



boston.com



SWTHDTM?*

By [Clif Garboden](#)

February 7, 2010

*Editor's note: *SWTHDTM = So What The Heck Does This Mean?*

' Roasted rutabagas.'

The two-word message showed up as a post in my Facebook "news feed" one morning. What was I to make of this? Did my friend Melissa, way out in Bend, Oregon, want a recipe? Was she typing in her sleep? Trying her hand at avant garde poetry? Had she awoken before dawn, sleepily popped a few swedes in the oven, then impulsively decided to confess the deed to everyone she knows?

So often these days, my immediate reaction to the cryptic snippets of thought that people share online, is equally brief, namely, "What?!!!" Sometimes, I answer posts with a simple question, such as, "Sorry, what are you talking about?" but I seem to be the only one who's curious or uncool enough to admit that I just don't get it.

What's remarkable is that Mel got any responses at all. Consider receiving her communiqué via any other conversational medium. If you answered the phone and the caller said, "Roasted rutabagas" and hung up, you'd dismiss it as some pranking kid who didn't know the joke about Prince Albert. If you opened a letter that read, "Dear sir, Roasted rutabagas," you'd probably contact homeland security.

Yet within the paradigm of digital discourse, nobody blinked. One Friend of Melissa interpreted "roasted rutabagas" as the opening gambit of a silly word game requiring an equally alliterative retort, and a parade of FOMs took the field. The ensuing thread included "toasted toast" (lame), "pecan pie" (close), and (really stretching it) "likable leftovers." I chimed in with a quote from Sylvester J. Pussycat: "sufferin' succotash."

It's common for people to post pithy one-line online updates such as "Off and running" or "Sam the Sham," or "Fish for lunch?" all declarations that, it would seem, no response could dignify. Yet people uninhibitedly write back. "Me too." "Fetch my turban?" "Capers." Inspired by Twitter's 140-character-per-missive limit, conversationalists are trying to say ever more with even less and creating model discussions for people with short attention spans, nothing useful to say, and an exaggerated interest in whether their friends are eating well.

In the daily expanding world of emailing, texting, Tweeting, and posting, shortcuts make sense. After all, people are often typing with their thumbs on a keyboard the size of a playing card. But I worry about the unintended consequences of minimalizing the art of conversation just to suit a new technology.

For most online users, it started with that cute email shorthand "LOL" for "laugh out loud," "IMHO," for "in my humble opinion," etc. Before long, the email abbreviation gimmick spun out of control. [Netlingo.com](#) lists hundreds of examples, ranging from the ubiquitous "BFF" (best friends forever) to the preposterous "SODDI" (some other dude did it). Millions of students, many of whom should instead be sorting out the binomial theorem or analyzing "Macbeth," rely on such terms to "discuss" things.

It sure does save time. Presumably, the American colonies would have cut ties with Britain in late June of '76 if the Second Continental Congress had employed the economies of net lingo: "WITCOHEIBNFOPTDTPB . . .". Then again, there would have been inevitable delays because George III would have had no idea what they were getting at.

Which goes to show that you shouldn't take these fads too far. Like every other technology-driven cultural adaptation, the construct of saying things in as few words as possible has already acquired a dangerous momentum. Judging from Facebook and Twitter exchanges, it has invaded our very way of understanding our own lives. A new language of brevity has emerged that's proving to be the soul more of confusion than wit. Apparently that's good enough for people already preoccupied doing three other things.

Last week WGBH aired a "Frontline" report on digital media, a good portion of which was devoted to the vogue for obsessive multitasking. Bottom line: multitaskers, generational affiliation notwithstanding, feel as if they're doing everything but, research shows, are doing everything less well. Worse, their overall quality of thought has been degraded by distraction. One of the simultaneous things they're attempting to do is maintain friendships through dribbles of terse out-of-context free association. Muddled minds. Truncated diction. Unelaborated thoughts. Synaptic snapshots. Message unclear. Future uncertain. Pie for breakfast. Help?

Clif Garboden is a Boston-area freelance writer. ■

© Copyright 2010 Globe Newspaper Company.