

## Education as an Art

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### SPELLING LESSONS

By Ruth Pusch

The laws of spelling seem as unalterable to a despairing Second Grader as the law of gravity on the top of a shoulder-high rock. Must one always be watchful of -ei- and -ie-? To the adult there is a kind of dogmatic virtue in the fact that spelling - much more than punctuation or grammar - has frozen into rigid shapes. Our stiff minds accept soberly the "one and only way" - except for those aristocratic Briticisms, such as *dialogue* and *honour*. Plebeian commercialisms seem below notice until a child, describing an evening at the Drive-In, writes of a "lovely nite", or after helping his mother scrub the bathtub, puts down a triumphant "kleen hands".

As we look back in time to the early Renaissance, however, we find a whimsical disregard of consistency. How cheering to be able to write "Shakespere" in 2 dozen different ways, all of them right! The early printers had the advantage of "know", "knowe", "kenowe", whichever was the best length to fill out their line, and yet it was they, those "devils", who began to insist on regularity, just as they set about standardizing punctuation. We can look back at the earlier manuscript writers with wonder and envy, for they not only possessed the will to form their letters in beauty, but also the complete freedom to write their words as they wished them to look and sound.

On the other hand, we know that in far distant ages, when writing itself was shrouded in mystic darkness, the letters were holy things: hiero-glyphs, sacred carving. The temple laid down the rules for the scribes, and these laws derived from the gods themselves. The stars and, their divinities helped man form his sounds, and cosmic laws were mirrored in earthly observances. A scribe who "made a mistake", was punished by death; a child today is immeasurably impressed by the wonder of this. It is hard for us to understand the acceptance of those unalterable gestures of cosmic wisdom which were later called the Logos. They worked into the moral-ethical sphere of men, not merely into the outer realm of intelligent language.

If the teacher today is not to be a pedant (and *pedagog* and *pedant* have come hand in hand to us from one Greek root), he must first of all respect the wisdom which remains in the sounds of our words, sometimes only as a breath. Take the clumsily spelled *night*: the eurythmic gesture of *CH*, of taking in blessing and refreshment in a wafting movement, a sound common to all Germanic languages and the Scots, still echoes there in the *GH*, half unheard. How utilitarian is the sleep of "nite", that has to do without such in-breathing! . . . The mouth that finds no delight in sound becomes one which bites the words it uses, as if they were parsnips.

But speech should be creative, not destructive. An affection for the sounds and rhythm of words in very young children will give them the ability to use and spell correctly (or freely!) a far wider vocabulary than the Sally and Sam readers provide. When First Graders in the Waldorf Schools paint a Big Brown Bear or a Bright Butterfly in learning the B, they follow, the contours of the letter with such pleasure and expectancy that it becomes an imaginative friend for life. Letters have shapes; sounds live and move: children can hear in the word *Bird* how the delicate vowel and R's impulsive motion lift the *B* - a rounded body - so that it swings out into a definite direction. It is true fairy-tale magic, accomplished by the miracle of human speech. The imagination has been involved, the eye looks with affectionate understanding at the "picture" of the word, and thus spelling is not a chore but partakes of that magic, too. Even a downright sly *B* that creeps on tiptoe into *comb* and *subtle* will be forgiven.

All teachers know that learning to spell well depends on careful looking. The method most used in studying spelling-lists is to fix the eyes on a single word, look away and see it in the mind, write it from memory, and then compare the printed and the written word. This is a proven method, if the child has enough concentration to pursue it. But we find less and less concentration: children need will-exercises as well as spelling-exercises. If the teacher 'will insist on correctness and systematic correction, spelling exercises are will exercises, not through self-righteous pedantry but because of a genuine desire to help the moral fault, or weakness, that lies far below the one of intelligence.

Lack of concentration may be in hearing, as well as in seeing. A training in careful listening is vitally important in this Age of the Eye, and this presupposes the teacher's attention to his own clear and pleasant speech habits! Rudolf Steiner regarded this attention as so necessary that he prefaced every faculty meeting, during the preparations for the first Waldorf School, with speech exercises for all the teachers.

The final task in connection with spelling is to bring a fresh, cheerful humor into a subject which too often, and unnecessarily, is deadly serious. A prose sentence can be more interesting than a mere list, and according to the specific class it can be gay, factual or didactic (You say you don't *fear*, the *bear*, you *sneaky bare*, but would you *dare* to climb the *stair* and knock on the door of his *lair*? The Indian *chief would* not *believe* his *niece's friend could* be a *thief* until he was *relieved* of his *meat-cleaver*. Do what's *right* with all your *might*!) Still better for the eye and the memory are rhymed verses, such as Lisa Monges has given us in the next article.

Spelling lessons will never, perhaps, be pure fun, but the Big Brown Bear and the imaginative determination of the teacher can certainly make them Bearable.