

Foot in Mouth Disease

I think I may be related to Peter in the bible. You know, how he was always making statements that embarrassed himself in front of Jesus? Take for example, when Jesus was transfigured before three of His disciples; Peter, James, and John, probably near the summit of Mt. Hermon. Jesus's body and robes were bright with heavenly light as He spoke with Moses and Elijah while his disciples watched. When the conversation ended, and Jesus's body returned to normal, Peter blurted out something like, "Hey, let's build some booths and camp out here for a while! This is a wonderful place, and it has a fantastic view! It's great to be here!"

As I age, my wife is starting to tell me that I also talk too much. "Who, me?" I protest. "But, people want to hear what I have to say."

"Maybe, " she says. "But, you're starting to babble! I'm taking my hearing aid out."

I think maybe the Lord has loosened my tongue, so I can share some of the stupid things I've said during my life in the stories I'm writing. For example, someone will share an anecdote about them self, and it reminds me of something similar that has happened to me, or some misunderstanding I've had. Something deep inside almost forces me to dredge up the memory and share it with you--my family and friends--and then write it down. That's where many of the tales I've been sharing with you come from.

However, I've also been having difficulty recalling some of the details of these incidents. I need to rely on my wife, Jeannette, to recover some of the information about the what, when, where, who, and why of these events. I think that's why she says it babble. If I didn't talk so much, she wouldn't have to think so hard, to help me remember the distant past.

Let me share some examples. Recently, when I tried to interpret a phrase from some foreign language, either in verbal or written form, in a movie or on a display, I was reminded of two mistakes I had made using a foreign language when traveling in France and Italy with Jeannette and her sister, Darlene, about a dozen years ago. I'm tired of constantly having to reconstruct these incidents from scratch.

I need to get them written down, so I can just hand the accounts to people in written form to read, so I don't have to repeatedly strain my brain to recover them.

Both incidents occurred on trains in Europe. We were on our way from Paris to Milan traveling up the west slopes of the Alps through a beautiful pine forest with mountains and lakes in the distance when I noticed a sign outside the window announcing, "Lac le Pin." I remembered the French word, "lepin," which means "rabbit," from my French class in college. My translation of this word was reinforced by a delicious serving of Welsh Rarebit I had enjoyed the evening before in Paris. Jeannette, Darlene, and I had dined at a restaurant off the River Seine called, "The Smoking Dog," and experienced a rare gastronomical adventure unparalleled in my gustatory experience. The meal of stewed rabbit was served in a simple copper pot at the table, simmered in an exquisite gravy, and accompanied by dumplings and fresh vegetables on the side.

But, I digress. I translated the word, "le pin," as "rabbit" and the preceding word, "lac," as "milk." I assumed "lac" meant "milk" from a similar word from my Spanish class in college and by the frequent use of the word, "leche," by my wife in her La Leche League baby nursing classes.

I was so proud of my translational triumph, that I announced it somewhat too loudly to Jeannette and Darlene, so that a passenger nearby, whom I had been having a brief conversation with earlier, heard me. When I confidently announced we were approaching a station called, "Milk of the Rabbit," he let out a loud guffaw, and immediately fell silent.

I recognized in his tone of surprise at my accomplished translational skills, an apparent different opinion of what the sign said. After requesting he offer his translation of the sign, he reluctantly stated his rendering. He told me the sign announced the name of a station called, "The Lake of the Pines." I fell into an embarrassed silence by my obvious stupidity. Once again, I had experienced a case of, "Open mouth, insert foot." The pathetic part of the entire incident was, that I had lived in a gated community in Northern California for five years called, "The Lake of the Pines."

A second example of erroneously fracturing a foreign language, occurred several times when I used the expression, "Mi scuse," when speaking to Italians

blocking my path on a train or subway in Rome and Naples. I had used the phrase several times and was astonished at how quickly people moved aside to let me pass. "Mi scuse, " was one of about ten phrases included on the tourist guide I had studied prior to our month-long trip to Europe.

Several days after arriving in Naples and having used the phrase several times with great success, I asked my daughter-in-law, Kriston, who was living there with our son, Daniel, because he was assigned to Naples by the U.S. Navy, why the Italians responded so quickly to the phrase, "Mi scuse?" She had been diligently studying Italian to communicate more effectively with her neighbors and friends at their church in Naples.

She asked, with great surprise in her voice, "You haven't been saying, 'Mi scuse', have you?"

"Well, yes," I said. "That's what my tourist guide suggests, " I responded. "See here," handing her my pamphlet.

"Oh, no! That's terrible! When you thought you were asking them to, 'Please, move aside.' You were actually telling them, 'Get out of my way! ' "

Great! Another "Ugly American" impresses our Italian friends!