



angela
hill



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Give 'Em Hill: Getting toasted, masterfully

By Angela Hill
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If I do say so myself, I make a pretty mean toast. I monitor it carefully so it's just nicely golden on both sides, not dark and smoldering as though struck by a flaming meteor, but also not too pale so as to be mistaken for a mere unaltered slice of bread. One might even say I'm a "master" at to a ... oh. Oh, not that kind of toast?

Yes, I have to admit, when I was graciously invited by Steve Taddei of Island City Toastmasters in Alameda to attend the annual Humorous Speech Contest a couple of weeks ago -- not to compete, thank heavens, just to observe -- I had no idea what Toastmasters members actually do. And what they do not do. Hint: They do not make toast.

No, toast they do not make. It may be involved in their home lives. I don't know. I didn't ask. But at their weekly meetings, they most assuredly do not sit around with four-slice, brushed-stainless-steel Cuisinarts and cook up conveyances for butter and jam.

Nor do they make the kinds of toasts that end in "Cheers!" or "Here's to 50 more years of wedded bliss!" although that's a little closer to what they do if you eliminate the alcohol.

They make speeches. Publicly. Which means in front of actual people, for crying out loud, which is what I usually do if I have to speak publicly. They prepare talks on myriad topics and present them in front of fellow members and evaluate them and mingle and snack on veggie plates.

Just kill me now

Now think back to your seventh-grade speech class when you had to stand up in front of everybody and talk about the pros and cons of the death penalty and you would just as soon have taken the lethal injection right there yourself because butterflies were doing barrel rolls in your tummy and you needed some sort of mental surgery to remove the words that were stuck in your throat and you were pretty sure your epidermis was showing and you just knew those evil witches Cindy Vault and Angela Foutz were sitting in the back row mocking the way the tip of your nose wiggled whenever you used a word that started with "m" and you can still hear their snickers which scarred me for life and ... Well, it's just like that. Except this is the civilized, grown-up version (the witches got tossed into alternative school -- ha!), all with the goal of personal growth, confidence building and career enhancement, which is a far a better occupational move than making a fake documentary about becoming a rap artist and acting like a spaced-out horse's patoot on Letterman.

And for some odd reason -- Toastmasters folks can't even explain it themselves -- their clubs are seeing a resurgence of activity worldwide.

"I don't know if it's the economy, with people needing to reconnect, network," said Kevin Wood, a 15-year Toastmaster member, mentor and host on their local public-access TV show who also led the meeting I attended. "Our club, which was on life support year after year, is now alive and bursting at the seams. I used to be an old jaded Toastmaster, but now I'm excited again. The week I draw my last breath, I will have gone to a Toastmasters meeting."

A support group, sort of

Yes, in a world gone mad with dispassionate electronic missives, firm hand shaking, direct eye contacting and clear enunciating is quite a draw. It's so retro, man. And retro's always in.

This meeting was part of an annual contest series, and took place in a fluorescent-lit conference room in Alameda Hospital with a pull-down movie screen and one of those light boxes where doctors examine X-rays. About 20 people were seated at long tables. It could have been anything, a cancer support group, an AA meeting.

And in similarly supportive fashion, they're all really nice to each other. They applaud everything, offer only constructive criticism, and though there are indeed winners who will move up through regional championships (there's ultimately an international winner who then tours around giving motivational speeches -- probably as a gateway to world domination), everyone gets a certificate of appreciation for participating, from the contestants to the judges to the people timing the speeches.

The humorous contest resembled mild stand-up routines. Carlos Rubinstein, who designs online and in-class training for corporate clients, presented, "What's for Dinner? Reservations," a charming chat about his love of food and his goal to find a Chinese/Mexican/kosher restaurant. Richard Yates, a software developer, gave a Stephen-Colbert-style PowerPoint presentation on "Working Together: How to Promote Team Bondage," a faux corporate team-building pep talk with lines such as, "Key Elements to Success: Have a rich uncle, or get everybody drunk and take photos of them puking in the sink."

Both speeches were delightful, but Carlos' conversational style won, and his talk was truly masterful, just the right balance of wit and wisdom, and pleasantly golden on both sides, which might go nicely with butter and jam.

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