

Sarah Ban Breathnach pisses me off.

My mother thinks this phrase vulgar. "Why can't people say 'ticked off'?" she asks, not really meaning people, but me. And not really expecting an answer.

"That's the point," I say through unfurling lips, "if someone is angry, then profanity suggests the degree of emotion they feel."

"Why not peeved, annoyed, or incensed? Surely their vocabulary extends beyond offensive words."

Mine doesn't, I say, and I'm a writer. We've barely exchanged greetings and I am already taking a position.

Abuse and misuse of the English language has always stuck in mother's craw. As a child I considered her an aficionado of sorts in this territory. She was always prepared to impart her extensive linguistic skill and infinite etymological acumen proved by the ability to "use the word in a sentence." This was awesome wisdom to a 9 year-old kid, this basic grammar for any 1950s high school senior, even in Port Arthur, Ontario.

The popularity of what she calls a "Universityese" malaise grates on her. It has a figure-four wrestling hold on the media, particularly the talking heads of newscasts who spin signs into signage, tell us people have "gone missing," and where everything arrives by indirect route in the form of "via." Corporations adopt the free and shameless exchange of i.e. for example and harbour a strange need to indiscriminately apply "ism" and "ity" to nearly every action, process and condition, that makes mother totally lose it. (Political rhetoric is tolerated because she was taught, as we were, to consider the source.)

I can only offer feigned malice towards the overuse of acronyms and catch-phrases used by banking upstarts I encountered during my auspicious 180-day banking career. These ladder climbers, to whom dressing down on Fridays meant starch-free shirt collars, greedily clung to clever buzzwords in hopes of being spared when the rightsizing hammer dropped. They were not. Then again, neither was I. I was doubly surprised to discover my mother's grammatical purism does not extend past pedantry.

After spending a week in simultaneous dual roles parenting my 95-year-old grandmother and her two-year-old great-grandson, my granny's daughter thought I could use a Daybook of Comfort and Joy and bought me *Simple Abundance* by Sarah Ban Breathnach. I was hooked the moment I opened the book. The entire month of August was dedicated to excavating buried creativity and the homilies promised great insight to unearthing mine.

The excitement was short-lived, however, and soon I became bored. Page after page of quotations, sweeping statements and recast philosophies was as spiritually satisfying as an issue of US magazine. By midsummer I'd discovered *The Artists Way* and within a week Sarah and I divorced.

Nothing Dies Harder

I can easily recall the words that finished us: "Nothing dies harder than a bad idea."

Naturally I felt compelled to share this startling news. Alas, Ms. Ban Breathnach is not the only one that pisses me off.

At first, the expression seemed vaguely familiar. Nothing dies harder. . . Old habits die hard. . . Nothing is stronger. . . nothing dies harder. The light bulb was dimming so I did what Mother Poulin taught me to do. I looked it up.

I found it in the opening to July 30's reflection:

"Nothing dies harder than a bad habit." Whether it was a bad idea or a bad habit that was dying, now I wasn't sure. Perhaps my memory needed defibrillation.

During this search I rediscover Henry Miller's words:

"Develop an interest in life as you see it; in people, things, literature, music. . . Forget yourself." And within the day's meditation, the writer Brenda Upland told me that "our imaginations need 'moodling — long, inefficient, happy idling, dawdling and puttering' to flourish."

Wow. I was experiencing the weirdest sense of literary déjà vu! Brenda Upland too?

Days later another flashbulb exploded. "There is always vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening . . ." I yanked the book from beneath a stack of reading material by its pink satin bookmark and push its pages around until I found the same Martha Graham quotation. "Aha! I knew it!" I shouted and took a backhand swipe at the book.

In addition to second-guessing as an art form, the family matriarch and her daughters habitually, yet seemingly unknowingly, take the axiom "two sides to every story" to ridiculous extremes. I knew I'd be rewarded at least with a syndicated conversation about the impropriety of "in regards to" plus a side dish of a tangent. For those who don't know, a tangent is an excellent way to disarm opponents. "Here are two books on the same topic containing similar language and phrases. What's the big deal?"

"There's a distinct likeness," I proclaim and crisscross the kitchen as if it were a trading floor, madly gesticulating.

"Morning pages are not negotiable," says Julia, "...the gratitude journal is not an option, says Sarah." I cleverly disclose my findings and await my due praise.

"Hmph." At least it's an improvement over characteristic electric silence. Still, this disapproving snuffle effectively bangs the battle drum and causes me to stand at attention.

