



“You won’t believe what I just heard...”

# Unraveling Rumor and Gossip

by JUDY BERANGER

**M**ary, an extrovert, taught class next door to Ann, an introvert. Their methods of teaching were as opposite as their personalities. Mary’s class was louder than Ann’s and the day came when Ann decided she couldn’t take anymore. During her prep period Ann exploded in the staffroom telling anyone who would listen that she could no longer deal with Mary’s inability to control her unruly class.

Is Ann’s assumption about Mary’s teaching capabilities founded on fact? Have you ever found yourself in Mary’s situation – being judged as a result of rumor or gossip? How did you find out? How did that feel? Who started it? What did you learn from the experience?

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**“Generally, people are very good and mean well... Look at what has worked for you in the past to keep your character and integrity intact and repeat what you know helps make the world a better place to be.”**

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Merriam-Webster defines *rumor* as an unverified account or explanation of events circulating from person to person and pertaining to an object, event, or issue. A review of the research on rumor by Pendleton in 1998 found that research across sociology, psychology, and communication studies uncovered widely varying definitions. Most theories agree that rumor involves some kind of statement whose veracity is not quickly or ever confirmed.

Rumor is a tidbit of information or story that may or may not be true as it has not been verified. Unfortunately, we’re all guilty of spreading rumors. It usually starts innocently enough, we pass on the information as if it is true and then it gets passed on until it becomes unrecognizable. Depending on who is conveying the rumor, the telling can change considerably in one passing.

## A Rumor

Sam applied for educational leave. Of those granted leave, the only two people he knew were department heads from two different schools. Sam wondered aloud in the staffroom if preference was being given to department heads. That evening, a couple of teachers attending a function in their community remarked to friends that they “... heard that only department heads are being considered for educational leave this year.”... and the rumor began!

Merriam-Webster defines *gossip* as idle talk focusing more on personal or private affairs. It is one of the oldest and most common means of sharing unproven facts and views, and has a reputation for the introduction of endless variations of a story. Gossip was identified by Robin Dunbar, an evolutionary biologist, as aiding social bonding in large groups. As in rumor, people who gossip feel socially connected. Personal information is spread without the person’s awareness. It can be true, false and more often than not, a lie that at one point may have had a shred of truth. It is often rooted in misunderstanding, anger, jealousy, revenge, with the intent of hurting. People who spread rumors may temporarily feel socially connected and the more they perceive interest the more the story is embellished.

Not all types of rumors and gossip are alike, and some can be more hurtful and damaging. An example of this is “defamation”. Merriam-Webster says it is also called slander for transitory statements, and libel for written or otherwise published words. It is the communication of a negative statement that is implied to be factual. Slander refers to a malicious, false and defamatory *spoken* statement or report, while libel refers to communication such as *written* words. Slander can be quite serious as it is meant to purposely damage a person’s reputation promoting the likelihood of humiliation and turning people against the person being slandered.

*Remora, who was often referred to as the community gossip and self-appointed judge of people’s morals, kept involving herself in other people’s business. Most people were unappreciative of her activities, but feared her*

enough to maintain their silence. Remora made a big mistake when she accused Sam, new to the community, of being an alcoholic based on her observation of his car parked in front of the town's only bar for a full afternoon. She commented to Sam and others that everyone seeing it there would know he was an alcoholic. Sam, a man of few words, stared at her for a moment and walked away. He said nothing. Later that evening, Sam quietly parked his car in front of Remora's house...and left it there all night!

People who gossip have reported feeling superior to the person they are gossiping about. Gossip is a judgmental action that temporarily assists people to feel in control and part of the crowd, albeit this sense of belonging is false. Reducing to the level where you destroy another with cruel insinuations or petty remarks is toxic for all involved, even for those who just listen. Even if we choose not to respond verbally, remaining passive can be interpreted as acceptance.

Gossip and rumors are linked to low self esteem, jealousy, and a self righteous person "setting things straight". Bearing the brunt of nasty remarks can be traumatizing and painful. Even lack of formal communication can give rise to rumor and gossip and be quite hurtful. If people do not have all the information they sometimes make it up. If they believe someone is not recognized enough or recognized too much gossip can easily be ignited.

### What can we do to reduce gossip and rumor?

A good example that can be applied to all grades comes from a 4th grade teacher:

*When I taught 4th grade, the 3rd grade teachers kept warning me about this little boy I might get next year. Sure enough, when the time came to see our rosters, that little boy was slated for my class. I made a decision to give this kid a clean slate and pretend I knew nothing about his past. I even had a talk with him the first day of school and told him some of the things I had heard about him. I told him that those things were in the past and that I was giving him a fresh start. My expectations for him were high, and he rose to the challenge. He ended up being one of my best-behaved students and worked very hard to earn high grades. He was not the same kid I was "warned" about. It's amazing how gossip can damage a person for life... What if I hadn't given this kid a chance? What might he have become?*

Generally, people are very good and mean well. Most will want to move beyond the negative. Some need help. Look at what has worked for you in the past to keep your character and integrity intact and repeat what you know helps make the world a better place to be.

Suggestions to consider for combating gossip and rumor:

- Identify where gossip or rumor is likely to happen and avoid these times.
- Make a difference one situation at a time. Speak up when rumors and gossip need to be challenged and change your behavior the next time you feel the urge to add to the fast moving story!
- Your NLTA Code of Ethics is an excellent resource with very clear guidelines for professional conduct and how we need to behave and remain respectful in difficult situations.
- Encourage open and clear communication. In the absence of any meaningful communication, rumor and gossip thrives.
- Model words you can use to tell people you do not want to participate in gossip. Be consistent, strong, friendly and give clear messages to the gossiper... "I find listening to this sort of thing zaps my energy and I really want to have a good relationship with all my colleagues."
- Consider some form of introspection to see if you can determine the underlying explanations as to your desire to engage in such behaviour.
- If this is creating stress in your life know that the Employee Assistance Program is always there to help.
- Avoid gossip and rumor like the plague. You are next on the list.
- Say only things you would be proud to have quoted.
- Be gently assertive. Challenge the negative conversation in favor of respectful conversations that set the goal of reducing rumor and gossip.
- Keep personal information to yourself and respect people's right to privacy.
- Steer conversations to fruitful places. Practice how you might handle the next time someone wants to gossip. "I can't imagine how hurt Sam would be if he knew people were saying these things."
- Try not to judge the intentions and motives of others.

**M**artin Luther King once said that the ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy. Where do you stand in the midst of gossip and rumor?

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