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A Newsletter of The Amy Foundation



An Unforgettable Holiday

By: Ruth J. Colvin

Ruth Colvin is the founder of Literacy Volunteers of America (now ProLiteracy), a national non-profit organization which trains volunteers to teach basic reading/writing and English as a Second Language. She was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom and inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame. She is a previous Amy Writing Award winner. This article was printed in *The Post Standard* of Syracuse, NY, on Nov. 26, 2010.

It was the week before Thanksgiving some years ago, and my husband, Bob, and I were feeling sorry for ourselves. Our son and his family were on the east coast; our daughter and her family on the west coast. We were in between and feeling lonely. It simply was not possible for us to visit them or for them to visit us.

I wanted to think friends would have included us in their own festivities. But, apparently, none knew we'd be alone. The phone remained silent. I

In the process of getting ready, we forgot all about being lonely and sorry for ourselves.

recalled the many times that we'd invited others to join our family for dinner. But I was in no mood to prepare a big dinner.

Most of us consider Thanksgiving a family day. But what about others who were without family on Thanksgiving?

I recalled when Bob's and my mothers had been in nursing homes. How they looked forward to our visits! Espe-

cially on holidays. But I do remember noticing other residents sitting by themselves, apparently envying our reunions.

So, on impulse, I phoned a local nursing home, identified myself, and asked if there were any patients who had had no visitors. I expected to hear of three or four. Or even half a dozen.

What a shock when the director paged through her records, then told me, "I have the names of 24 residents who've had no visitors all year."

Our feelings of self-pity evaporated.

Our consciences wouldn't let us pick just a few names out of two-dozen lonely souls. But what to do

to visit that many on Thanksgiving morning?

Of course—make cupcakes! One for each. Decorated and in a separate package with a single rose for each. And, somehow, we must decide how to make each one feel he or she was the special one being visited.

In the process of getting ready for our Thanksgiving Day visits, we forgot all

about being lonely and sorry for ourselves. Instead, we were up early, packing the cupcakes I'd made the night before. The nurse had assured me the people we'd visit could eat such sweets at any time.

As we bundled up, we were surprised how excited we were about the trip. We discussed what I might say to each. Bob had chosen to stay outside each door to hold the other treats and help make sure I had the proper name for the resident of each particular room. Conversation was to begin with my introducing myself and saying "Happy Thanksgiving." Then, I would wait to see if more talk was appropriate.

The first name was that of Marjory Marshall.* When I entered her tidy room and greeted her with my pre-arranged speech, she looked up at me as she sat in an overstuffed chair, dressed in her bright pink robe. "Do I know you?" she asked.

I admitted she probably didn't, but that I was lonely and hoped to meet new friends. She thanked me for the cupcake and responded eagerly to questions.

Continued on page 2 ➤

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Pen & Sword

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► Holiday, cont'd from p.1

That's how I learned she had been a teacher in a rural school and active in her church. She'd remained single all her 94 years. All her relatives had died. "I'm tired and would like to join them. Sometimes my pastor comes. I asked him, 'Why do I continue to live so long?' He told me, 'I guess God has something planned for you to do.'"

Then she asked me, "What do you think God wants me to do? I can't figure it out."

It was a logical question indeed and I had no easy answer. "Well, the Bible says we should 'encourage one another and build one another up' (1 Thess. 5:11). You seem to be blessed with a good mind and a positive attitude. I'd guess He might have you here to help some of the others to be happy."

Her smile and firm nod assured me this was the correct answer. It confirmed her wish that she was needed there in the nursing home.

Then there was Mr. Barber.* He and his wheelchair were in a corner where he sat staring at the walls. His response to my greeting and the offered cupcake was, "Can I eat it now?" His only interest was in the cupcake. So, even though he didn't so much as look my way, I knew he was pleased with this little gift.

Mrs. Metcalf,* a blue robe over her white hospital gown, was slumped over in her wheelchair, having been tied in so she wouldn't tumble out. Her white hair was frazzled as she lay with her head on her arms, fast asleep. I hesitated, thinking of leaving quietly so as not to disturb her. I put the cupcake and red rose on her bedside table.

"No, no, do go ahead and wake her," the aide instructed. "She wouldn't want to miss a visitor—the only one she's had."

I wondered how to do this without frightening her. So I knelt down at her side, gently touching her arm, and whispering, "Mrs. Metcalf?"

She raised her head, eyes still sleepy and hazy. "I'm Rose Metcalf."

"I'm Ruth Colvin. I've come to wish you a Happy Thanksgiving."

"How nice. It's mighty nice of you to come. Thank you." And her eyes glazed over again. But she'd responded to me even though it was for only those few seconds.

Each of the twenty-four residents' reactions was different. Yet every individual touched Bob's and my hearts. We realized that all were "somebodies" in their day.

As we left the nursing home to return to our own home, Bob and I discovered we had grateful tears welling in thankfulness for our own health, for our family members, for our friends. We realized, too, that someday we might be in a similar position of yearning for a visit from someone. Anyone.

It also made us more aware of caring staff members who work day in and day out – often at menial jobs – to take care of our nation's elderly and/or those who need special attention.

When I told a friend about the Thanksgiving Day which had cured our own feelings of depression and loneliness, how it turned out to be the most meaningful one we'd had in many years, she determined to do something similar.

She and her young son chose Christmas Day to visit a nursing home in her own community. Their gifts weren't cupcakes and a silk rose, but a new pair of sweat pants for each person visited. It made their day brighter too.

