

The Loosening

Written by Margaret Evans, Editor



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I don't know about the rest of you internet junkies, but early morning is my prime time for scrolling. I get up before everybody else, brew myself some coffee, settle down at my computer with a hot mug ☕ and two squares of Dove dark chocolate ☕ and start scrolling away.

Thursday was one of those luck-kissed mornings when a theme emerged before I'd poured my second cup ☕ or even unwrapped my second square. For a columnist staring at a deadline, themes are a gift from the gods. Or maybe just a gift from Mark Zuckerberg.

(Since Facebook has stolen my concentration, my information, and possibly my soul, the least Zuck can do is offer up a good theme now and again, right?)

First I came across a clever essay in the *Washington Post* called ["Stop. Using. Periods. Period."](#) The subhead read, "The period is vanishing, and it's great" (There was no period after "☕ great." ☕ None. Whatsoever.)

The gist of the article? Thanks to the popularity of text messaging, and its youthful contempt for periods, the "full stop" at the end of a sentence is becoming a thing of the past. And apparently, that *too* is a thing of the past. According the WaPo writer, Jeff Guo, written language used far fewer periods - and far fewer rules - before the invention of the printing press. The rise of mass printing changed everything. Where once written communication had been a super-expressive, free-style free-for-all (to hear Guo tell it, anyway), it now became stodgy and standardized ☕ with strict rules for spelling, grammar, and punctuation. And so it remained for many a century. But according to Guo, text messaging and other recent trends in punctuation "hark back to that age when people used punctuation in more liberal and creative ways." He

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says language is becoming looser, and therefore richer, and we should all celebrate this development.

I'm on the fence. I don't like to be school-marmish, and I'm a big fan of strategic writerly rule-breaking (*if you know the rules*), but I can't help thinking all those rules arose for a reason. Should we really be so blithe about casting them aside? Is "harking back" actually moving forward, as Guo claims? And do we really want to live in a world where sentences never end?

As I pondered these questions, I scrolled my way to another article on my newsfeed. The headline read, "*NPR: 25 Million Votes For Clinton 'Completely Fake' - She Lost Popular Vote.*" Below that, was a summary claiming, "A study published - by NPR reveals that over 25 million Hillary Clinton votes were completely fraudulent, meaning that the Democratic candidate actually lost the popular vote by a huge margin." The article was published by YourNewsWire.com, which flaunts the banner: "News. Truth. Unfiltered."

Well, a girl knows Fake News when she sees it. In fact, I typically just scroll right past stuff like this, much as I ignore the *National Enquirer* and its ilk while waiting in line at Publix. But I confess, I'm occasionally titillated enough by one of those tabloid headlines - " (What are Brad and Angie up to *now?*) - that I can't resist picking up the publication and searching its dark contents. And so it was on this Thursday morning when my hand took on a life of its own and clicked on the link to YourNewsWire.com.

It was the reference to NPR that got me. What was a nice imprimatur like that doing in a place like this? Either there was something to this story - some grain of truth - or Fake News had now become completely and utterly shameless. It wasn't even trying anymore.

The contents of the article revealed that this was, indeed, the case. The story failed to prove its headline's claim in even the slightest way. The connection to NPR was flimsy, at best - a reference to some Pew Center study it had reported in 2012. I won't bore you with the details, but suffice it to say this article was Fake News at its fakest. The audaciousness! The brazenness! If it weren't so vile it would almost be impressive.

And here's the thing. Beneath this post - which was shared on Facebook by somebody I know

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and like - a large host of people were discussing the article as if it were absolutely factual. The gospel according to YourNewsWire.com. One person had fact-checked it at Snopes - and found it completely false - to which the others in the thread replied with some version of, "Snopes leans left. You can't trust anything they say."

So. Here we are. I wouldn't mention this incident if were it merely anecdotal. A one-time thing. Fake News - and the people who believe it, because they want to - is now a common phenomenon. And please don't get the impression, based on this story, that it's only happening on the right. In my experience, there is Fake News a' plenty for devoted partisans of every persuasion, and they are all too happy to share it with you.

Of course, I'm not telling you anything you don't know. This has been going on for a while now, this Fake News phenomenon. What's new is this: People don't seem to *care* anymore. They no longer even *expect*

the headlines to reflect the contents of the story, or for the story to reflect some semblance of truth. For passionate partisans locked in a cold civil war, facts just don't seem to matter anymore. If you suggest to one of these diehards that the article they've shared has some serious honesty issues - and even give them proof - they either shrug it off as unimportant, or they discredit the fact-checker. Either way, the post stays up to be shared and re-shared. And the beat goes on.

But I promised you a theme, didn't I?

That Thursday morning, I couldn't stop thinking about the word "loosening." The loosening of our punctuation rules and the loosening of our journalistic standards. . . they seem somehow related. And in both cases, there are many who celebrate this loosening. There are many who believe that loosening the rules of written language makes writing more "creative," more "expressive" - communication and clarity seem like secondary concerns at best. And there are many who believe fake news is a small price to pay for the freedom the internet affords us - freedom to bypass the traditional gatekeepers of "right thinking," to examine the world through a kaleidoscope of various filters and perspectives.

But is that really what we're doing?

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While musing on these connections, I came upon a third story. It was beautifully written, informative, incisive - and chock full of periods and other comforting punctuation marks. It was an essay by Brady Kiesling, an American diplomat in Greece, called ["Being Honorable."](#)

The essay was long and complicated, full of historical references, literary allusions, and emotional nuance. Kiesling traced the history of honor - in the world, and in his own life - and made a pretty good case that we've suffered a breakdown of honor in our era - a "loosening," you could say - in both the private and public spheres.

"Perhaps the concept of personal honor - once a crucial point of common ground between genuine liberals and genuine conservatives in Congress, and society as a whole - is on its deathbed, collateral or intentional damage from the 'populist' movement that empowered the current Congress," writes Kiesling.

He ends his dark piece on a hopeful note, though, invoking Tolkien - which is never a bad move:

"We live not in the twilight of Gondor, with the Dark Lord Sauron marshaling his hordes to attack us, but in a well-peopled superpower, with untapped natural resources, deep reservoirs of underused talent, and no enemies but those we cross oceans and deserts to seek out. Our vast capacity to behave with courage and decency must empower us. We should insist on America first - an honorable community of honorable citizens of an honorable country. We must be governed by hope rather than by fear, because our honor, and with it our health and our happiness and possibly our survival as a people, depends on it."

I agree. So I will not be participating in The Loosening. I will continue to discredit fake news whenever I see it, I will attempt to behave honorably, even as those around me descend into insults, profanity, and partisan vitriol. And I will never, ever stop ending my sentences with a period. Period.

It's a small, quiet rebellion. But it's mine.