

WHAT IS “THE BEST”?

There is a civil rights era song that goes, “Woke up this morning with my mind on freedom.” Well, I woke up this morning with my mind on superlatives. I was trying to figure out what is THE BEST. How do we define it? Sure, “best” is better than all the others, but is it the most expensive? Is it the most beautiful? Is it the most moving? How does it stand out from all the other “its.” As President Clinton once almost said, it depends on what the meaning of “it” is.

The definition of the best, when it applies to one thing, may not apply to another. And identifying the best in one area may be a lot easier than in another. In sports, the best player is measurable. One who gets the most of whatever it is you are measuring: hits, runs, catches, goals, baskets, tackles, saves, wins. Also, by being voted MVP, or its equivalent, like Oscars or Emmies, in the performing arts. Critics are deferred to. They designate who or what is the best. Audiences define “the best” by selling out their concerts, and buying their—I was going to say “records”—but whatever the product is one buys today.

Winning an award is another way to designate the best. Put together a panel of judges, nominate several people considered “outstanding in their field,” establish criteria, and assign the judges the task of picking the best. There are hundreds, if not thousands of awards being given each year, and the winners are then considered tops. Pulitzer, Nobel, MacArthur, Miss America. Cy Young Awards, and Olympic Gold Medalists, and winners of Obies, and Grammys, and Oscars, and Tonys. They are all the best.

There was a rock song in the ‘80s by someone named Joe Esposito, I found on Google, called “Try To Be Best.” It begins, “‘Cause you’re only a man. And a man’s gotta learn to take it. You’re the best around. Nothing’s gonna ever keep you down.” (It may be better with music.) “Try To Be Best” brought to mind “You’re the Top” which is the same as the best. Cole Porter showed everyone that he was the best with his rhymes: “You’re the Coliseum, You’re the Louvre Museum.” “Bendel bonnet, Shakespeare sonnet,” Mahatma Ghandi, Napoleon brandy” etc. I am sure most of us agree that “You’re the Top” is one of the best.

We hear the term “best” used a lot in the arts. The best painting, sculpture, print, photograph, building, novel, play, poem, short story, song, (Do the best artists make the best art?) I have a book titled “The Best American Magazine Writing of 2009.” It narrows the field nicely. Will its contents be considered “the best” in 2010 or only for 2009?

Prestigious art museums try to collect the best art. And the best auction houses try to sell the best art. Is the art work that goes for the most money generally considered the best art. Is a painting that sold for \$50 million better than one that sold for \$40 million? And if the best painting that sold for \$50 million falls out of favor, and the auction house can

not even get \$25 million, does that mean it is no longer the best painting? Or maybe, it was the best painting of 2009?

I can imagine going out to dinner to an expensive restaurant (rarely, but it does happen), and someone exclaiming, “That was the best meal I ever ate!” No one would ever say that leaving a less than expensive restaurant. It figures. Only an expensive restaurant can prepare an extraordinary meal—the finest ingredients, the most creative chef and the most careful preparation. Only then can it be the best. You don’t get that at IHOP or your neighborhood bistro. I am afraid I have never experienced such a meal, but then, I am not a gourmet.

An area where I have dabbled with the best, is clothing. I previously mentioned that I bought all my clothes at one of two stores: in NY it was Klein’s, and in Boston it was Filene’s Basement. The stores were very similar. They would buy the leftovers from the very best clothing stores, and when I found the perfect “whatever” in my size, it made my day. The most expensive shirts from Brooks Brothers, the finest ties from Saks Fifth Avenue, the best suits from Hart Schafner and Marx. And in the good old days, all union made. The feel and quality of the fabric, the workmanship, the styling. They were the best. And best of all, Klein’s and Filene’s were reasonably priced. To get the best clothing at reasonable prices, who can ask for anything more?

Now that I have been obsessing about the best, I decided to check the dictionary: “Best. adj. superlative of good. Surpassing all others in excellence. Most excellent: the best performer, the best grade of ore. Most satisfactory, suitable or useful. The best solution. The best time for planting. Greatest. Most. Best. n. One that surpasses all others. The optimum condition or quality. To outdo or outwit: My opponent got the best of me. (The bestid bested me.) Regards: give them my best. The best of times.” So that’s what “it” means!

As I started writing this, I wanted to give it my best. I didn’t expect it to be the best thing I ever wrote, but I wanted it to be insightful, humorous, but best of all, I wanted the reader to enjoy it, since I was sharing it with my best friends and my best children.

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