Go ahead—if you're feeling sorry for yourself, give a lonely friend or a local nursing home a call. It'll do even more good to you than to those you plan on helping. ◀

**The residents' real names are not used.*

This article won 1st prize in the 2010 Amy Writing Awards. It is reprinted with permission

Amy Foundation Announcements:

- Remember to turn in submissions for the 2011 Amy Writing Awards by **January 31st**. See our website for details on how to qualify.
- The Amy Foundation would like to thank the **Lloyd and Mabel Johnson Foundation** for their support of the Amy Writing Awards. They have made a generous donation to The Amy Foundation to support the ongoing work of the Amy Writing Awards. We greatly appreciate their support.
- **Merry Christmas and Happy New Year** on behalf of our board and staff!

A Refresher Course: Common Grammar Errors

By: Mary Jackson

The influx of new writing outlets causes some to loosen up – and develop bad habits – when it comes to grammar rules. Researchers say more Americans are writing with the surge of texting, blogging, emailing, and social media, yet the constant use of digital communication may be eroding writing skills.

Grammar errors are increasingly common, even among business-school graduates, according to a recent article in the *Wall Street Journal*, which looked at declining writing scores of M.B.A. graduates. Employers complained of graduates' tendency to ramble and pen too-casual emails. Technology use, as well as an overall de-emphasis in writing instruction in U.S. high schools and colleges, is to blame, according to the National Writing Project Director Sharon Washington.

Aggravated English language bloggers bemoan the slip in writing quality. An Internet search retrieved some of the Web's most "flagrant" writing errors, which can distract readers and decrease credibility and exposure. Here's a refresher on these common mistakes:

Commas:

First, use commas in a series of items.

Incorrect: I bought milk, eggs and bread.

Correct: I bought milk, eggs, and bread.

Second, remember to put a comma between two independent clauses connected with a conjunction.

Incorrect: Health and wellness interest her so she wants to study nutrition.

Correct: Health and wellness interest her, so she wants to study nutrition.

Last, insert a comma after a dependent clause:

Incorrect: Before I go to bed I always read a chapter.

Correct: Before I go to bed, I always read a chapter.

Subject/Verb Agreement:

Subjects and verbs must agree, meaning a singular subject needs a singular form of the verb, and a plural subject should have a plural form of the verb.

Incorrect: One of these orchids bloom at night.

Correct: One of these orchids blooms at night.

Its or It's:

The possessive form of "it" is "its," not "it's." Use "it's" only when it means "it is." Unless you can replace "it's" with "it is," use "its." Never use "its'."

Incorrect: The lion shook it's mane.

Correct: The lion shook its mane.

There, their, or they're:

"There" can specify a place

and also can be used as an expletive or empty word to start a sentence. "Their" is used as a possessive form of "they." "They're" is short for "they are."

Examples:

- There are seven major continents in the world.
- The two girls raced their bikes.
- They're friends from college.

Quotes and end marks:

Follow these simple rules: Put quotation marks after a period or comma. Put quotes before a colon. Put quotes after a question mark unless the entire sentence is a question.

Examples:

- He asked, "Are you thirsty?"
- She replied, "Yes."
- Did she say, "Yes"?

Other common errors include misuse of the words affect/eff-ect, lose/loose, and then/than. The Web offers a plethora of grammar sites to check usage – it's just a matter of taking the time. ◀

Help on the Web

For more examples and extensive explanations of grammar usage, go to: **www.grammarbook.com.**

To view several grammar myths, or rules some insist it's time to do away with, go to: **www.grammarphobia.com/grammar.html**

For daily posts on grammar and writing tips, go to **www.dailywritings.com**



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For Elmer's Sake

By: Donna Clark Goodrich

"Lord, why have you let mother linger so long? You know she's ready to go."

It was two o'clock in the morning in December, 1982. Sitting in the tiny, smoke-filled waiting room of the Intensive Care Unit, I thought back over the events of the last eighteen months: my mother's cancer surgery, the chemo treatments, my eight trips between Arizona and Michigan, and the final surgery which led to the coma in which she now lay.

The week before, the doctor had told me "24 to 48 hours," and I had summoned my brothers and sister who had come, along with some of their children, to be by Mother's bedside. Day after day, we waited and watched. "She quit breathing," someone would say and we'd rush to the cafeteria to get a family member. But by the time we returned, the breathing had begun again.

Exhausted, and needing to return home for a statewide Christian writers' seminar, I of-

ten found myself alone in this little waiting room, praying and questioning God.

On this particular night, however, I was not alone for long. A man in his mid-sixties made his way into the room, dragging his IV stand beside him. "How are you doing?" I asked him.

"Not too good," he answered in a low voice. "My doctor told me today I have only six months to live." We chatted for awhile. Then he asked why I was there, and I told him about my mother.

"How did she handle it when they told her?" he asked me. I shared with him about her Christian faith, which had kept her all through the years, and also that many people had been praying for her. "I used to pray," he admitted, "but I don't anymore. It's too late."

It's never too late, I told him. Reaching into my purse, I took out my New Testament and turned to John 3:16. I read the words, putting his

name in the appropriate places: "For God so loved Elmer, that he gave his only begotten Son, that [if] Elmer believes in him Elmer shall not perish, but have everlasting life." Elmer read the verse again, and then he looked up and asked, "Does that mean there's still a chance for me?" Yes, I answered. I explained the gospel message simply and then asked if he would like to pray. He bowed his head and repeated the words I said to him. When we finished, he said, simply, "Thank you," and left the room.

The next day while walking down the hall I looked up and saw Elmer coming toward me. His head erect, he shook my hand and said, "It's okay. I'm not afraid to die now." Then I knew why God had let my mother linger for so long. It was for Elmer's sake. ◀

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