

Shirley Whittington



Once again I attack the typewriter short of breath and cold of finger. I've just returned from an errand of mercy.

While the rest of you have been imbibing cheering beverages and toasting your toes on portable electric heaters, I've been fighting my way through a raging blizzard to bring some gelatin home to my parsley.

Someone told me that if I poured a potion of gelatin over those sickly green threads that poke through the soil of my kitchen flower pots, they would erupt into parsley Julia Child would kill for.

As you know, gelatin is good for the fingernails. It must also be good for fern fronds, geraniums and parsley.

There are, at this writing, no plant closings in our household. In fact the several dozen plants we wet-nurse through the winter are open for business and more demanding than ever.

It's amazing - how enslaved we are by our house plants.

When Barbara Frum was named Woman of the Year by *Chatelaine* magazine, not a few of us were engorged with envy. Why?

It wasn't her brains, her beauty, her charm, her art collection or her rich husband that we coveted. It was her plant doctor. He makes house calls. This means Barbara's bloomers are always in good shape, and she doesn't have to lift a Fertab.

The average houseplant gets more specialized care than the average loved one. When did you last give your mate a bag of Zoo Poo? Do you regularly check your nearest and dearest for spider mite? How often do you atomize your beloved with distilled water?

It's no coincidence that one of the decade's best sellers was called *Roots*.

Plants even have their own advice columns in the daily papers. ("Dear Plant Doctor: Is it Baby Tears to rhyme with beers, or Baby Tears to rhyme with swears? Confused." "Dear Confused: Does your baby cry a lot?

Bill Smiley



I WAS going to say, "There's nothing more boring than old people talking about the 'good old days' when they were young."

Then I realized that I was out in left field, with nobody at bat, the pitcher chewing tobacco and spitting juice, the catcher fumbling around trying to adjust his athletic protector, as they now call a metal jockstrap.

There are many things more boring. Little children who want one more horse ride when your spine feels fractured in eight places from the 10 previous jaunts.

Teenagers babbling endlessly about rock stars, boyfriends, girlfriends, and the money they need to keep up with their friends. "How come we only have a 21 inch TV? I'm 16; why can't I stay out till 3 a.m. if I want to? I'm the only girl in the class who doesn't have construction workers boots!"

University students, perhaps the most boring creatures in our society. After the initial chirps of recognition: "Oh, Mr. Smiley, are you still teaching? How's it going?", as though you should have quit the minute you levered them through high school.

And then 40 minutes of straight, self-centred description of their university courses or their jobs, their professors, their disenchantment with their mission that they can't hack it, as

you knew they couldn't in the first place.

I manage to brush them off after about eight minutes with a cheery, "So long, Sam, great to hear you're doing so well, and best of luck. I have to go to an orgy for senior citizens that starts in four minutes, with the pornographic movie." It's great to leave them there with their mouths hanging open.

Next worse, in the boring department, are young couples who have produced one or two infants, and talk as though they'd swum the Atlantic, or climbed Mount Everest. "Let me tell you what Timmy (or Kimmy) said the other day. He was sawing wood in the nursery school, and his saw slipped, and he pointed at his saw, and he said, 'Don't you dare do that', and the teacher told me, and she said it was the most hilarious thing she'd ever seen, and blah blah blah, and..."

Boring. B-o-r-i-n-g. We can all top that type of story. My daughter, age 7, Grade 2, just getting over the Santa Claus bit, came home one day and told my wife she knew what a certain familiar four-letter word that she'd seen scrawled on the sidewalk meant. My wife is naive, even now, 20 years later.

At the time, rather absent-mindedly, with Dr. Spock lurking in the background, she enquired, "And what does it mean, dear?"

Roger Bell



During a bull session (okay, a philosophical discussion) with a colleague this past week, the topic turned to union dues. It was her contention that these fees are tantamount to incompetence insurance. That is a statement which might just cause Dennis McDermott's left ventricle to stage a walkout.

Now, before posties stop delivering my Playboy, sanitary engineers cease to remove my debris, or civil servants refuse to process my tax return (horrors!) let me explain that I don't totally agree with her. Even I, who have been known to occasionally hyperbolize, realize that she was making a rather sweeping generalization.

