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The Art of Being Oneself  
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Brou-Ha-What?

I have always been the type of person who is completely—and I mean completely—scared of creating any sort of uproar. I shy away from anything that may lead to some sort of embarrassment and freak out at the smallest sign of commotion. Where friends dare to challenge the rules a bit, such as staying out past curfew or speeding by one mile per hour on the highway, I immediately tense up and run in the other direction (or plead with them to slow down so we don't all die on the 101 highway where no one will ever find us). All I can think of is, "What will others think? What if I get caught? I don't think I could tolerate the embarrassment!" Basically, I am a scaredy-cat, just like Chuckie, from the cartoon *Rugrats*.

I tend to stay away from all form of humiliation, whether big or small. Yet somehow, I still managed to find the craziest boyfriend on the planet who loves everything I try to stay away from. I'm pretty sure his life is one big embarrassment—at least from my perspective—but he loves everything about it. Because of my need to stay away from all things awkward or humiliating, I have an irrational hatred towards Halloween and dressing up in general. I feel weird dressing up as someone else, pretending to be someone I'm not. I feel awkward and embarrassed to be strutting around with a façade. My boyfriend, on the other hand, loves Halloween and dressing up as characters from random Sci-Fi shows. He finds a way to enjoy and love everything that I would find completely embarrassing and ridiculous. Everything I try to stay away from, he jumps for at the first opportunity. I am still unsure how I tolerate everything he does, but somehow I do.

A few weeks ago, I found out that my boyfriend was going to participate in Columbia Science Fiction Society's ceremonial sacrifice to the god CTHULHU. I have no idea what this actually means, but I've heard it involves robes, an honorary virgin to sacrifice—a male this year—and red corn syrup as a substitute for blood. If this is not the epitome of embarrassment, I don't know what is. Let's just say, I won't be anywhere near him when this occurs; I do not want to be associated with this craziness. I might be able to handle my boyfriend's insane life, but seeing others also participate in such insane events is too much for my poor scaredy-cat self to handle.

I bring this up, not to randomly discuss my relationship, but to discuss a word that has been following me around for years. Everywhere I turn, I find this word; in newspapers, on television, or just in random conversations, I can't seem to escape the word *brouhaha*. I first encountered the word in tenth grade. After months and months of studying vocabulary words like *corroborate* and *redress*, the term *brouhaha* popped up on the vocabulary list for the week. At first I thought it was a joke. I mean, really, who would honestly think that the word *brouhaha* is an actual word unless told that it is? It does not sound like any other word, and truthfully it does not even sound like a real word at all. I expected the definition to be something along the lines of "a brute laughing" or "a deep guttural laugh." In both cases, I was incorrect, though I still think my suggestions make more sense. Instead the Oxford English Dictionary, sometimes abbreviated to the OED, said that *brouhaha* actually means, "a commotion, a to-do, a 'sensation'; hubbub, uproar." Personally, that definition seems like it has nothing to do with the word other than

the fact that just saying it would probably create a hubbub or uproar, since it is such a ridiculous word.

As I said before, I don't do well with commotions or large embarrassing scenes—I can barely watch romantic comedies anymore because I get embarrassed for the characters—but somehow *brouhaha*, which literally means a hubbub or commotion, has been an inescapable word in my life. It's probably the biggest irony of my life thus far: the very word that means commotion has continually been popping up throughout my life, even though my life goal is to escape its precise definition. Yet, the word completely fascinates me.

There are many words in the English language that seem nonsensical. Some words seem preposterous at first but then become completely normal, such as the word buttress—was I the only person who thought it had to do something with a butt rest at one point? In any case, there are many weird words in the English language, but none compare to *brouhaha*. The word barely sounds like a word at all. It can easily be mistaken for a weird laugh with an extremely strange starting syllable. The word is odd, but at the same time, it is also beautiful and intriguing; it beckons to be understood more closely and somehow keeps popping up in everyday life.

Now, let's get to the fun scholarly stuff. *Brouhaha* has a few origins, and I am not sure any of them are correct, but all are quite interesting. The first origin is from 16<sup>th</sup> century France. Apparently it comes from a farce in which “a priest disguised as the devil cried out, ‘Brou brouh brou brou ha ha, brou ha ha!’” (Webster's Word Histories). Later in the 16<sup>th</sup> century the word began to be used in order to describe

any turmoil or hubbub (Webster's Word Histories). So maybe this is why the word sounds so comical in the first place, because it was created as a source of comic relief. The second theory is a little more complex. The theory is that *brouhaha* actually stems from the popular Hebrew phrase *Baruch Habba*. The phrase means "blessed is he who enters" from Psalm 118 and is used as a greeting when one welcomes someone into his or her home. The statement is very common and is plastered on every single classroom door in Israel and Jewish Day Schools. Even on Israeli television, when someone walks into a room or a talk show, the host always says *Baruch Habba*. In any case, the statement comes from Hebrew and that's all the matters—at least as far as I am concerned. In America, *Baruch Habba* is commonly heard in synagogues. Greeters are usually instructed to say *Baruch Habba* in order to create a feeling of warmth and readiness for prayer. My friend, who was a greeter at a Bat Mitzvah, said that the only instructions she received were to hand out the programs and say "*Baruch Habba*" to anyone that came through the door. The theory that *Brouhaha* stems from Hebrew is a wonderful one, but it does not explain really how *brouhaha* got its current meaning. However, it is believed that many worshipers who did not understand Hebrew very well heard the phrase *Baruch Habba* being said repeatedly and quickly when they entered synagogue and thus the term came to stand for "rapid confused, or meaningless speech" (Webster's Word Histories). So really, the word just came to represent the confusion around the saying. There was so much noise in the synagogue that *brouhaha* came to represent the commotion that occurred inside. The word is thus based on the pronunciation of

*Baruch Habba*; *brouhaha* sadly has nothing to do with the actual meaning of the Hebrew phrase.

It is odd how some words fit so well into one's life. *Brouhaha*, the word that has followed me ever since 10<sup>th</sup> grade, is a word that encompasses everything I try to avoid in my life. I don't want to create a huge commotion, and I will do anything to avoid causing a scene. The word is the perfect description of everything I despise and try to prevent. Then there is the actual etymology of the word. Who would have ever guessed that it comes from Hebrew? Honestly? It just seems like such a far stretch, but a fantastically interesting one. I love how my native language was manipulated to create a new meaning in English. There is something quite poetic about it; my past and present lives merging together to form the sophisticated vocabulary that I have started using in my everyday life. In any case, I have started to embrace the word, and look forward to finding it as it continues to appear in my life.

Work Cited

“Brouhaha.” Oxford English Dictionary. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1989.

“Brouhaha.” Webster’s Word Histories. 1989.