

1-2-95

Spelling

My thanks to Sue Chermiside for her inspiration for this subject.

Mamie, my maternal grandmother, stayed with us for extended periods of time until her death when I was twelve. Family legend has it that I was her favorite grandchild. I cannot confirm that but I do know that, when she was with us, she and I spent many hours together. She was a natural teacher and occupied many of those hours talking to me about her faith and her various activities. I paid more attention to her moral and religious instructions than I realized, but what I valued most at that time was her patient instruction in other activities. For years I had a wrinkled, crude-looking embroidered baby bib that was not finished. Crudely done, it was one of my attempts, at age four, at embroidery under her tutelage. I learned several stitches, including wheat and buttonhole stitches and French knots, but it was easy to see that I wasn't meant to be a fancy needleworker.

Mamie was much more successful in teaching me to knit, for by my tenth birthday I was knitting sweaters that were wearable. But her greatest success as my instructor was in guiding me into the mysteries of the printed word and fostering my life-long addiction to reading. I do not remember the details of how she went about teaching me to read. I recall that, when George and Roland began school, I was fascinated with the methods used, methods that sometimes seemed so familiar that I suspected they were variations on Mamie's methods. One thing I do remember is that she was insistent that I learn to spell correctly as I learned to decode the printed word. She was positive that everyone must learn correct spelling and that *anyone* could indeed learn. In fact, her oft-repeated admonition was that "a parrot can learn to spell."

I always prided myself on my ability to spell and was very unhappy with myself any time one of my teachers returned a paper with a misspelled word marked even though that didn't happen often. I was usually successful in the occasional spell-downs we had in school. Over the years I developed an exaggerated opinion of my near flawless spelling ability. However, when I had my first job as a stenographer, I discovered that there was a reality to the practice of good spelling that went considerably beyond the simplistic "a parrot can learn to spell."

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While I was still in college, I was hired as secretary at the John E. Mitchell Company in Dallas. The Mitchells were a firm of three brothers who had a thriving plant, manufacturing cotton processing machinery. They were highly literate and interviewed me at some length before they hired me. I had taken a stenography course in the interval between high school and college and had used my shorthand extensively in taking notes in my courses. Consequently, I had little difficulty in taking Don Mitchell's dictation. The brothers occupied large adjoining offices and freely shared the concerns of the business. One day I heard a burst of laughter from the three and was appalled to realize that one of the letters I had just delivered to Don for his signature was the source of their hilarity. I had spelled the word c-h-u-t-e as s-h-o-o-t, giving that part of the cotton cleaning apparatus a whole new meaning. I can still feel my cheeks burn with humiliation at such a spelling, but they simply accepted it as the innocent mistake of someone new at their business. Most of the rest of my stenographic errors at the Mitchell Company were typographical rather than orthographic.

I came to the painful conclusion that typing was not to be my primary calling, nor indeed were most of the aspects of being a competent secretary.

Later when I began teaching, I was both fascinated and appalled by the spelling habits of my college students. I discovered that some misspelling is regional. My Tarheels frequently misspelled *library*, for they pronounced and spelled it *libry*. My SMU students had great difficulty with *separate*, preferring s-e-p-e-r-a-t-e, but seldom had trouble with *library*. And Virginians didn't always include r's in their words where needed and they generally misspelled *library* as *libary*. I also observed in all parts of the country a sad deterioration in handwriting when spelling was a factor. I learned to count bumps and loops to try to decide whether my composition students were spelling correctly. More importantly, I learned that spelling was not entirely the rote-memory exercise that Mamie had claimed. Years after her day, the pedagogic world discovered various learning disabilities which make spelling, among other things, a chancy occupation. My growing acceptance of the existence of learning dysfunctions made me more sympathetic to mechanical errors and caused me to emphasize the content and organization of students' writing, at the same time urging the spelling-challenged students to pay careful editing attention to the form their words took on paper and to develop ways of coping with their difficulties.

Among the spelling helps that I discovered was a book named *Word City: How Can I Look It Up If I Can't Spell It?*, introduced to me by my friend Mary Lietman. Since vowels are generally the stumbling blocks in spelling, Marvin Morrison, the compiler of the book, devised a way of using only the consonants in a word. He claims that the consonant sounds in a word make up its *address*. You look up the address, or consonants, in *Word City*: for example, T-M-N will give you the correct spelling of *ptomaine*, G-R-L will refer you to *girl*, *gorilla* (ape), *grill*, or *guerrilla* (soldier), and J-K-R-T will spell *jakarta*. The book would not have helped me much with *chute*. I just now looked up S-H-T and got a long list including "chateau (house), chute (passage), eyeshot, sheet (paper), shit (excrement), shoat (pig), shoot (gun), shot (bullet, broken), shout (yell), shut (close), and shuteye (sleep). A number of my students used the copy of *Word City* that I placed in

the Writing Center and several even acquired copies of their own. Of course, now an even better spelling aid is the spell-checking programs that most word processors have. Even that would not have helped me with my infamous *chute* because *shoot* is not a misspelling. Also, my speller suggested several alternative spellings for *shit*, refusing to recognize it as a legitimate word, thereby offending my old Anglo-Saxon professor, who claimed that Old English four-letter words should be used in modern English without offending anyone.

I do use my computer's spell-check frequently to reassure myself that I have not goofed. I am amused at the words it does not recognize, *Mamie* and *SMU*, for example, but I do like the way it discovers my typos and repeated words. At least, with experience and age, I have lost my lofty attitude of my ability to spell and have become tolerant of the difficulties of others.