

But competition is good. It has expanded his vocabulary, and certainly increased my understanding of how words can be used.

The other day I opened a cupboard and saw a splotch of brown stuff splattered on the edge of a shelf, and a dab or two on the wall. Curious. I noticed cracker crumbs on the counter, too. Then I knew what it was. I got this picture in my head:

MyKeeper, trying to spread a knife full of peanut butter on a thin, crisp cracker. I cleaned up the mess, snickering all the while.

Later that afternoon, the peanut butter picture leaned hard on my will power. I grabbed four crackers, a saucer, the knife, and the peanut butter jar. I could hardly wait, it smelled so good. I dug out some peanut butter and slopped it on a cracker. Ummmm. Good.

Next cracker. I pressed a dollop of peanut butter to the cracker, and SPLAT!!! The cracker crumbled, and there was peanut butter all over the cupboard door.

I don't know what made me do it, but I couldn't resist a taunt next time MyKeeper walked by. Picture this.

I chose my words and timing with the artistry of a stand up comic. Hands propped on hips and elbows out, I said, "I want you to know..."

His shoulders scrunched up at the accusing tones.

"that I..."

His eyes looked hooded.

"am every bit as good..."

His jaw jutted out.

"as you are..."

He turned to glare.

"at flinging peanut butter all over the kitchen."

Picture him now. Is that a winner?

Diamonds in a Blue Day...

The redbird swooped from tree to tree, then to a fencepost near the kitchen window. When the phone rang, I still kept my eye on the flash of color that brightened the winter landscape.

It was my daughter calling. She was trying to tell me something, but the redbird flew off to perch on the bare rosebush. I leaned forward to keep the bird in view. "There's the prettiest redbird out in the garden," I told her. "I've been watching it flit all over the place."

"Mom!" said Puddin'.

"Oh, there it goes again. It's been doing the same thing over and over."

"Mom! I'm trying to tell you..."

I laughed at the bird's antics and relayed a running commentary to Puddin'. "I wish you could see this. It's so funny. The bird..."

Puddin' interrupted. "Mom! This is funny, too. Listen! We got the Christmas tree up today."

"Oh, that IS funny." I laughed at my own corny humor, keeping my eye on the bird. "Here it comes again, that silly bird!" I told her how the bird tried over and over to settle at the edge of the dog's water dish for a drink. Gretchen crouched at the doggie door with her ears perked up. Each time the redbird landed, he'd dip his beak in for one sip before Gretchen rushed out the door to scare him off.

"No, here's the funny part." Puddin' told me how the girls came from their room to help decorate the Christmas tree. Peanut and Sweet Pea picked up a handful of ornaments and tinsel. The youngest reached for a branch, but stood there facing the tree with her arm frozen in midair.

Puddin' asked her, "What's the matter, Peanut?"

"Hmm...Just seems like the tree looks smaller this year."

"The tree's not getting smaller," Puddin' explained to them. "You're getting bigger!"

It's always the diamond moments set in a big blue day that make life so memorable.

Gourmet Dinner for

Eight

Eight around the table,
ironed napkins tonight,
with two-fork setting
and sumptuous smells
from the kitchen.

Mom, with a flourish
reveals the meal,
medallions of hot dog
swimming in beans,
a shimmery bake
in brown sugar,
and something more,
not a taste, but a flavor,
the thing that ties the
meal to memory -
family chatter.

A worm story...

Sweet Pea fumed, mad at her sister, so my company ran a close second choice for the moment.

While I continued weeding in the garden, she stood first on one foot and then on the other, all the time with her arms crossed in front of her and a glum line where her smile used to be.

Pretty soon she bent over to pluck a weed near the honeysuckle. She found another and another, then paused to breathe in the fragrant perfume of the flowering shrub.

Twisted among the roots of one of the pulled weeds was a worm. Sweet Pea was ishy-delicate about touching it until I picked it up and handed it to her. "Worms are good," I told her. "We want them in our garden."

"Are these fishing worms?" she asked. I told her I didn't know if people fished with angleworms I only knew about night crawlers for fishing. They're big, and fish love them.

In the fascination of discovery, the grumpies were forgotten, and she took the worm for a walk. She came back with a flat metal pan scrounged from somewhere around the yard, and asked if she could use it. I nodded.

I kept gardening, and Sweet Pea returned now and then. She went into the house to grab a jacket, then asked where she could find a jar. She brought by a succession of pipes and elbows and scraps of sheet metal, and disappeared around the corner for long periods. At one point she brought an old discarded kettle to the garden to fill with dirt.

A bit later, she came back around the corner. "Come and see!" she said. I gathered up my stiff bones, straightened up, and followed her to the other side of the house. She had created a masterpiece of construction with the spare parts and pieces scavenged here and there. I can't think of anything to liken it to, except maybe a still or some kind of a Rube Goldberg contraption. I was properly impressed with her creativity, and said so, adding, "It's in the driveway, though."

Right on cue, Mama drove up, easing the car around the construction site under the direction of Sweet Pea's excitable hand signals.

