

MODERN WISDOM: URBAN LEGENDS

In ancient times, wise men and women shared their knowledge of the world by relating fables and myths to younger generations. These stories served to explain the mysteries of the natural world: What is thunder? Why does the moon fade away? Why do the seasons change? Today, we no longer need myths and legends to explain our environment. Traditional wisdom has been replaced with urban legends—unproved stories that warn of danger or teach a lesson relevant to the modern world. The following reading examines the purpose of urban legends in a technological society. This passage may be useful in reinforcing the concept of wisdom discussed in Sociology and You, Chapter 1.

Everyone knows the story of the vanishing hitchhiker. Some guy is driving on a country road when he picks up a pretty young girl thumbing a ride. She says she is on her way to her parents' home and wants to ride in the back seat. When the driver arrives at her house, he turns around to find the woman has vanished. He decides to knock on the door anyway, and is told by a man inside that the young woman in question was his daughter. She had gone missing years before while hitchhiking on the very road where the driver had picked her up. Her ghost had tried to catch rides back to the house before, says the father, but never made it all the way home.

People have been creeping each other out with this myth for decades; University of Utah folklorist Jan Harold Brunvand has traced dozens of variants on it as far back as 1876. It is the prototypical urban legend—passed from person to person, usually told as having happened to a relative or twice-removed acquaintance, changing slightly with each telling, and completely bogus. "These frightening stories used to happen to someone's brother or best friend," says David Emery, a California writer who tracks urban legends for the Mining Company Internet directory. "Now it's 'Such and such police department or state official said...' People are trying to make these stories scarier by using more reputable sources."

Thanks to the Internet, people can now share these modern-day tall tales with millions of cheerfully credulous people at a time. On November 25, the Edmonton Police Service (EPS) was forced to issue a press release countering a legend that has been popping up on computer screens all over North America. The e-mail message claims that a "police officer that works with the DARE program at an elementary school passed this warning on...If you are ever driving after dark and see an on-coming car with no headlights turned on, do not flash your lights at them!" The posting says that street gangs have been initiating new members by having them drive at night without lights. The first person to flash their lights becomes the new member's target; the wannabe gang-member has to turn around, chase the car and shoot at it to get inducted.

Not only has Edmonton never seen an incident like the one in the story, there is no record of something like it having occurred, ever, in Canada. "We got at least two or three dozen calls on this within a week from citizens, school officials, government employees, you name it," says EPS spokesman Kelly Gordon. "It was ridiculous." Well-meaning teachers at one city high school went so far as to read the posting to their students as a warning. "The school should have taken a minute to check this information with the police," says Mr. Gordon, "Not only is it a myth, but it encourages people

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not to engage in an act which is very important to traffic safety. That's why we wrote a rebuttal."

For every fake story the police have to rebut, the Internet carries a dozen more: people dying after drinking from Coke cans encrusted with rat urine; drug users leaving used needles in coin return slots; a back-door encounter between actor Richard Gere and a gerbil which ended badly. "One reporter dubbed these 'Internet vampires' because they never die," says Mr. Emery. "Don't believe everything you read."

Of course, some apparent "urban legends" are true. Ever hear the one about the California truck driver who dreamed of flying and tied 42 helium weather balloons to his lawn chair, and reached a height of 16,000 feet? The story is commonly believed to be a hoax, but the plucky trucker really existed. On July 2, 1982, Larry Walters and his aluminum chair floated three miles above Los Angeles as passenger jets whizzed by. After 45 minutes, Walters pulled out a BB pistol, shot some of the balloons, and descended slowly back to earth.

Davis Sheremata, "Folklore Gone Wild," *Alberta Report*, Vol. 25 Issue 52 (December 14, 1998), p. 20.