I watch my husband and son playing outside. I'm a reasonably effective practitioner of the silence manoeuvre too and fill the kettle to make tea, stretching the long-distance buzz into dreamlike stillness.

I needed a lower-level adversary

I feel I am standing as a writer often does, alone and steadfast in belief; determined in stance. In reality, I am watching a game of sidewalk hockey shinny through mullioned windows.

I am the first to blink. "'Tasks' in one book become 'joyful simplicities' in another."

"Who wrote their book first?" is shot back, closely followed with the force of a Wilson Mizner quotation "If you steal from one author, it's plagiarism; if you steal from many, it's research."

Clearly I needed a lower-level adversary. Again, I head into combat impatiently and without much planning and am immediately rewarded with a question about publication dates. If second-guessing and senses of the obvious are family traits, the art of subtlety is not. "So what?" asks sister-who-lives-nearby with blunt sincerity, "if she's guilty of anything it's pop culture spirituality."

My husband enters the house while I'm on my fifth trip encircling the main floor: kitchen, dining room, living room, into the kitchen again absentmindedly straightening objects and fluffing pillows as I pass by them. He turns and marches out. After almost nine years his ear drums are still unaccustomed to the intense vocal screech of my impassioned conversations.

"It's not even that the same quotations recur with alarming frequency," I insist laying the books side by side on the kitchen table. "The similarities are too similar to ignore." I link the speechless and imagined eye rolls with a list: The same Baruch Spinoza quotation appears on page 28 of *The Artist's Way* and August 10 in *Simple Abundance*. You'll find Giacomo Piuccini quoted on page 2 and August 12. Then there's Louise Bogan, page 33/January 19, Jalai ud-Din Rum page 24/February 8, Agnes de Mille page 121/February 7, Louise Nevelson page 70/February 26, and Somerset Maugham page 177/February 10.

"And?"

And indeed.

"The book just seems, well, a rip-off," I say as I shrink into my chair and listen to a voice strained from a hectic lifestyle, a crushing career, and the demands of rearing teenagers. Abruptly, I interrupt and invent pleas for a mommy's attention.

Later, in my customary post-debate sulk, I tell myself that neither mother nor sister have struggled to get published. They don't understand a writer's fury: a newspaper article on shyness by a young journalism student appear weeks after your outline is rejected.

They don't know a writer's anxiety: publicity for a recently released poetry book to help street youth while your submission lingers at the shelter unacknowledged. They don't get a writer's disappointment: discovering your manuscript reincarnated by an association that declined yours.

I abruptly end the call by inventing my child's request for attention.

It is tenacity, another family trait, which encourages me to head into battle a third time. This time with revised strategy I push 11 digits on the telephone that will connect me with my oldest sister, a Ph.D. aspirant and masterful debater. Although there's little empathy from someone who's never struggled to avoid flogging clichés, write an interesting turn of phrase, or create fresh prose, my liberalist sibling emerges genuinely intrigued by my accusations of plagiarism.

In the face of acceptance I concede that quotations by widely quoted individuals — Anne Morrow Lindberg, Carl Jung, May Sarton, Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, Jessamyn West, Oscar Wilde, Rainer Maria Rilke, Robert Louis Stevenson, Henry David Thoreau, Agnes de Mille, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe — is pure chance in a book that contains an estimated 700 quotes.

Somehow I am inspired to admit that I am too lazy to trace sources or check bibliographies. This advice sounds eerily like her mother's go-look-it-up philosophy.

"I'm willing to let scholars debate the existence of plagiarism. Besides it's not so exact as to be deemed so. Maybe it's more like 'heavily borrowed'. Or filched." With this repeal I think myself off the hook.

My son's father has now reentered the house wearing another pained expression I take to mean it's time for me to get off the phone and join the growing group of neighbours collecting on the sidewalk. I wave him into the kitchen, turn and scoot into the living room lowering my voice. My sister's fascination has audibly wavered and she wonders aloud if, from an academic standpoint, I stand a chance. I fold.

I'm down, as they say, but not entirely out. Casual mention of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross' name encourages me to rebound with referrals to intimidation and fear in *The Artist's Way's* "Your Enemy Within" and *Simple Abundance's* "The Enemy Within." Before it's necessary I counter a comparison of Cameron's 'Basic Tools' and the 'artist's altar' and Ban Breathnach's 'Basic Tools.' There's just so many similarities, just so many.

"It's not just that," I say to marked silence. "It's just that Sarah turned her morning pages into a best-selling book." And in a whinny voice that surprises me I say "and ... now I can't."