

Perceptions (as I sees 'em)

*Dennis Payton Knight*

"I calls 'em as I sees 'em!" There likely is no better illustration of the word "perception." It was an umpire's loud response to an even louder Casey Stengel's protest of a called third strike in the ninth inning on a full count with two runners out, costing the Yankees a ball game. Stengel, of course, had a different perception.

Perception is how we evaluate things in whatever form it is we sees 'em. Technically, it is "the organization, identification, and interpretation of sensory information in order to represent and understand the environment." Specific perceptions may be shaped by sight, sound, taste and hearing, even by pain. And perhaps it's honest to include bias and prejudice in that soup.

Perception is not always fair, but it explains why after only one taste I never again will eat spinach from a can, even if with my eyes I have seen what it did for Popeye's biceps, and by sound what it did to Bluto's solar plexus. It formed my perception of what imprisonment in a can will do to an otherwise tasty commodity. Popeye, of course, had a different perception.

With perceptions gathered in the same way I learned to hate spinach, I happily stock cans of peas, corn, pork and beans, pears and pineapple, sliced, diced or crushed. And I love that fruit cocktail with the rubber cherries that many of my friends won't touch because their own perceptions are so screwed up.

Without perceptions, we can't even make decisions when we go to the store. That is the genius behind advertising. There is something about a field of lavender to persuade us we can change our hair from straw to silk, a cowboy lighting up to make us believe one cigarette is better than another, or a swoosh to give us the perception a certain brand of tennis shoe will make us jump the highest.

When it comes to politics, strategists sort us into demographic similarities, guess at our convictions, if any, and play us accordingly. They appeal to or try to change our notions about social justice, economics, immigration, even war and peace. It is the privilege of, and the price we pay for having perceptions in the first place, and it is our individual perceptions, collected from the ballot box and counted, that cause us to elect great leaders, sometimes, and sometimes to elect great mistakes.

Perception is what tells us the sky is blue and the distant mountains are purple. It is the beauty one finds at the opera and the thrill another gets from a Grateful Dead concert. It is the wonder absorbed from a Monet or a Picasso. It is the excitement of speed and the embrace of family. It accounts for our reverence for horses and our fear of spiders.

And it is perception that explains why you either love or hate the Yankees. But don't blame me. I calls 'em as I sees 'em.