

A couple of mornings ago, the phone rang here at my home office, and despite the unfamiliar number on my caller I.D., I picked it up.



Remember the good ol' days when you just *answered the phone*? I was feeling nostalgic, I guess. Plus, the call was coming from Los Angeles, and Jeff has family and friends out that way, so I thought maybe, just maybe, the call was legit.

"Hello?" I ventured, cautiously...

"Hey, this is Bill Such n' Such callin' from the So n'So cump'ny to discuss yer death binuh-feeuts – fer fyun'rul costs 'n such..." drawled the friendly voice on the other end of the line, sounding a bit like my parents' next door neighbor, Frank, back home in Alabama.

Ah, a fellow southerner, I thought, smiling. A kindred spirit. A real, honest-to-goodness person in a world of bland, homogenized, canned recordings. How refreshing!

Clearly, I wasn't about to discuss "death binuh-feeuts" – as if! – but I would dispose of this gentle soul with civility and good will. Poor guy was probably down on his luck, just trying to put food on his family's table during these troubled times...

"Listen, Bill," I began cheerfully, "I really appreciate your call, and I'm sure you have great death benefits, but at the moment, I'm incredibly busy..."

I paused, suddenly aware that Bill had started talking again. Right in the middle of my cordial kiss-off. And he was still talking. About "death binuh-feeuts." Bill, in fact, was not a real, honest-to-goodness person at all. Bill, with his charming, aw-shucks, up-close-and-personal Southern accent, was a recording!

Incensed, I slammed the phone into the receiver! I couldn't believe it. I'd been had! Snookered. Bamboozled. I felt betrayed!

Then my inner businesswoman kicked in, and I grudgingly had to hand it to the So n' So Company. Pretty ingenious! Get a southerner to record your sales pitch, and trick folks into staying on the line. People like southerners. People trust southerners. People don't expect southerners to be robots peddling lame-o death benefits!

Of course, I was much angrier at So n' So (and at "Bill," for that matter) than I'd ever been at any of the myriad companies that bombard me with recorded sales pitches all day long, every day. At least those recordings weren't phonies. At least they didn't pretend to be just folk, with "heys" and "y'alls" and warm, fuzzy chit-chat. At least you knew where you stood with those other recordings... and you didn't feel guilty about hanging up on them.

But this was Bill. Bill. And Bill had let me down. This felt personal.

It got me thinking about another southerner named Bill, one who, with his "regular guy," authentic persona, had inspired confidence and a feeling of instant kinship, in millions of Americans, then broken our hearts when he turned out to be not just a regular guy, but a pretty flawed one. I'm talking, of course, about Bill Clinton, one of the most beloved, despised presidents in US history.

The truth is, America has a love/hate relationship not just with Bill Clinton, but with southerners in general. We southerners are the ultimate contradiction, the great American

paradox. On the one hand, we're the butt of countless jokes and endless criticism; we're widely viewed as stupid, unsophisticated, backwards and racist. On the other hand, we're regularly celebrated and adored; people think we're friendly, hospitable, genuine and trustworthy. Sophisticates throughout the nation delight in making cracks about the South, but those same sophisticates often choose to retire here – and when they do, they rave not only about the nice weather, but the nice people, too. They laugh at us for being old-fashioned even as they praise us for being... old-fashioned.

Even the talking heads over at MSNBC – those great proponents of all things post-racial, post-regional, and post-traditional – have worried aloud that, for the first time in decades, there's no southerner on the Democratic presidential ticket. They know deep down that, as much as they and their Bill Maher-loving cronies bust on us, most of the country has a reluctant, but undeniable, soft spot for the South.

I could go into a long spiel – in fact, I think I have before, on this very page – about the history of the South and its inherent contradictions. I would, of course, say something about the Confederate South, with its great sense of romance and honor and doomed wrong-headedness... about the 20th century South, with its graciousness and virtue and Jim Crow laws. A million people have parsed this subject, and done it better than I ever could. Today, I'm not so interested in that. I'm more interested in why it is that, even now, when we're supposedly “new” – the South still stirs such singular passion – both positive and negative – in the hearts of our fellow countrymen... and even in our own hearts.

Peggy Noonan had a column in the *Wall Street Journal* last week lamenting the end of “placeness” as represented by the presidential campaign. She contends that it's harder for us to know Barack Obama and John McCain than it was with candidates in the past because neither is really, truly *from anywhere*.

Noonan is more poet than pundit, I think, and sometimes she has to squish her delicate cultural observations into the rigid framework called “politics,” where they don't always fit. This may have been one of those times. Still, part of her column rings true for our purposes:

“I was at a gathering a few weeks ago for an aged Southern sage, a politico with an accent so thick you have to lean close and concentrate to understand every word, so thick, as they used to say, you could pour it on pancakes. Most of the people there were from the South, different ages and generations but Southerners—the men grounded and courteous in a certain way, the women sleeveless and sexy in a certain way. There was a lot of singing and toasting and drinking, and this was the thing: Even as an outsider, you knew them. They were Mississippi Delta people—Mizz-izz-DEHLT people—and the sense of placeness they brought into the room with them was sweet to me. It allowed you to know them, in the same way that at a gathering of, say, Irish Catholics from the suburbs of Boston, you would be able to know them, pick up who they are, with your American antennae. You grow up, move on, and bring the Delta with you, but as each generation passes, the Delta disappears, as in time the ward and the parish disappear.

□□□ *I miss the old geographical vividness. But we are national now, and in a world so global that at the Olympics, when someone wins, wherever he is from, whatever nation or culture, he makes the same movements with his arms and face to mark his victory. South Korea's Park Tae-hwan moves just like Michael Phelps, with the “Yes!” and the arms shooting upward and the fists. This must be good. Why does it feel like a leveling? Like a squashing and squeezing down of the particular, local and authentic...”*

There. That's the key, I think. That's why people all over the country love *and* hate the South,

why nobody's just neutral. Because, for better and worse, the South still has its "placeness."
Both geographically and culturally, there's still

there

there (or here here). The South hasn't yet been entirely glossed over, hasn't quite been brought up to code. The South still has some rough, quirky edges. And like any rough, quirky home, it inspires humility, shame, and fierce loyalty in those who live there... scorn

and

affection in those who don't.

Such crazy, conflicting, *human* emotions. Don't I know them well! I love a good joke about the South, don't you? But only when it's told by a southerner. All my life, I've been slightly embarrassed by my southern accent... but, even now, it bothers me when someone tells me I don't really *have one*.

My daughter doesn't have a *trace* of a southern accent, and my own is much less pronounced than my mother's elegant drawl. With each generation, the sound of the South fades, as our distinctive "placeness" blurs into national, global sameness.

But for now, the South – the good, the bad, *and* the ugly South – still smacks of that "old geographical vividness."

You can gripe about it till the cows come home. But you know you love it.