Nonetheless, a great number of people, many of them union members, seem to sense that something is indeed rancid in the work world. These feelings have given rise to such jokes as this: Have you heard about the new weapon called the Union Member? It will end all wars because it won't work and it can't be fired.

I'm lucky - I don't belong to a union. Instead, I am a federation member. I'm not forced to pay union dues. My money goes to federation dues. I could never be involved in a dirty strike. I might be asked, however, to take part in a withdrawal of services. If Gertrude Stein walked in right now, she'd say, "A synonym is a synonym is a synonym."

To get back on topic - sarcasm frequently causes me to forsake unity - it was the assertion of both my colleague and me that it is high well impossible for a teacher to get fired. It's doubtful whether one could reach the depths of inability or moral turpitude which would necessitate termination (not to be confused with extermination, a practice carried out by a certain crime-oriented brotherhood of workers).

In fact, it strains the brain to try to imagine

the dismissal of any serf under the safekeeping wing of a labour organization. Because I've belonged unwillingly, to several unions (Note, teachers, if that word brings on apoplexy or otherwise offends your professional sensibilities, you may substitute federations), I know whereof I speak. The word incompetence has been obliterated from the labour dictionary. We are asked to believe that all card-carriers are top-notch, gung-ho employees. Excuse me while I pause to choke.

The underlying rationale is - who is really competent to judge competence? No one. It is a relative word. The guy who left the thingamawidget off your car so that it crashed into a herd of sheep, spraying the countryside with mutton, isn't incompetent. How dare you slander the lad so? He was merely "having a bad day". And the lady at the hospital who mixed up your X-rays following the crash so that the doctors gave you a tubal ligation instead of repairing your ruptured spleen? Don't reprimand her, please. Her hamster died last week and she's been so distraught!

Are you thinking these two hypothetical situations are unbelievable? Well then, how about a real-life example.

When working on a large construction project for the government - already you begin to see - I had the misfortune to be on the same crew as a carpenter who had a slight problem. He was a dipsomaniac - you know, a souse. I hold nothing against souses. I've been known to murder a few brain cells in the pursuit of pleasure. But I don't want them in their cars weaving down the highway or working, as this man was, two hundred feet above me.

He was a carpenter, and prone to dropping the tools of his trade - hammers, saws, crowbars, planks. A crowbar through the

For plants, getting potted pays off

Or rip up magazines? Take your pick.") Makers of plant accessories - pots, hangers, greenhouses, fertilizers, window boxes and light units - are finding that money does grow on trees after all.

The CBC regularly airs a program with a plant doctor who dispenses useful advice to worried plant parents. He often tells people to leech their plants. If you ask me, the plants are the leeches.

Certainly any species that can persuade man to keep it inside all winter, in these days of rising fuel costs and crowded apartments - has the smarts.

But are they grateful, these leafy green parasites?

Some, like my psuedo-parsley, make small pretense at serving the hand that feeds them. We have an orange tree, but its fruit is inedible. It's as sour as Margaret Thatcher on Labour Day.

On the whole, plants are not grateful for your ministrations. They laugh at you behind your back, and violate your highly polished surfaces, leaving indelible white rings.

Think about it. Would your rubber tree keep your feet dry in an emergency? When did your spider plant last catch a fly?

What's more, some of these things can give you a one-way ticket to the emergency ward. Eat the leaves and stems of a poinsettia, or the berries of the mistletoe, and your next plant may be personal - six feet down.

Yet in these days of disposable personal relationships, insane judicial decisions and terrible TV sitcoms we need something to fuss over in order to stave off madness.

Better to ponder slipping your geraniums than slitting your wrists.

Better to take pruning shears to your dieffenbachia than to your bank manager.

Better to ventilate your frustrations by forcing spring blooms than by beating your wife.

Now - you'll have to excuse me. I have to get back to my plants. They've had their gelatin.

I can hear them screaming for Dream Whip.

There are boring parts to life

The response was, "When men and ladies lie down on top of each other and go to the bathroom." That was the end of any birds and bees instruction.

Next in a descending line of boring conversationalists are middle-aged grandparents. The women, young enough to still elicit a whistle on a dark night, the men old enough to suck in their paunches when a bikini walks by, they act as though they had invented grandchildren. They whine exchanged whimpers about the baby-sitting they have to do. They brag that their grandchildren are the worst little devils in the world. Boring.

