

Gossiping in La Ronge
by Lloyd Robertson

They announced the wedding by postering the university campus. Being psychologists they forgot one small detail, the location. Which is just as well since the happy couple didn't exist. Later this team of psychologists interviewed a random sample of the college students. More than one quarter, 27%, claimed to have gone to this non-existent wedding. There was a gender difference. The women described the bride's dress in detail. The men were more likely to talk about the party afterward.

This result was surprising because the students gained no real benefit from making up stories about wedding dresses and parties. The only apparent motive for this gossip was that these students wanted to be "in the know", one of the "in-group".

It has become fashionable in some circles to say that gossip is a good thing. Gossip, we are told, allows people to share their values by giving examples of behavior that they find good or disgusting. We know, for example, that the female students of the university campus valued wedding dresses. The males, on the other hand, had other priorities. But think of the embarrassment, even damage, that could have been caused by this gossip if the couple had been real and were simply away for the weekend.

I suppose an argument could be made that gossip, where it is true and not malicious, is good. If Scott Boyes donates his Saturday afternoons to helping widows and orphans then what harm is there in letting others know?

Anyone who has played "gossip chain" as a kid knows that, even when people are trying hard to get the story straight, it changes. By the third or fourth re-telling Scott may be said to be doing something quite different with all those widows. And when I attempt to tell my Aunt Mary about Scott's humanitarian behavior she may, with a knowing smile, (because she is now "in the know") explain that Scott has his "reasons" for appearing to be so good.

Malicious gossip involves lying right from the start. The motive might involve getting even for some past hurt (real or imagined); reducing the influence of someone whose beliefs are different from those of the gossiper; getting ahead in business or politics by slandering the competition; or, simply just to appear "in the know".

A 1994 study showed malicious gossip to be rampant in the workplace. Managers who felt insecure in their positions would sabotage, by use of manipulative gossip, those staff who were perceived to be a threat. Employees seeking promotions would engage in gossip about their perceived competition. Disgruntled employees who were demoted or repeatedly passed over for promotion would engage in malicious gossip about those in authority. Sometimes careers were ruined.

A few years ago a child was killed in our community by other children. The gossip and rumour that accompanies this kind of tragedy can tear a community apart. The first victim of the gossip mill, in this case, was the police. It was said that if the victim had been "White" the police would

have responded faster and, perhaps, saved his life. It turned out, however, that the boy was murdered before anyone knew he was missing.

It was then rumoured that a Satanic cult had caused the murder. The victims of this piece of gossip included the children who were forced to stay indoors by frightened parents who thought they could be next. No doubt there were a lot of nightmares caused by this piece of gossip.

It is never a good idea to react to gossip. Now, if I tell you about something that happened to me personally, and providing I'm not making up a story to sabotage someone else, then it is not gossip. But if I tell you that Aunt Mary's friend saw the mayor carrying sacks of unmarked \$20 bills out of the town office, it is gossip and it's probably false.

Meanwhile, I am feeling good today. I recently learned that the fellow who wrote and recorded "Don't Worry, Be Happy" is alive and still singing. And all this time I had believed the story about him having committed suicide right after he recorded his song.....