extemporaneously. Language was their stock in trade. Their diction was crisp. “Like” was used as either a verb or an old-fashioned preposition. “Um”s and “you

know's were nonexistent. Training in the theater (for Francis and some of the other panelists), or a lifetime of reading (for Cerf) and writing (for Kilgallen) played a part in the easy grace of their speech.

As did what we can only label courtesy or politeness. Manners no longer constitute a major part of most television conversations, where people have forgotten the advice of their mothers, to speak in quiet indoor voices and one at a time. Cacophony and interruption would have been inconceivable as well as unpleasant to the CBS studio and viewing audiences sixty years ago.

Even the commercials on the show sound to today's ears innocent or corny: "Luxurious liquid Prell, sinfully rich"; "Mr. Clean leaves a sheen where he cleans"; "Denture wearers are asking: Is there a difference in denture cleaners?" But these are mere amuse-bouches compared to the main course. Looking back, we can appreciate the program not only as a model of politesse but also as a gentle brainteaser. Of its two parts, the identification of the mystery celebrity was both the more fun—in most cases a kind of lovefest or romp—and the easier to achieve. Woody Allen, Paul Newman, Jesse Owens, Kate Smith, and Raquel Welch were four of the rare performers who stumped the panelists. Father and daughter Edgar and Candice Bergen also confounded the panel, as did Shirley Jones (19 August 1962), to whom Abe Burrows coyly asked, "Are you a blonde? . . . Think it over." By one internet estimate, the top ten most popular guests, some of whom appeared more than once, were Rosalind Russell, George Burns and Gracie Allen, Fred Allen, Jack Benny, Debbie Reynolds, Art Carney, Danny Kaye, Louis Armstrong, and Lucille Ball. Oh, and Eleanor Roosevelt, in 1953, following her service as the American delegate to the United Nations General Assembly.

But everyone was there, mostly show-business people, from Edie Adams to Frank Zappa, and including an impressive group of African Americans (Mohammed Ali, Marian Anderson, Louis Armstrong, Arthur Ashe, Count Basie, Harry Belafonte, Roy Campanella, Nat Cole, Dizzy Gillespie, Lionel Hampton, Johnny Mathis, Butterfly McQueen, Brock Peters, Leontyne Price, Nina Simone, the Supremes, et al.); some businessmen, arts administrators, and politicians (Sherman

Billingsley, Schuyler Chapin, Everett Dirksen); and some surprises (Edward Albee, Kermit the Frog accompanied by Jim Henson, Yehudi Menuhin, Norman Rockwell, Carl Sandburg, Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, Mickey Spillane, Frank Lloyd Wright). Both Kilgallen and Cerf appeared as mystery guests, as did, in the show's last episode (3 September 1967), John Charles Daly himself, speaking in two registers as guest and host. "Are you possibly impersonating yourself, Mr. Daly?" asked puckish Bennet Cerf to the delight of the audience, right before the panelists removed their masks.

John Daly routinely used words like "ululate," "pristine," "heretofore," and "albeit," phrases like "nervous prostration," and double negatives like "not inconceivable." He could extemporize a deliciously evasive response to Arlene Francis, who had asked whether a mystery guest—in this case, Salvador Dalí—might be described as a leading man: "Actually, in the general context of the questioning, we would have to accept that all of the affirmative replies except the last one are not misleading in any major degree; however, I think the last answer *is* misleading and we could not accurately describe our guest as a leading man." Quick-witted Miss Francis made her comeback: "He's a misleading man." Touché. Exchanges like this were not uncommon. Convoluted sentences were normal. When the boyishly cute Johnny Carson appeared in 1962, much was made of the title of his then television show *Who Do You Trust?* Daly called it *Whom Do You Trust?* and the wholesome rising star could only nod and smile.

