

The Many Meanings of Words

By George Philipin

As a little boy who wondered about everything, and knew that older people like my mom and dad knew everything, and knew that my grandparents were consulted by my mom and dad on things-- so that the older you were, the more you knew. Like my teachers in school who were at least one-hundred years old. I attended grade school in the 50's. All teachers then were much older than today. Something about being hired during WWII with only a high school diploma. And they couldn't be laid off after the war. Depression era people seemed to work until they died of old age, and often worked well into their late seventies and early eighties. Of course I must confess that anybody over about eighteen seemed old to me, then!

Anyhow, my great-grandmother and grandmother on my maternal side were often together when I visited. Being a young brat and getting into everything around the house and often pulling pranks, I was labelled as having 'no sense' by my great-grandmother. I can still hear my great-grandmother saying, "Kids today don't have any sense! They don't. It's because they don't have anything to do most of the time. I had to feed the chickens, help out with the meals, can vegetables, and walk about four mile to school everyday." Every time she told the story the distance from the farm, where she was reared, to the school seemed to grow. One day I asked her, "Why didn't you ride your horse to school. You said you rode him a lot?" She just glared at me and said something like "Pa wouldn't let me!"

We lived out in the country when I was younger, not far off Route 22 and about forty- miles from Pittsburgh, Pa. One day, and that day will live within me more than my first kiss, if you know what I mean; believe me, some things that happen when we're kids bore into our very essence and paint the caverns of our mind with vividness in colours from those childhood recollections, often rivalling Michelangelo's painting on the ceiling at the Sistine Chapel.

That day happened when someone rapped at the back door. My mom was upstairs at the time and asked me to see who was there. I looked out the window first, saw an older lady wearing a brown-trench coat, and wearing a hat that belonged in a Humphrey Bogart movie. I opened the back door and before me stood this tall lady holding a briefcase ---almost looking like a bird with her beaked-nose projecting into the doorway. And the cold air from outside stirred me up further since I had been in the living room reading a comic.

She looked down at me and said, "I'm the census taker. Is you mommy home?"

I never stood up straighter in my life. The 'senses' taker! God, no—not t-that!

The words 'you don't have any sense' ran through my mind like an action movie. And I was sure that she was after me! I-didn't -have-any-sense! None! Just asks my grand-grandmother. Where are they going to take me! The reform school? To church every day? Or would I have to go to summer school, which in my opinion was the worst of the lot. I heard about summer school, for

my older brother said you got paddled every day there. Older brothers are like that!

My mother came, and as she and the census taker talked, I slipped into the living room and hid behind a chair with a baseball bat! Nobody was going to take me, especially some 'census' taker!

I heard my mom say that three boys lived here all school age, and mom also answered some other questions. That perplexed me somewhat since this census taker didn't ask questions like, "Does your boy do dumb things? Does he spill things on the floor? Does he wipe his ass after going to the bathroom?" These are questions I was sure an adult would ask to determine if a kid had good sense!

The census taker finally left—I'm glad my mom didn't invite her in for coffee. It seemed like my mom invited all the older women in for coffee. Well, good riddance to this census taker, I thought.

A few minutes later, and me behaving like some precocious alter boy, I politely asked my mom what she wanted.

Boy was that a relief! She only wanted to know who lived in our house. Why didn't they just call her the people-counter? That would have saved me much pang. Oh, well, I guess I'll never know!

The End