

# "Dial Back the Snark" Speakers Scramble for Limited Gigs

by Con Chapman

WELLESLEY FALLS, Mass. In his black t-shirt, pea coat and hipster hat, Jason Myers looks somewhat out of place as he steps from his hybrid car onto a tree-lined street in this quiet suburban town. "I made the short-list for the Young Anarchists Club's annual dinner-dance," he muses with a note of disappointment, "and I thought I had the gig for The New Wave Boston staff retreat, but no go."

*"That was very interesting!"*

And so Myers, who's trying to position himself as one of the leading spokesmen for the "Dial Back the Snark" movement, finds himself taking a deep breath on the front step of Betsy Brett's house where he'll address a meeting of the town's Junior League, a group that regularly brings in outside speakers to keep its member current on new and developing trends.

"'Dial Back the Snark' is an attempt to fight the pervasive cynicism that's corroding America's social fabric," he says, mixing his metaphors as he fiddles nervously with his scarf. "It's spreading like wildfire as people yearn for more honest relations with others, without all the irony."

*"My father was cynical, but it skips a generation."*

But the movement has been a victim of its own success, with inspirational speakers rushing to enter the potentially lucrative field as other sources of income have dried up due to competition from so-called "webinars," broadcasts that can reach an unlimited number of participants. As a result some, like Myers, who have made the movement into their cause find they must accept second-

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tier gigs like the one tonight in order to keep their names front and center in the crowded inspirational speaker marketplace.

"It's tough," Myers says as his hostess opens the door and greets him effusively. "You must be our distinguished speaker!" she squeals before extending a hand to shake. Myers has been warned by his agent that he may be expected to engage in an uncomfortable "party kiss" with one or more attendees tonight, so he balances himself cautiously on the balls of his feet, ready to go forward or back depending on visual and verbal cues.



*"You're dressed in black—did your goldfish die?"*

"Nice to meet you," he says politely, and Mrs. Brett escorts him and this reporter into her living room, where her fellow housewives are comparing notes on their hectic holiday seasons to date. A round of introductions follows, most of which are lost on Myers in a haze of Tori's, Marci's, and Courtney's, and the hostess directs us to a buffet and encourages us to fill our plates.

"I dress in black to put my bitter, nihilistic audiences at ease—so they know that I was once one of them," Myers says as he passes over salads—"to hard to handle when you're standing"—in favor of finger foods such as spring rolls and mini-ham sandwiches. "You've got to establish that rapport right from the start, otherwise you're not going to get anywhere."

We take seats on a recently re-upholstered couch and listen as the chapter's secretary Karen "Smoki" Green reads the minutes of the last meeting, then—after a report on the success of a recent fundraiser from the treasurer—Betsy Brett stands to introduce the evening's program.



*"He's cute when he gets like really sincere!"*

"Mr. Myers is a young man of 28 who realized that he was heading down a road of cynicism and negativity and—in the words of the movement he helped launch—decided to 'dial back the snark' and take a more positive outlook on life. So without further ado, ladies, please welcome Mr. Jason Myers."

There is polite but muted applause, to which tinkling overtones not unlike tiny sleighbells are added by the clinking of charms on attendees' bracelets. "Thank you for the kind reception," Myers says with considerably more gravitas than he usually brings to audiences who are covered not with jewelry but tattoos. "You know, we live in very confusing times," he begins softly, but his comment draws blank looks from the women in the audience, who are confused by their lack of confusion.

"On the one hand, we raise our kids to be high achievers," he says. "On the other hand, they are exposed daily to a culture that tells them that effort doesn't matter, that the world is corrupt, and that the proper response to any expression of hope or optimism is a snarky remark."



*"You don't think I overdid it, do you?"*

A hand goes up from a chair in the back row, next to the fireplace whose mantel is still decorated with a garland of pine. "Yes?" Myers asks.

"Could you repeat what you just said, I didn't quite catch it," says Sue Morton, a real estate broker who joined the club primarily for business reasons.

"He said 'snarky remark' I think," says Fran Othmer, who is sitting in the front row.

"What does 'snarky' mean?" another woman asks.

"It's like . . . bitter, sarcastic, cynical," Myers says, groping for terms more familiar to his slightly older crowd.

"I've never heard of it," says Maribeth Goshko, a substitute English teacher in this suburb's high-achieving school system. "And I score in the 99th percentile on vocabulary tests."



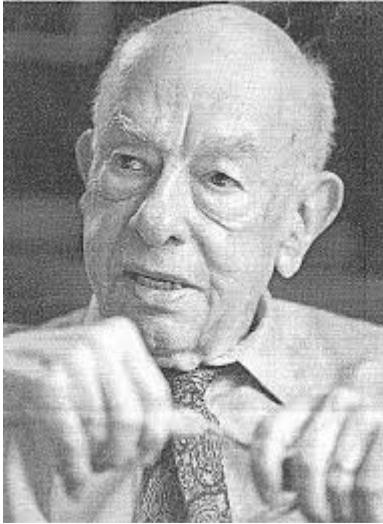
*Club president and last month's speaker Dennis Rodman, in drag.*

The other women burst into laughter, and Goshko is congratulated for her verbal aptitude.

"It's the whole attitude that you shouldn't take anything seriously—'Life sucks and then you die' kind of negativity," Myers says, then recoils when he hears a collective intake of breath across the room.

"That's a *terrible* thing to say!" says Margo Fleishman, whose husband owns a chain of discount jewelry stores that she doesn't patronize.

"I'm not *saying it* saying it," Myers says, "I'm saying that *other* people—especially young kids—say it." He's about to invoke the "use-mention" distinction he learned as an undergraduate philosophy major, but decides that an allusion to Willard Van Orman Quine might fly over some of the frosted blonde heads in the room.



*Quine: "I'm going to have another slice of the pear tart, if you don't mind."*

"I don't know what kind of kids you're talking about," Othmer says. "My kids are too busy with field hockey and lacrosse and Latin and Mandarin Chinese and volunteering to teach ice sculpture to autistic children and building irrigation systems in Venezuela to be cynical," she says, and heads nod around her in affirmation.

"Why don't we hold our questions until the end," Betsy Brett says, and even though a sense of decorum returns to the room Myers has difficulty returning to the thread of his topic.

"Like I was saying," he fumbles, "if we don't instill in our children, through the attitudes that we take to our work, our community and our country, a sense that life is worth living, we may be setting them up for failure in college—and in life." He looks up from the note card on which he has written out in block letters the peroration that usually brings audiences to their feet—if not their knees in praise of his inspiration—and sees faces that appear to need a guide for the perplexed. He waits for several seconds as silence hangs heavy in the room, then a sigh of relief escapes from his lips as Betsy Brett realizes he is finished and steps forward to thank him.

"That was *very* inspirational to all of us I'm sure," she says, as she shakes his hand, which is moist from flop sweat. "Now I think we can take a few questions. I saw Sue's hand go up first."

She looks over to the fireplace where Sue Morton is still struggling to understand the speaker's message.

"This 'snark,'" she says with a tone of skepticism.

"Yes?" Myers asks, genuinely wanting to clear up any misconceptions.

"Is it a fish or an animal?"