Consider a question posed to Sandi Kane (21 January 1965), a shapely, bouffant blonde from Atlanta, whose line was demonstrating exercise equipment to potential customers. Asked whether she wore a costume for her work, Ms. (or, rather, Miss, since all women were asked, politely, whether they were Miss or Mrs.) Kane demurred, but Daly stepped in to clarify: "It is a costume that would be reasonable for the performance of the service that's involved but would not necessarily isolate that service particularly by its character or nature." Then, asked by the young, very handsome William Shatner whether she entertained her clients, Daly again stepped in to help: "You mean specifically with the intent of being an entertainer? . . . I would think

we would have to agree that the average individual would consider that, while not specifically having an intent of an entertainment, he or she would be entertained by what transpired.” Commenting (implicitly?) on sentences like this one, Bennett Cerf introduced Daly on the show’s fifteenth anniversary as the man “who has never missed an opportunity to use an ill-chosen word.” He was, of course, both joking and incorrect. Neither Daly nor Cerf ever chose badly. They played with language. Their gusto was infectious.

None of these feats of verbal dexterity was committed with the kind of condescending, sneering, curled-lip performance that marked virtually every articulation coming from the mouth of William F. Buckley Jr., whose taste for eye-rolling, sesquipedalian shenanigans lacked any charm whatsoever. (His *Firing Line* began in 1966, just as *What’s My Line?* was heading toward extinction.) An English professor gets a kick when he hears Miss Francis ask mystery guest Charlton Heston whether his current movie “is one of the ones that are playing now on Broadway,” nailing her subject-verb agreement while homing in on the proper identification.

Linguistic and behavioral customs change with the times. What some people would consider charm or politeness—then, or even now—others would wince and take umbrage at. Women were routinely objectified, their looks the subject of discussion, whistles, even catcalls, if a celebrity beauty appeared on stage. A man could not get away with it today if he asked Miss Kane, as Shatner did, for her phone number: “It’s been changed,” she quickly replied. Steve Allen asked Ava Gardner, “Are you a doll?” (Answer: of course.) And Joey Bishop asked Joan Crawford, “Are you a glamour girl?” Bennett Cerf asked Lana Turner, “Would you answer to the description of a pin-up girl?” He also requested that John Daly answer a question he was posing to Jayne Mansfield, then at the height of her bouffant grandeur and maximum décolletage: “Are you a slinky and voluptuous creature?” But would we wince to hear Kitty Carlisle Hart observe that a certain female contestant has “got such a beautiful figure”? Perhaps not. When does good-humored, flirtatious flattery cross a boundary between compliment and prurience? Everything is in the tone, and

sixty years back many things seemed more innocent. Daly routinely called Francis and Kilgallen “darling girls.” Cerf introduced Daly, the night Miss Kane appeared, by calling him “the *pièce de resistance*, our great panel moderator, of whom a darling little Florida girl at Cape Kennedy the other day said, ‘I don’t understand one word he says, but he seems to mean it.’” If everyone is bait for kidding or ribbing, both the panel moderator and the darling little girl, then no one has been singled out for insult. “Arlene looks lovelier every Sunday,” said Daly one evening. We believe him. And we certainly take no offense when Arlene, having easily identified mystery guest Carl Sandburg (“my favorite living author”), delights the poet and the audience with “We’re an old romance, Carl Sandburg and I.” Nowhere is prurience even implicit.

Where the mystery guests were often easy to guess, despite their confected voices and the blindfolds on the panelists, ordinary contestants were often more difficult. Looking back, we also see the changes between then and now in social mores, expected gender roles, and career choices. In 1958, we have Corporal R. K. Beecham, a dog-catcher for the US Marines. Bob Angell from Rochester “sells knitting needles.” Sister Mary Christina is a dentist. Jean Chapman is a ferry-boat pilot, as is Kathy Gretschman from Springfield, South Dakota. Paul Haas fits men’s corsets. Milton Meier (from Pretty, Texas) raises worms. Two back-to-back guests on 31 January 1965 are Nell Duncan (“is that Miss or Mrs.?” asks John Daly, as usual. Duncan is married), who is a guard in an armored car in Gainesville, Florida; and then Mrs. Dorothy Chase of Westchester, New York, who pickles herring. Another back-to-back pair (1 July 1962) are Irene Fischer, a crab fisherman from Baltimore, and Dolores Carroll, an African American woman from Chattanooga who does “a human bomb act,” in which she blows up dynamite sticks on stage while wearing a protective helmet. On the fifteenth anniversary show, Annette Clarke, an elegant black woman, is identified as someone whose profession did not exist when the show started: the television audience was told that she “plays records for dancing in a discothèque,” the last word then helpfully defined as “nightclub.”

