

COMMUNICATION DETERIORATION A school superintendent told his assistant superintendent the following: "Next Thursday at 10:30 a.m., Haley's Comet will appear over this area. This is an event which occurs only once every 75 years. Call the school principals and have them assemble their teachers and classes on their athletic fields and explain this phenomenon to them. If it rains, then cancel the day's observation and have the classes meet in the auditorium to see a film about the comet."

Assistant superintendent to school principals: "By order of the superintendent of schools, next Thursday at 10:30 Haley's Comet will appear over your athletic field. If it rains, then cancel the day's classes and report to the auditorium with your teachers and students where you will be shown films, a phenomenal event which occurs only once every 75 years."

Principals to teachers: "By order of the phenomenal superintendent of schools, at 10:30 next Thursday Haley's Comet will appear in the auditorium. In case of rain over the athletic field, the superintendent will give another order -- something which occurs only once every 75 years."

Teachers to students: "Next Thursday at 10:30 the superintendent of schools will appear in our school auditorium with Haley's Comet; something which occurs once every 75 years. If it rains, the superintendent will cancel the comet and will order us out to our phenomenal athletic field."

Students to parents: "When it rains next Thursday at 10:30 over the school athletic field, the phenomenal 75-year-old superintendent of schools will cancel all classes and appear before the school in the auditorium accompanied by Bill Haley and The Comets."

BREAKING THE BAD NEWS I was reminded of an old story that is one of my favorites when I read Sunday Sermons this month. It's about the man who was out of town on a trip and he asked his brother to take care of his cat for him while he was away. The cat was a beautiful Siamese and meant a great deal to the man, although the brother who was caring for the cat didn't like cats at all. When he got back from the trip he called his brother's house and asked about his cat. The brother was very curt, and replied, "Your cat died." And then he hung up.

For days the man was inconsolable. Finally, he phoned his brother again to point out, "It was needlessly cruel and sadistic of you to tell me so bluntly that my poor cat had passed away." The brother demanded, "Well, what did you expect me to do?"

He said, "Well, you could have broken the bad news to me gradually. First, you could have said the cat was playing on the roof. Later you could have called to say he fell off. The next morning you could have reported he had broken his leg. Then, when I came to get him, you could have told me he had passed away during the night. But you didn't have it in you to be that civilized. Now tell me -- how's Mama?"

The brother pondered momentarily, then announced "She's playing on the roof."