In ever-changing world, notion of literacy does, too

A n invitation from the Redondo Beach Rotary Club arrived via e-mail asking me to speak at a luncheon on the topic of literacy— a subject pontificated on, argued about and pondered for years, a subject about which there appears such controversy.

After some researching—using Google, not in a brick and mortar library or a tree bark dictionary, by the way—literacy was to be found as having multiple meanings, all of which reflect a state of being (actually a state of appearance).

• The quality or state of being able to read and write.
• Having knowledge or competence or skills.
• The ability to recognize and understand ideas conveyed through any visible actions or images.

Some of the measuring methods of literacy are:

Correct use of language, including spelling—something even this grammar teacher could not do past the third year of cell phone text.

However, when the subject of literacy is bantered about, it seems to be to impose, protect, inflict or force an idea of some correct standard, performance and vehicle because it is the correct one.

The “problem” is not literacy or lack thereof—it is in clinging to the sense of how things should be happening; that there’s a wrong way and right way to promote, resist, formulate, present, express, convey and deliver anything. Or, more importantly, that any of those things, for their own sake, matter.

This way is right, the mind says. This wrong. This tool is right.

This word, spelling, definition, etc., is right. Now not. Start doing it correctly! Stop doing it wrong!

There is an image that just came to me. I am in a third-grade classroom. The teacher is trying to correct my handwriting. It is too large, she says. Make it smaller. I hear, I am too large. Make me smaller. I hunch over and scrawl.

This instruction was given with the love and patience possessed only by elementary school teachers, I suspect in the name of literacy.

What difference would it have made if I were simply given another piece of paper and another until the assignment were done?

What difference would it have made, today, when I almost never write with pen and paper? If there be a “literacy problem,” it is not because literacy is lacking. Rather, it is because we are tied, bound and imprisoned by our idea of what it is supposed to look like, and we cannot help but pass that on.

What literacy is and was for one generation is completely different a generation later, or now, in just a few years. Why insist that expression appear in any manner whatsoever?


Class dismissed.