

In Defense of the Typo  
July 2021

And there it was, glaring from the paper I held before me, cradled in my lap, amidst the beautiful prose and poetry that drew me to this setting, to this belief. A typographical error, a massive one at that. I stifled my gasp because I was in a public setting.

I thought the typo massive in that moment. But was it really? Wasn't it just a mere slip of the hand, the result of a writer's quick turnaround—from thought to text? If we can admit that typos are not massive, why are they most memorable? Why do they color and shape and perhaps even diminish our response to the writer's central idea? Why do we sometimes share nothing but the typo?

During one extremely long winter, my husband and I shortened the time between awakening and retiring to our beds by tuning in to the late-night local news. Newscasters and technicians starting out in their careers made up a significant part of the newsroom's staff, so we were forgiving of camera glitches and an anchor's snafu. We cheered on the neophytes and hoped that their budding careers would reach full bloom. However, what dissolved us one night into blobs of hysterical laughter, was a particular typo, embedded throughout the text-laden visuals that accompanied, unbeknownst to the anchor, one of her reports.

It appeared that a popular local construction company, in birding on a building project, had offered birds that were incredibly high. The birds were accepted by the town officials, but the townspeople had grown irate that more reasonable birds had not even been considered. Tension surrounded the birding process, and a moratorium was placed on all birds for an indefinite period of time.

Shame on my husband and me for our unchecked hilarity! As if we had never made a mistake! Dash our smugness, our condescension! Where was our humbleness?

I quickly appeal to you, reader, to forgive me my amusement, for not long after we turned off the TV and wiped dry the tears that accompany uncontrolled laughter, I felt a kinship to the newsroom staff. I felt admiration. They had made it through one of the more humiliating aspects of our human existence. They had survived a typo. I knew that we would tune in to the next night's broadcast. I knew that the newsroom staff would plunge forward on their professional journey, the salve of commitment and perseverance slathered on their bruised egos. Kudos to them. I should be so strong!

Here is a peculiarity. A thin line exists between accepting the challenge to use and thus spell some unwieldy words and committing a typo, emitted merely by fumbling fingers. The effort involved in creating any written document should be applauded and the typo/misspell be ushered to the background or at least treated with understanding. If we are good and loving human beings, we must set aside our smugness and be aware of the misery of the writer caught red-handed with a typo or misspelling. What if a teacher had not merely smiled, hugged her young student, remarked on the unique spelling of foreign words, and gently urged the student to

change “Crape diem” to “Carpe diem”? To be honest, that teacher is thankful to the student for an unwitting gift of a phrase to attach to certain days in her life.

When I am asked how I spent the professional years of my life, I must, in honesty, state that I was an English teacher, a career born from my English and Drama degree. After I deliver that news, people often take a step back, or they say, “Wow, I’d better watch what I say.” When I’m asked to read what often turns out to be a beautiful piece of prose, the writer prefaces the submittal of the work with some sort of apology about not only grammatical slip-ups but also “gosh, I hope there aren’t any typos.” Of course, there will be those little errors. Writing takes a community to get it right; handing over our work for gentle scrutiny creates a community. As an English major, I will not rant. I will not slash. I will not cackle. I will read to savor the story or idea. Honestly.

A typo is merely a stumble. Just like putting the carton of milk in the pantry, turning down 4<sup>th</sup> Street rather than 5<sup>th</sup>, tripping over the root on the mountain trail, or getting someone’s name wrong. It’s a part of our daily human performance, a delightful mix of error and success. We’re still loved at the end of the day.

How interesting that the very mechanism that draws us to a convenient means of putting words to paper is the villain. When we use paper and pen to jot notes to ourselves, we might fuss over—with all mental capacity on the alert—the spelling of broccoli or onomatopoeia, but we do not suffer an actual typo, scribbling “murshrooms” or “poety”. I believe that when we write with pen or pencil, the connection between our fingers and brain is much more attuned and alert. The process is, without our realizing it, assiduous. When using the word processor, we fly. At the computer, our thoughts simultaneously zing from needing to let the dog out to dealing with a cramping toe. As I type, I can carry on a conversation or study a bug crawling up the wall...the latter as I am doing right now. It’s actually an ant.

If the mechanism that provides us the ability to type so easily desires a villainous counterpart, that feature is the Autocorrect. Once, I stumbled over the word “hyacinth”. Autocorrect gleefully and jubilantly pounced upon my finger fumble, playfully swirled it about with no regard for my ego and slapped “high jinx” in the typo’s place. Not even close, right? Sadly, I didn’t notice the correction, made just as I was clicking Save and then exiting my document.

“Oh joy!” cackled the monster Autocorrect, its sharp teeth exposed, its red eyes flashing, its bony and bent visage creeping. “Victory!”

“Not my fault!” I cried, as friends read that more than one high jinx sprouted in my May garden.

We, as conscientious and caring writers, are not to be brought before the jury. The crime of a typo is an accident, unpremeditated. Instead, as we nervously share our compositions with our readers, be they professional or non, as we apologize for the typos that may lurk, we must remind ourselves that writing, just like life itself, is not about perfection. Instead, it is about the desire to create and to generously share that which is in our hearts and our heads. It is about the act of tenderly and eagerly receiving that which has been shared. We do our best. We can do no better than that. We don’t need to.