

of atheists on the faculty, and that these atheistic professors might try to undermine their religious faith. They were told that one way they could identify an atheist was when he started talking about evolution. Those little rascals had decided I was an atheist because I used the word "evolution" in a lecture. For Heaven's sake. It infuriates me. I am a Methodist. I am no atheist at all. But I learned one thing. You cannot use the word "evolution" when you are talking to freshmen on my campus without losing about 40 percent of your audience. I now say, "speech is a long, developmental process," they don't tune me out with the word "developmental."

Three years ago I was giving a talk at Lincoln, Nebraska, for a retail-sales convention. My audience was all female. I kept saying to the ladies there that night, "You clerks know what I mean. You clerks have had these experiences yourselves in your stores." They froze up on me. At the end of my lecture, five women, all abreast, came right at me out of the front pew, and they said, "We are not clerks." I said, "What do you like to be called?" One said, "We are retail sales personnel. And if you do not like that you can call us salesladies. But we are not clerks." I learned the bitter truth that night. Don't ever call a female a clerk. She will hate you for it. I don't know what is wrong with the word, but it is a fighting word for some reason.

I wish I could tell you all the words that cause listeners to tune speakers out, but I cannot do it. I can only give you a half-dozen that we are completely certain of. We have nailed these down. One word that does it with a lot of listeners is the word "automation." The worst word in the language, apparently, is the word "mother-in-law." Others are "pink," "fellow traveler," "Communist," "big business," "Harry Truman." These are words that have actually caused many listeners to tune the speaker right out.

What a silly business. After all, the word is not the thing. It is merely a symbol for it. Yet on and on we go through this life of ours letting symbols stand between us and self-growth. I wish we knew the 100 worst word barriers in the English language. If we knew what these 100 demons were, we could graduate them according to their difficulty, lay them out in the classrooms of the Nation, and put these silly barriers behind us.