

IT WAS THE SUMMER of 1959. At a resort inn in the Sierra Nevada of Northern California, I had a job that combined being the night desk clerk in the lodge and helping with the horse-wrangling at the stables. The owner-manager was Swiss, with European notions about conditions of employment. He and I did not get along. I thought he was a fascist who wanted peasant employees who knew their place. I was 22, just out of college, and pretty free with my opinions.

One week the employees had been served the same thing for lunch every single day. Two wieners, a mound of sauerkraut and stale rolls. To compound insult with injury, the cost of the meals was deducted from our paychecks. I was outraged.

On Friday night of that awful week, I was at my desk job around 11 p.m., and the night auditor had just come on duty. I went into the kitchen and saw a note to the chef to the effect that wieners and sauerkraut were on the employee menu for two more days.

That tore it. For lack of any better audience, I unloaded on the night auditor, Sigmund Wollman.

I declared that I had had it up to here, that I was going to get a plate of wieners and sauerkraut and wake up the owner and throw it at him. Nobody was going to make

ROBERT FULGHUM is the author of the best-selling books *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* and *It Was on Fire When I Lay Down on It*.

me eat wieners and sauerkraut for a whole week and make me pay for it and this was un-American and I didn't like wieners and sauerkraut enough to eat them one day for God's sake and the whole hotel stunk and I was packing my bags and heading for Montana where they never even heard of wieners and sauerkraut and wouldn't feed

Angry?

Before doing something really stupid, try ...

## Sigmund Wollman's Reality Test

Condensed from "UH-OH"  
ROBERT FULGHUM

that stuff to pigs. Something like that.

I raved on in this way for 20 minutes. My monologue was delivered at the top of my lungs, punctuated by blows on the front desk with a fly swatter, the kicking of chairs and much profanity.

As I pitched my fit, Sigmund Wollman sat quietly on his stool, watching me with sorrowful eyes. Put a bloodhound in a suit and tie

and you have Sigmund Wollman. He had good reason to look sorrowful. Survivor of Auschwitz. Three years. German Jew. Thin, coughed a lot. He liked being alone at the night job. It gave him intellectual space, peace and quiet, and, even more, he could go into the kitchen and have a snack whenever he wanted to—all the wieners and sauerkraut he wished. To him, a feast. More than that, there was nobody around to tell him what to do. In Auschwitz he had dreamed of such a time. The only person he saw at work was me, the nightly disturber of his dream. Our shifts overlapped an hour. And here I was, a one-man war party at full cry.

"Lissen, Fulchum. Lissen me, lissen me. You know what's wrong with you? It's not wieners and kraut and it's not the boss and it's not the chef and it's not this job."

"So what's wrong with me?"

"Fulchum, you think you know everything, but you don't know the difference between an inconvenience and a problem. If you break your neck, if you have nothing to eat, if

your house is on fire—then you got a problem. Everything else is inconvenience. Life is inconvenient. Life is lumpy.

"Learn to separate the inconveniences from the real problems. You will live longer. And will not annoy people like me so much. Good night."

In a gesture combining dismissal and blessing, he waved me off to bed.

Seldom in my life have I been hit between the eyes so hard with truth. There in that late-night darkness of a Sierra Nevada inn, Sigmund Wollman simultaneously kicked my butt and opened a window in my mind.

For 30 years now, in times of stress and strain, when something has me backed against the wall and I'm ready to do something really stupid with my anger, a sorrowful face appears in my mind and asks, "Fulchum. Problem or inconvenience?"

I think of this as the Wollman Test of Reality. Life is lumpy. And a lump in the oatmeal, a lump in the throat, and a lump in the breast are not the same lump. One should learn the difference. Good night, Sig.

### As Luck Would Have It

MY PARENTS WERE at the airport waiting for their flight to Las Vegas. At boarding time, they were informed of a half-hour delay. Dad turned to Mom, looked at his watch and said, "That'll save me \$200."

—Contributed by Jacqueline J. Trostel

A FRIEND BOUGHT a book of raffle tickets. The day after the drawing, the woman who had sold the tickets contacted my friend and apologized because she had forgotten to deposit the stubs into the bin on time.

"But don't worry," she added. "You didn't win anyway."

—Contributed by Michaela Casey