And finally, we get to the elderly. Certainly some of them are boring, but they are the ones who have been bores all their lives.

But the others, the salty ones, even though slowed by the body's increasing frailty, retain their saltiness, and even improve on it, because they don't give a god damn anymore. They can say what they like and do what they like. And they do.

I've met or talked to three men in their late 80s recently. My father-in-law, 89, seemed rather frail when we arrived for a visit, at 3 p.m. At 11 that night we were still arguing religion and politics, at top form.

I've told you about old Campbell, the 85-er who dowses wells and is set to go to Paraguay. Talked to my great-uncle, riddled

with arthritis, and his voice and welcome were as warm and crackling as a fireplace freshly lit.

This whole column was inspired by a clipping my sister sent me about 88 year old Lawrence Consitt of Perth, Ontario.

Lawrence was present when the last man was hanged in Perth. His comment: "It was strange." The man had turned to the crowd and smiled just before his death. He had murdered his wife. Today he'd be given a man-slaughter and six years.

Lawrence started playing piano 79 years ago, at dances, at the silent pictures theatre. He got five dollars a night for a dance. The talkies knocked him out of a job in 1930. But he kept on playing ragtime and jazz wherever there was an opening.

I listened to him improvise for the silent movies. I danced to his piano at country dances, with his nieces and great-nieces.

He always had a crock. Took the pledge in 1925. It lasted 13 months. Got sick on a ship to France in 1918, and was too late to be killed.

He never married; "But I drank a lot of whiskey." He's in one of those Sunset Havens now, but when they ask him when he'll be back from a day in Perth, he says, "It depends on who I meet."

That's boring? Hang on Lawrence. You gave great pleasure to many people. I hope I can stay as salty as you.

The state of the union

cranium is no one's idea of a good time. He was warned and warned. To no avail. His tipting continued. So they did the logical thing: they fired him.

Wildcat city! The same guys who'd been cursing this bozo the previous day for using their skulls as targets were now incensed that those callous pigs in management would fire a harmless fellow worker. They immediately struck the site, and would not return until the boozehound was back performing his unsafe aerial antics. Which he was, four hours later.

We've created a school where mediocrity is a bloody parameter, one where there exists no failure. Everyone passes, and gets paid for it. D- and A+ students receive the same

meaningless degree.

For our own sakes, let's resurrect competence. Let's brush the burial dirt off it and put it back on its pedestal. And why don't we, while we're at it, let's restore the merit pay system.

If everyone produced equally, if effort, quantity and quality were uniform, we'd all deserve equal pay. But in the union world of the closed shop, it just ain't so. Isn't it about time for the re-emergence of the open shop? We must channel our energy into rewarding those who achieve, instead of squandering our integrity protecting those who, for whatever reason, do not.

'Jitters' coming to MSS

Huronia Players' production

"Jitters" by David French is Huronia Players' next production slated for Feb. 12, 13, 19 and 20 at Midland Secondary School.

"Jitters" is the story of a Canadian theatre company and the premiere of a play written by a fellow Canadian. An influential New York critic will be in the opening night audience.

Naturally, everyone from the playwright on down has the jitters.

It is a comedy, but it is also a revealing behind the scenes view of Canadian theatre. Members of our local theatre group have been hard at work shaping up this play within a play for presentation in the Association of Community Theatres Festival.

The cast chosen by Director Mark Warrack is an interesting combination of talents and experience.

The lead roles are played by Huronia Players favourites, Bill and Joan Hanna.

Watch for the specially designed posters. Tickets are available at Huronia Office

Services, Barber and Haskill and Mac's Milk in Midland, Gignac's Children Wear in Penetanguishene, and Elmvale Lumber in Elmvale. Tickets are \$3.50 for adults and \$1.75 for students.

The curtain rises for "Jitters" at Midland Secondary School on Feb. 12, 13, 19 and 20.

Feb. 4

Huronia Crafts Guild mini crafts sale (seconds, one of a kind, miscellaneous hand crafted items) on Thurs., Feb. 4 at 7:30 p.m. at Ste. Marie among the Hurons conference room. Beg, buy, barter.

Feb. 5

Registrations are being taken now for the Red Cross and Royal Lifesaving Course at the Midland YMCA. Held on two weekends, starting Fri., Feb. 5.