

Saving the Adverb

by Kathryn Stripling Byer

I like to look at bumper stickers on campus and sometimes talk back to them. One claimed knowledge is not important, imagination is, with the image of Einstein in the corner. "How could Einstein use imagination if he didn't have knowledge to play with?" I asked the sticker but got no response.

Sometimes I leave a note, if the sticker makes nasty political comments. Or if the vehicle sports a macho "If it flies, it dies." The men in my family hunted quail, but they never went after cardinals, nuthatches, or, for that matter, crop dusters.

Then, there are stickers urging us to save this lake or that river, so when I approached the car proclaiming Save the Adverb, I was, to put it mildly, puzzled I didn't know the adverb was endangered, no more so than any other part of speech, in these days of endless "whatever's," and "like, you know's." The verb "to be" seems to be gobbling up all other forms of predicate, and "Uh" seems to be replacing most nouns. But the adverb?

I started thinking about adverbs, the pleasure of using a good one, not to mention a long adverbial clause or phrase. What a challenge to pull off, especially beginning a sentence, making the listener wait for what comes next!

What a pleasure, for that matter, to diagram sentences! I can hear readers thinking, "What a geek she must have been!" Yes, I was a grammar geek. I loved learning how a sentence works, the parts of it on the blackboard like a trembling spider web or constellation.

My junior high English teacher, a bulldog of a woman, made us memorize definitions for the parts of speech and sentences, the cases, as well as verb conjugations. We had regular recitations, along with sentences on the blackboard to which we were called to point out every element of their construction.

I never feared these assignments, though I shuddered when called to work an algebra problem. The truth is I loved those words, and yes, I really loved adverbs, I loved them rapturously, greedily, longingly. When I was a freshman in a beginning psychology class, the subject turned to language. "What, Miss Stripling," the professor asked, looking down at his lengthy roll, "is the most important thing about a word?"

"The way it sounds," I answered. He looked around. A girl raised her hand and said proudly, "The meaning." That's right," he nodded, with more certainty than I thought necessary.

I sat frowning in the back, sure that I would never take another psychology course. I would not stop loving the sound of adverbs, or adjectives, verbs, and nouns. Saucily, perfunctorily, filigree, stubble, and that word I once put in a poem, desolate, and was told in workshop to ditch it because the field did not need a modifier. I decided the field might not, but I did. Desolate remained.

So, yes, let's save the adverb, along with all the other parts of speech and let them roll off our tongue with the pleasure that words can bring.