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## **MRS. PETRY AND THE CHALKBOARD** (Or, The Dangers of Conjunctions)

by S. Ray Granade

8/23/2009

I had never been in much trouble in school, for I always tried to follow the rules (or not get caught). The general exception was fighting and biting (in conjunction with fighting); I broke a bone in my right hand fighting with Mike Kilpatrick and broke out a tooth (it was already loose) biting Johnny Snowden when he was wearing a puffy silver coat with a furry collar. But in the third grade, my mouth got me in trouble in another way. My quick mind, ready tongue, and general mischievousness earned me something of a well-deserved reputation as a smart-aleck (a teacher's word). Despite all efforts to live tongue-in-check, such self-restraint never proved my strong point. On top of it all, even when I was a young child my voice seemed made for my nature's loud, boisterous portion.

Empathy and sympathy strongly tinged my approach to the world, and often my parents commented on my tender heart. Maliciousness never figured into my make-up, and my first two grade-school teachers seemed to fix on that lack as compensation for the less pleasant portions. Perhaps they were merely more accepting of my maleness and more prone to adopt the "boys-will-be-boys" attitude. That changed in the third grade. Mrs. Petry's only child was a ne'er-do-well son quite a few years older than I, which might have had some bearing on the story, and she was a single mother (for reasons I never knew), which might also explain part of it.

Unbeknownst to me until decades later, Mrs. Petry fed Mother a steady dose of tales of dread and woe about my behavior all through that year. Unfortunately, I did nothing to make things better. Certainly the climax came one spring day when Mrs. Petry was writing on the chalkboard.

The lesson involved conjunctions. The teacher wrote the word "conjunctions" on the board. She wanted to make sure that we understood the function of coordinating conjunctions before we moved on to correlative and subordinating ones. She wrote "and" on the board and talked briefly about it and its role. Then, fatefully, she moved on to "but."

As Mrs. Petry wrote on the board, from my nearby seat I remarked on her word choice: "Ahhhhh ummmmm. Teacher wrote a bad word on the board!"

I can remember knowing that I should keep my mouth shut but going ahead anyway. This was premeditated sass, not innocent putting my foot in it.

I might as well have slapped her.

Her swift and righteous reaction did not surprise me except in its intensity and its lack of physicality. Its speed quelled class reaction—or at least any incipient reaction registering through the wall of white heat that instantly surrounded my desk and linked me to her. My front-row seat suddenly was more disadvantageous than normal.

Mrs. Petry, with clipped words and menacing tone, said "This is a conjunction. There's nothing wrong with the word. The one you're thinking about ends in two 't's and this isn't it."

I will remember the urge to say "I know that 'butt' has two 't's!" but, unlike the first time, I stifled the urge. I just sat and looked at her, which didn't help but at least didn't hurt either.

I don't remember physical punishment, and I don't remember being referred to the principal. Mr. McMillan ("Mr. Mac"), a bachelor who lived in a cottage beside Mrs. Weathers' large house just across Highway 31 from the elementary school with his sister, who taught 5th grade, was the principal. As his name suggests, he was Scottish by lineage, and shared both their Presbyterianism and their generally dark view of humankind. He dearly loved children, which was in part why he served as Scoutmaster. But he also had no qualms about spanking; no one ever thought of him as soft in person or outlook. He would have paddled in a heartbeat—and I would have remembered it!

By the time I got home, Mother knew the story, at least from Mrs. Petry's side. She never asked my side. I suffered in silence, taking in Mother's sadness and Daddy's reminder that I should never sass teachers. I don't remember getting a spanking. Nor did it occur to me that Daddy's mother had been a schoolteacher, and that he must have taken my sassing my teacher much differently than did my Mother (though hers had been as well, as had her father). I never shed a tear; Mother later told me that she did.