Mama and Grampa admired the invention, and after Sweet Pea left the wind howled and the rain pounded. Her "thing" blew over. Some of its sections

tumbled around the house, parts of it strewn farther and farther before the wind. The lighter weight pieces ended up by the back doorway, and got kicked aside at some point.

A few days later, all that remained was the kettle, filled with dirt. Before Sweet Pea returned, even that was demolished. The car backed over it.

Sweet Pea was in mourning over the destruction next time I saw her.

"I'm sorry, Honey," I said. "It was a pretty interesting thing you made out of all those scrap pieces."

"It was my WORM FARM!!! she wailed. "I was going to grow big worms, and sell them, and make lots of money! And now look!"

It's awfully hard watching big dreams go down the tubes. Especially when I'm not aware it's a big dream. All I could see was a loosely but artistically connected conglomeration of metal bits and pieces, and a kettle full of dirt.

I think that's why the future is left to the younger generation.

Nick of time chicken...

The hen was a "gift" from our neighbors. She was old, and ready for the stewpot, but they couldn't do it to her themselves. She was more to them than just a laying hen. She was their pet.

She had free range in the orchard across the road from us, but for her safety we put the chicken in one of the rabbit cages. There, she was protected from the dangers of her new home. Our own small flock of chickens would likely attack her as an intruding stranger, and our dogs would think she was wild game until we could convince them she was one of us.

No decision about her longevity was made immediately. We fed her along with our other critters, and she continued to give infrequent eggs. Due to her age, her productivity was limited, but sized Extra Large.

The children from the family next door sneaked over to visit their old friend every once in awhile. It

sat hard on our conscience, so we couldn't put her in the stewpot, either.

The family came over as a group one day for a last visit to their pet. Mother said they had talked it over, and they were not to ask anymore if the hen was still alive.

Still the kids came over for a peek now and then.

And the hen kept on laying occasional eggs.

As the season trailed onward there were fewer eggs, and the kids stopped coming by. Egg production slipped into the "seldom" category, and from there, down to "now and then."

MyKeeper and I stood near her cage talking one day. That was the day we first mentioned the stewpot.

The chicken must have heard, because next morning there was an egg in her nest. We voted a reprieve for her nick-of-time compliance, and let her go for awhile longer.

There was another long stretch, but as soon as we uttered the word "stewpot," another egg was forthcoming. It went on for awhile like that, and we didn't think about her too much. All she wanted was a place to scratch for grit and seed, and to grow old grazing the green grasses she loved.

One summer afternoon we were notified to expect company the next day. I searched my

cupboards for menu items as I planned a feast. We had plenty of meat, and we had fresh vegetables from the garden. There was farm-fresh bread and cheese, and some snacky treats. What we lacked was something special for dessert.

Most of the eggs had been used for French Toast that morning for the six of us. In a cookbook search, I found a couple of one-egg recipes, but I had my heart set on Chocolate Fudge Brownies and Lemon Squares.

After a few frustrating minutes, it occurred to me that I knew just what to do.

I went out to the rabbit hutches and whispered into the chicken's ear. "Stewpot!"

Next morning I collected an extra egg, and we had enough for a big family breakfast and two luscious desserts as planned.

Saying "no"...

I say no to telemarketers. They are hounding me to distraction right now. Spring brings them out in droves. They catch me in the middle of a million things. And they must have x-ray vision because they always know when it is most inconvenient to call.

The other day, I heard the phone ringing as soon as I got out of the car. I ransacked my purse for the house key, crashed through every room trying to locate the phone left somewhere off the charger, and answered with a breathless Hello, just in time to hear a recorded invitation to wait for the next available sales pitch. Much gnashing of teeth.

The telephone sales calls I hate most are the ones that come when I'm eating fried chicken or catching 20 desperate winks so I can be lively at an evening meeting. Their calls have caught me in deep thought, or in the middle of devising a good plot. They've bothered sick kids, fouled up a rushed schedule, and erased all recollection of what I was doing before the phone rang. They've disturbed

dinner, movie videos, good calls (from family or friends), and generally interrupted my "wa" (that came from Shogun.)

Yesterday's calls pushed me to the edge. Two salespeople called, one after the other. Both times, I had to run for the phone. I said No Thank You and hung up. Two more calls came soon after. I was on the phone to my daughter. I told the caller, no - don't call back when I'm not busy. I won't want to talk to you then, either.

We weren't 20 minutes into our call when the third call beeped in my ear. I clicked over to the other line. "Friend or telemarketer?" I demanded. (I did warn you I was near the frayed edge.) I continued, "If friend, call back in 10 minutes. If telemarketer, never! This is a recording!"

When I start to feel bad about such retorts, I remind myself I'm performing a valuable public service. If my response convinces even one telemarketer trainee to quit and go on with life, then it is worth my sharp words. I don't guess telemarketers will go away any time soon, but maybe they will merge into mega-marketers, and grow and grow until they start down-sizing. I can envision a call like this some day in the distant future:

"Hello. This is Cynthia. You don't have to wait for the next available agent. This is the only call you will receive this month. This message is not recorded.

