

Am I the Nut in that Sitcom?

by Dennis Payton Knight

Situation comedy is like soap opera: short episodes that are depictions of life - tragedy in soap operas, silliness in comedies. But to my mind, it is the soaps that are silly, and the comedies that portray real life.

I identify easily with characters in situation comedies. I want to be Andy Taylor, but I am probably Barney Fife. I want to be Jerry Seinfeld, but I am Cosmo Kramer. Am I Sherman Potter? No, I am Radar O'Reilly.

Sherman Potter and Radar O'Reilly are just two of the many characters from the long running M*A*S*H series that I see myself in. Somedays, I am as cool and worldly as Hawkeye Pierce, and then my self-righteous, pigheaded Frank Burns side emerges. If I am not the competent Trapper John, I am the bumbling Henry Blake. Father Mulcahy is the priest I might have been. I understand Klinger's millinery and stratagems toward a Section 8 discharge even if I don't see myself in a dress.

I am probably the quintessence of Radar O'Reilly, the earnest, bespectacled company clerk who took to typing a duty roster as seriously as Hawkeye took to removing a spleen. It was Radar who successfully scrounged every supply clerk in Korea for critical medical supplies, from tongue depressors to morphine.

Years into the series, Colonel Sherman Potter rode in on his horse Sophie to become the outfit's crusty new commanding officer and grandfather. He instantly became the one character I most admire and want to be like.

The good Colonel had natural, folksy leadership qualities that paralleled his surgical skills. One example of Potter's touch was in the episode where he found out about the illicit still Hawkeye and B.J. kept in the swamp. He smiled and offered advice on how to improve its yield, explaining that he himself had a still while stationed on Guam during World War II. One night the still exploded, leaving him with an injury that won him a Purple Heart.

M*A*S*H fans remember those earthy Potterisms, like horse hockey, buffalo chips, pigeon pellets and pig feathers. Potter also put feathers on mules and deposited some mule muffins. A major concern to Major Burns was to Potter but "a pimple on a flea."

In one episode, he was concerned about the effects of never-ending war on his troops, observing "Morale here is lower than a gopher's basement." A happier moment earned the accolade, "That was the oyster's ice skates."

M*A*S*H made us laugh but did not ignore the horrors of battle, especially the undeclared, prolonged police action that the Korean War was. Treating soldiers gruesomely burned by white phosphorous, an ammunition new to battle, the kindly surgeon-colonel angrily cried, "If they can invent better ways to kill each other, why can't they invent a way to end this stupid war."

Good comedy is something we can relate to, but even more, it is something we become part of. That was M*A*S*H.