

G'Day Mate, Bonzer Hat Ye Got There

by Erik_Deckers

They're called "cringe moments." Those things that we've done in our past that make us squirm uncomfortably like a Baptist at "Brokeback Mountain" as we remember them. We die a thousand deaths as we recall our past cringe moments and break into a cold sweat at the first sparkle of memory. No one likes to talk about them, but everyone has them, me included. Big surprise, right? Believe it or not, most of my moments come from saying the wrong thing at the wrong time. It was a lifelong lesson, but I finally learned it. I now think before I speak. People who have known me for several years have just fallen out of their chairs in stunned amazement. That just shows why you shouldn't drink at work. Okay, so I still need a little practice. This has been a hard lesson for me, because I have always been a "shoot first, aim later" kind of guy, which is why I usually ended up with my foot lodged firmly in my mouth. I would often say the first thing that popped into my head without thinking beyond the next three seconds. If I had, I could have predicted the response I was likely to get: an angry rebuttal, a tearful "why would you say that?!" or a punch in the nose. Or a combination of all three. But if I had just thought beyond my own need to make a clever statement, I could have avoided years of embarrassment and frantic backpedaling as I tried to remove my size-10 cross-trainers from my back molars. I finally decided to change my approach after meeting the mother of one of my daughter's friends several years ago. We were standing outside the girls' dance class, and got to chatting about our kids and our own lives. Now I'm a fairly outgoing person. When I meet someone new, I like to ask a lot of questions about where they're from, their family, and what they do for fun. These kinds of questions are usually safe in the hands of anyone else on Earth. But not me. I managed to make a tasty snack of both feet in less than 10 minutes. As this woman and I talked, I noticed she had a distinct accent. "So, are you from Australia?" I asked. "No, New Zealand." The quickest way to aggravate a New Zealander is to mistake them for Australian. Later: "What does your husband do?" Turns out she was recently divorced because he had joined a cult and had become something of a jerk about their daughter's custody. So I made a joke about "visiting" her family in New Zealand for a very lo-o-o-o-ong period of time, because there were no extradition treaties with the United States. You'll never guess where she returned from three weeks earlier, or why a family court judge thought she had gone in the first place. During our conversation, this woman happened to mention she was finishing her last few rounds of chemotherapy for a brain tumor, and explained this was why she was wearing a hat. I told my wife later, "It was like watching a slow train wreck. With the way the conversation was going, if she hadn't said anything, I swear I would have asked her why she was wearing a hat." (Luckily I had decided to cut my losses after the visiting New Zealand crack, and just listened instead of speaking, so I was spared that little faux pas.) This has since become our code for saying something completely stupid. Whenever my wife and I hear someone ask a dumb or insulting question, or more frequently, we ask it ourselves, the other one follows it up with "So why are you wearing that hat?" Nowadays we don't even ask the question. A simple "nice hat" or "He/she was sure wearing the hat on that one," has become our little verbal shorthand for "Man, that was nearly as moronic as that time I talked to that woman from New Zealand." So why am I telling you the story of one of my biggest cringe moments? Because I hope you, my reader, can keep your foot out of your mouth and spare yourself the shoe leather buffet that has been my life. I want to help you avoid saying anything overly stupid. It'll just make you look like a complete moron who wears a helmet out in public and still needs their mommy to dress them. See, I told you I still need a little practice.

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