I'm passing your call to Marian, who will be with you in two shakes of a lamp's tail...Hi! This is Merry Marian! How are you today? I know you are a busy person and so our company will take only a moment with this combo-call. Tell me, do you need any roof repairs, credit cards, or phone service changes? No? Well, how about signing up to win a free ocean cruise. Or you could check out our dynamite insurance policy, or..."

Just musing in an idle moment. Oops! There goes the phone...

Washing dishes

I have no time for washing dishes, but I must make time for just that. Not to be neat. Not to get them done. Not because the counters are crowded. And certainly not just because there are no clean dishes in the cupboard. Heck, I can use paper plates, styrofoam cups, plastic bowls and spoons. Even for the oven, stores carry a ton of disposable baking pans.

The reason I need to find time to do dishes is that I'm desperately in need of mindless drudgery. I shouldn't call it that. There's cause for appreciation, and many reasons to be grateful for the benefits of mindless drudgery.

I remember the thrill of helping Mom at age six. Back then it was a privilege. Mom set a chair beside her and I stood at her elbow. What an achievement. Finally! Allowed to help with the dishes.

All I can say is that was a long, long time ago. By now I know the truth. Dishwashing takes up a lot of

time, dries out your skin, and has to be done again as soon as you're through. A conspiracy, I'm sure.

A sinkful of sticky dishes calls to me again. Sidling up to the edge, I pick up the soapy washcloth and one soaking plate. Rub. Scrub. Swish. Swish. There I go. That sure didn't take long. Outside my window is the pleasant hill of the back yard. Beyond that is a hayfield, a river, foothills, sky, and dreams. Yes, day dreams, planning dreams, memory wandering dreams, and Beyond-Your-Wildest Dreams.

That's why the mindless drudgery of dishwashing should have a much more fitting moniker of honor. My soul is what benefits most from washing dishes. While my hands are occupied with a mundane task, my mind sneaks away to an unplanned tryst.

The starting place is always the dishes. But my mind can't be caged. It runs to the fields, just to feel the breeze. Then it sits beside the barn cats taking their siesta in the safety of the goat pen. It chases the birds, watches the corn and pea vines sway in the breeze, follows the dogs on their way to the river. Dots of laughter start a search for the dot-sized children on the next farm. Oh, there they are, under that tree. Then off up into the sky, above the highest-flying birds, to the waiting ether. In the place of uncounted time, I find it. I jump up and down and laugh, grabbing at the treasure, stuffing the words in my pocket, in my sleeve, in my wash

cloth. Oh, there I am, back in the world. Back to the sink. I had been to the moon to find the thing I couldn't see - the thing that was there all the time. My story words are dancing through my mind and I'm running to the keyboard. The rest of the dishes will just have to wait.

Yes, I have no time for dishes. I just need something to keep my hands busy while I stare out that window.

Boots and belts...

"Are you wearing those boots to work today?"
It was me asking.

"Which ones?" MyKeeper asked over the lip of his coffee mug.

"The ones with the hole in one."

"No," he answered, "Why?"

"Because I have this belt..." I started to explain. He threw up his hands. "Stop right there. You're doing it again. This is way too early in the morning." Off to the kitchen he went, muttering to no one in particular, "See what I have to put up with?" What he really wanted was some affirmation that he was managing to stay sane even while dealing with me on a daily basis.

He made an attempt to latch onto some cog in the conversation. "What's my boots got to do with your belt? Incidentally, that's MY belt," he added, risking a conversational shift that would take us off the chart before he could get to the end of the first

leg. To avert a dialogue going two ways at once, he asked, "Are we getting to the point yet?"

"Oh, heh-heh, you want me to start at the beginning, don't you?"

"Just tell me the story in a nice straight line."

Too often, I start a conversation in the middle. From there, it can go either way and not necessarily end up at the end. I forget that he hasn't heard the mental conversation going on in my head when I blurt out the part where the question is. I know what I mean, but he misses out on the thing that got me thinking about it in the first place. He hasn't a clue how far the thought traveled in my head before I opened my mouth.

When I pop out with, "Oh, and they'll be here on Tuesday," MyKeeper is left to pry out the supporting facts to find out who, where, what and why.

I've been known to say something like, "Well, Megan said she was going even if no one else did." The blank look on MyKeeper's face signals me I've done it again. The part I forgot to say first is that there was an early afternoon telephone call from Megan about the upsets leading to the probable cancellation of a group gathering, including all the details of her disgust with the falling apart thing after all the work she had put into making arrangements and contacting everybody. All I did

was leave out the long, gradual build-up and start at the most pertinent point.

MyKeeper is used to this. A few minutes later, he was leaning against the kitchen doorway with his second cup of coffee. "OK," he said. "I think I'm ready for this now. Fill me in."

I explained, "My belt buckle broke, even though it used to be yours, and I am going to take it to the shoe repair. I thought I could take your boots in for new soles at the same time."

He shook the early morning cobwebs from his head. Looked to me like he had succumbed to the logic. He thought it over for a minute. With his hand on my shoulder, he looked me in the eye and asked, "What's wrong with saying it like this: I'm going to the shoe repair shop today. I'll take your boots, too."

"Well," I said, "that's simple. Isn't asking better than telling?"