

## PREFACE

### THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE IS THE ULTIMATE RECYCLING PROJECT!

My father had a favorite "old timer's joke" which he used to deliver for the benefit of the children around our dinner table. In his best "old codger at the town meeting" voice, he'd say:

"I make a motion that we build a new schoolhouse out of the bricks of the old schoolhouse – and that we don't tear down the old schoolhouse 'til the new one is built!"

This brought noisy laughter and objections about the ridiculous impossibility of such a proposal, but long after dinner, in the late evening, as I watched moths circle the street light outside my bedroom window, I was never quite able to lay to rest the recurring speculation that there might be a way to pull it off!

I started school in the old Chicago elementary classrooms with their high ceilings, and their tall frosty windows through which, in winter, we could see leafless tree branches and neighboring walls with fire escapes. There were precious few decorations inside to distract our eyes. But my third grade classroom had a long freight train with the cars cut out of colored construction paper chugging across the top of the blackboard at the front of the room. Each car had one word and the train carried a cargo of one sentence. I used to think about those cars rolling on tracks right out the window by my seat and all across America, each carrying its one word to cities down south or way out west . . . switching frequently to other trains, fitting in between other cars, carrying quite different sentence loads, and I meditated philosophically on the glorious network of civilization and communication.

My ninth grade Latin class, too, was devoid of decor except for a poster that pictured a stone wall in the process of being built by a swarm of rosy-cheeked children in overalls each carrying an ancient mossy stone block emblazoned with one Latin word. Above the incomplete wall rose the shining gothic towers of a university and some skyscraper office buildings and, floating in the air before them, the banner superscription, "Success in life is built on a firm foundation." Wait a minute! Those children were building, well, not a schoolhouse, exactly, but a whole college! – a college education! They were building their future lives! And Latin was giving them the foundation blocks with which to do it!

I was just 13, and I took it all to heart.

Three years later, as I was studying Latin and Greek in high school, I began to notice that all the other reading I had to do – English, History, Science, Social Studies and even Math – was becoming easier and more interesting all the time. The old schoolhouse puzzle began to make some sense after all.

The Latin and Greek vocabulary I had learned in the course of reading Julius Caesar, Cicero, Vergil, Xenophon, Herodotus, Plato and Aristotle, seemed to keep leaping out at me more and more frequently as I plowed through homework assignments in the writings of 19th century English novelists, early American political philosophers and contemporary scientific theorists. These people were doing all this modern writing with some very ancient words, I noticed, changed ever so slightly to make them look up-to-date and state-of-the-art, but nevertheless, the same words. The endings were a bit different and they were often being used in new compound word combinations – but the prefixes were pretty much the same and the meanings were good old friends.



I had always taken for granted that school existed to help children become acquainted with ideas and that these ideas couldn't be understood, or manipulated, or argued with or used in the formulation of new ideas until children learned the words which carried the ideas. We actually need words of a large working vocabulary ten times more for thinking than we do for talking. (Unfortunately, many people seem to do their talking and thinking in reverse proportions. Ten times as much talking as thinking.)

Many years later, as I began to teach children, I found that I was able to enliven their days by introducing them to some of my old friends – the Latin and Greek words and the ideas which they expressed. Early elementary school is a grand time to do this, since the children are then able to get used to the Latin and Greek root words and their English derivatives over the course of many years – playing with them, trying them out in hundreds of situations, becoming comfortable with them, making them their own – and all before they even get to high school, let alone college. Children who are lucky enough to have an early introduction to the major significant vocabulary of the English language have a big advantage over other children who decide, hare-like, to take crash courses in vocabulary just before they sit for their Scholastic Aptitude Tests, while the tortoises who learned the words years ago are already crossing the finish line with years of experience behind them.

The trouble is that too many people haven't realized how valuable that old Latin and Greek vocabulary has always been in the formulation of a finely structured English vocabulary today. They allowed Latin classes to be dropped from the curriculum in one school after another all across America. And then they complained about the flimsy and limited command of words exhibited by the graduating seniors. Those folks had gone ahead and torn down the old schoolhouse before the new one was built. And you can see what has happened as a result. People stand in the midst of the ruins mournfully picking at tufts of grass and ruminating. (That means chewing cud and appearing to meditate today just as it used to when the old Roman farmers watched their grazing cows and pronounced it "ruminatio".) And then we write books about the ruins called *The Closing of The American Mind*, and *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?* and *Cultural Literacy*, and a whole bunch of others.

But hey! The old schoolhouse may be down, but it's not out. The old bricks are lying around everywhere. Let's pick them up and get to building again! If we could teach every school child in America just 100 of these Latin and Greek roots, they'd be on their way! They'd never look at the English language the same way again. Because learning even a few Latin and Greek root words gets you hooked and you want to learn more. Before you know it, you're a self-learner, an autonomous scholar, an articulate and influential human being, a richly contributing member of a free society.

So, this book is for all of you who would like to let your children have that advantage right now – today. Don't worry if you have never studied Latin or Greek yourself. If you haven't, you may find some new and entertaining things in this book along with the children. The Latin and Greek words aren't hard and neither are their English derivatives when they are learned together. You just start building your new English vocabulary . . . out of the bricks of the old schoolhouse, and . . .

. . . here, let's start picking up a few of these bricks. . . .

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