Some Fortuitous Thoughts, Not Fulsome, Not Delivevered From a Podium, During Penultimate Week

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Some Fortuitous Thoughts, Not Fulsome, Not Delivered From a Podium, During Penultimate Week

I have been fascinated by language since an early age, so perhaps it is no accident that I became an English major in college. I especially like words that people commonly misuse. I am a collector of such words.

For example, “fortuitous.” It is very common to hear a person say something like, “It was fortuitous that I brought my umbrella today, since it has started to rain.” Despite the way it looks and sounds, “fortuitous” does not mean “fortunate”; it means “by chance.” A coin flip is fortuitous—and your team is fortunate if it goes their way.

Another commonly misused word is “podium.” The speaker did not stand at the podium; she no doubt stood at the lectern. A podium is something a speaker stands on.

When you describe a guy as having a goatee, he most likely has instead a Van Dyke, named after the Dutch painter. Custer wore a Van Dyke; Maynard G. Krebs had a goatee.

I especially like “fulsome,” since it is seldom used, but almost always used incorrectly. I have heard several speakers here at Winthrop say, “We have a fulsome agenda today for our meeting.” Ouch! To quote a famous movie, “I do not think it means what you think it means.”

“Fulsome” means “offensively flattering or insincere; offensive to the taste or sensibilities.” On second thought, maybe that agenda really is fulsome.

I am sure a few of my readers have already found a dictionary that sanctions some or all of these misused words; dictionaries will bend to popular usage eventually, and language does evolve and change. (“Fulsome” actually did mean “full” several centuries ago.)

I bring up these words to introduce my absolute favorite: penultimate. Like “fulsome,” the word is seldom used, but when it is, it is almost always used incorrectly. “This is the penultimate issue facing the Democrats today,” I heard Michael Steele, former chair of the Republican National Committee, say on MSNBC the other day. “Penultimate” does not mean the biggest or the best; it means second to last.

To drive home the meaning of “penultimate,” I began over a decade ago celebrating “Penultimate Day” with my classes. The last class is cause for celebration, but I like to celebrate the second-to-the-last class.

Like Easter, Penultimate Day is a moveable feast: for my Monday-Wednesday class this semester, PD falls on April 23.

The celebration usually involves some sort of food and drink. And if you are so inclined.)
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Think of how far we have come. Think of all you have covered. Think of all the challenges your students have met, all the work you and your students have accomplished, all the ways your students have grown, how much you and they have learned.”

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Involves a costume. I began with Hawaiian shirts, but I found that not every student owns one, much to my surprise. I tired of bringing in 15 or more shirts from my vast collection for the whole class to wear. So Penultimate Day garb has now evolved to hats, boots, overalls, tie dye, and Hawaiian shirts, or any combination thereof. When you see me walking down the hall next Wednesday dressed this way, you will know why. I will join a class that is similarly festooned.

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The penultimate week of classes is not necessarily a time to panic. It is a good time to pause and reflect and plan and get a second wind. Stop and think and breathe deeply. Now let’s march on, to the ultimate week, and then to final exams.

You are giving a final exam or culminating experience, aren’t you? During the scheduled exam time? As required by the Faculty Manual?

I have a confession to make: even though I have repeatedly brought up this issue of giving final exams during the exam period, since I often notice empty classrooms on my way to give my final exams, I have sometimes made other arrangements. I have never understood why we have to have exams on Saturday, and I find it very disruptive for me and my students, so I have sometimes given a take-home exam when my class had a Saturday exam.

This year, I have a 3:00 pm exam on Saturday. As tempted as I was to make other arrangements, I knew I would be hypocritical if I did not give my exam at that time. So I will be there. You can check on me. Owens 209.

But for now, in Penultimate Week, a time to pause, take a breath, and get ready to do a good job with the time that is left.

In addition, this is the penultimate *Weekly Reader* of the year! Thanks to those who read it and give me comments, positive mostly, thank goodness. Now, on to the end!
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To offer this programming, the TLC depends on the talent, expertise, and generosity of our faculty and staff. We do not have a big budget to bring in outside speakers and experts. Even so, we are able to offer engaging, timely, and valuable sessions every year on a variety of topics. We thank those who have offered their time and talent this year and in past years.

We also thank those of you who have attended TLC sessions. Your time is valuable, and we appreciate you taking some of it to enrich yourself through professional and personal development.

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Thought For the Week

“But language is a treacherous thing, a most unsure vehicle, and it can seldom arrange descriptive words in such a way that they will not inflate the facts.”

--Mark Twain