The show opens a window onto American society. What jobs did people have more than half a century ago? Which of those occupations still remain? And who performs what? The series brought out a ninety-year-old golf caddy, the president of a shopping-cart company, the voice of Donald Duck, a female nightclub bouncer, a “girl” who did stunts on airplane wings, a young Tony Perkins look-alike who was a balloon pilot, and, following him, a snuff maker. There was a man who actually made breadboxes. (“Is it bigger than a breadbox?” was a standard question that panelists asked of contestants who worked with a product.) Highbrow, lowbrow, no brow at all: the show is a mostly middlebrow microcosm of mid-century American culture. It celebrates everything equally.

Such generous hospitality to all work, all workers, puts me in mind—perhaps unexpectedly—of two other American chroniclers of our country’s jobs. When Studs Terkel published *Working* in 1974, America was still enjoying the great postwar prosperity that lasted for decades. But the period of job satisfaction celebrated by *What’s My Line?* in the 1950s and 1960s, to which we can look back wistfully from our perch today, was coming to an end. The early and mid seventies witnessed a rising tide of discontent with the workplace, which can be traced back through the counterculture. Terkel’s book was a symptom of this ferment. There were gratifications and disappointments attached to all of the jobs, of course, from the lowest to the most highly remunerated, and all of those jobs came with their own mundane details. What seems gracefully old-fashioned is the pride people took in the most ordinary of those jobs—sanitation worker, telephone operator, janitor—pride that has long since vanished for the most part. When the CEO made a salary only twenty times greater than the factory worker in his shop, rather than three hundred, as is the gap in today’s economy, something like solidarity assured the people at the bottom that they need not feel shame.

We hear a similar celebration of plenitude in the words of America’s greatest poet of democracy. Leave it to Walt Whitman to write “A Song for Occupations” and to sing the plenitude of American work:

Neither a servant nor a master I,
 I take no sooner a large price than a small price, I will have
 my own whoever enjoys me,
 I will be even with you and you will be even with me.

And he enumerates, cataloguing: house building, blacksmithing, fish curing, “the work and tools of the rigger, grappler, sail-maker, block-maker.” He could go on forever, and he strongly implies that all work is the same. It is all like art: the “hourly routine . . . [the] daily life . . . in them realities for you and me, in them poems for you and me.” We are all brothers and sisters in a democracy:

You workwomen and workmen of these States having your
 own divine and strong life,
 And all else giving place to men and women like you.

It’s a great, perhaps peculiarly American, paradox: a vast list of singular human identities, occupations, jobs, and careers produces a testimony to both our radical individualities and our integrated wholeness.

Occupations have changed over the past two centuries (we have fewer blacksmiths today), but work persists. As does interest in work. It is a far cry from Whitman’s exuberant salute to America’s almost infinite occupations, to the more buttoned-down appeal, and the indoor setting (and indoor voices) of the charming pundits on *What’s My Line?* But perhaps not. If Arlene Francis had an old romance with Carl Sandburg, why not an earlier one with Walt Whitman? His barbaric yawp might not fit in easily with the gentility of the CBS studio, but who can tell? And both celebrations of work, along with Studs Terkel’s expansive recording of the feelings and souls of American workers, remind us of our national infinite variety. When the off-stage announcer made his invitation—“Now, let’s all play *What’s My Line?*”—he was talking to *all* of us. That was America, then.