

# AN InterPReter's Nightmare

by Tony Beckwith © 2001

THE LIGHTS DIMMED IN THE HOTEL ballroom as the keynote speaker strolled across the stage. He stood behind the podium and looked out at the audience. I adjusted my headset and leaned closer to the microphone in the booth at the back of the hall. I ran my tongue across my lips and swallowed. The rustling and the shuffling and the talking subsided, and the man on the stage eased into his speech.

"Good morning," he said brightly. "My theme today is 'Clarity and Synergy in an Age of Divergent Paradigms and the Implementation of the Conceptual Approach.'" My heart sank. How was I supposed to interpret that? I understood the individual words, but what was he trying to say? My job was to convey his meaning into another language, but so far he was making no sense at all. For me, the process is quite simple: if I can hear you and I can understand you, I can interpret what you say. Speakers who talk like this make me crazy, they drive me insane. Where, I wondered miserably, were we going today?

"Now, let me say right away," he continued, "that I don't intend to articulate a TDC perimeter of cognitive assumptions or leverage a real-time review that is mission-critical and structured around a survey-based data bank. No! What I . . ."

Somebody was knocking on the side of the booth. Like an iguana under a

rock I shot a lightning glance to my left. There was the lady from the agency, shaking a sheaf of papers, grinning triumphantly and mouthing "I got his speech for you!" My eyes swung back to the front, smoldering beneath furiously furrowed brows. What in the world was the acronym that *odious little cretin* on stage just uttered? I waved my arm wildly to make the lady from the agency go away. *Why* do they talk in acronyms? Have your scuba call my RSVP!

The speaker paused, and looked around the darkened hall. He smiled, protected by his spotlights. "Let me get back to the NGY synergy and how that inevitably transitions to the cross-cutting issues we are considering. But, hey, I know we're all on the same page on that one." A wave of laughter rippled comfortably through the audience.

There was a roaring in my head, like a high wind in a hot valley, and my eyes were seared in their sockets. The muscles in my neck had turned to stone and my shoulders were hunched up around my ears. I seemed to be trying to move large pieces of furniture around in my brain, pushing pianos through keyholes under water.

Blissfully oblivious, the speaker moved away from the microphone and

stood with his elbow on the podium. When he looked to his right his voice was muffled and barely audible. When he faced forward or to his left I couldn't hear him at all. ". . . what we in fact envision . . . unwavering across-the-board support of our ongoing objective of clarity at any cost . . . and a market-driven focus . . . essential competitive edge . . ." There were shouts of 'Bravo!' from the front rows.

The booth had filled with ants, and I could no longer see my hands. My skull was lowered slowly into a cauldron of molten lava. I could see out of my ears and my tongue lay down with a crocodile. There was no time, no distance anymore. No colors, no laughter, no light. Only the roaring.

"In closing," said the speaker, who seemed to be moving further away, "let me say one thing. We cannot make mountains out of innuendo! There can

be no win-win synthesis if we don't move proactively together to . . ."

It was dark in the booth. Huge black clouds rolled in over a vast, angry sea that hissed and boiled across the beach where I was buried up to my chin in the sand. A seagull stood on a rock, looking at me, its feathers ruffling in the wind. My nostrils were packed with gravel.

". . . sixty percent of our MIF will be transferred to the PDT. Nineteen percent of the R-sevens will regroup . . . and with that, it is my very great pleasure to hand you over to Donnie Donaldson who will go over the rest of the TDCs." A tall monkey in a white coat took me gently by the arm as the speaker waved and said, "Thank you and have a great day!" ★

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