OK America, prepare to have your life change for the better. There is a situation that you find yourself in all the time. And it has been unclear what to say or do in that situation until now.

We heard about it, and it was like Post-its. It was just all of the sudden something that you needed to use all the time. It just explained so much.

That's Nancy Updike, one of the regular contributors to our radio show. And she tells the story this way. A couple years ago, friends of hers were traveling in Europe, and they are walking through these old buildings. And these people do not know anything special about architecture. But you know how it is when you're a tourist. They're walking through these buildings, and they're looking at the doorways and the tiles. And they decide that they think that this one building has a very Moorish influence. And they're pointing out details, and saying the Moors this, and the Moors that. And finally, one of them turns to the other and says, you know what? We sound like we're in a magazine, a magazine called Modern Jackass.

Modern Jackass. Of course, there is no Modern Jackass. But ever since I heard that story, I found myself referring to Modern Jackass all the time. It's incredibly useful, and it could be useful to you, to back out of all kinds of awkward conversational situations.

The thing about Modern Jackass is, it's usually not something about which you know nothing. It's something about which you know a little bit, enough to sort of get yourself into trouble.
Like you read an article.

Nancy Updike

Exactly, or something on the web.

Ira Glass

Just last weekend, I was out for breakfast with some friends. And we got into this conversation about these people who do caloric restriction. Have you heard about this? Apparently, there are these people who believe that if you eat a lot less, it can make you live longer. As so we're talking about this, and somebody's explaining the cells of your body go through all this wear and tear when you actually digest food. And before you know it, one of my friends-- somebody who knows nothing about biology, actually-- starts talking about mitochondria. Mitochondria. And maybe he had a little bit of knowledge about this. But it was totally Modern Jackass. Modern Jackass, the medical edition, which Nancy says that she finds herself in quite a bit.

Nancy Updike

My mother sends me information about partially hydrogenated oils. And then when somebody says, wait, why is partially hydrogenated oil bad again? I say, well, it's an unstable compound, which it is. It's oil to which hydrogen has been added in order to make it solid at room temperature. That I know. That's a fact.

Ira Glass

And why would that be bad, Nancy?

Nancy Updike

Well, that's where we get into Modern Jackass territory. It's unstable in your body. There's an extra hydrogen atom that can interact with things.

Ira Glass

Oxygen and form water.

Nancy Updike

Exactly.

Ira Glass

Having no information, that's one thing. That's pure. The trouble is when you have a little bit of information about the problems with electronic voting machines, what it really means, the battle between carbs and protein. It's hard for some people not to take the tiny pigment contained in
that tiny bit of information and paint a vast canvas of the entire world. It is exactly the problem
that people encounter in every story in our program today.

It's *This American Life*, from WBEZ Chicago, distributed by Public Radio International. Today
we bring you four stories of people taking a smidgen, a tiny smidgen of understanding, and
stretching it far past the breaking point. Because as everybody knows, all over the world, a little
bit of knowledge can be a very entertaining thing. We have Dan Savage matching wits with a six
year old boy. Stay with us.

**Act One. Small Thoughts In Big Brains.**

**Ira Glass**

Act One, When Small Thoughts Meet Big Brains. We have this story about people functioning
with a tiny little bit of knowledge, long past the point that you think they would, from Alex
Blumberg.

**Alex Blumberg**

I can reconstruct the events that led me to one of the most embarrassing conversations of my
adult life. The chain starts back when I was 11 or 12, and I first heard the term Nielsen family. I
was probably listening to some adults talk. And from their conversation I gathered that networks
consulted Nielsen families to find out how popular a television show was. But that didn't make
sense. Why would they only ask people named Nielsen which shows they liked. I started
thinking.

I knew that when they figured things like this out, they didn't ask everybody, they just asked a
small percentage of people, and then extrapolated. I think I figured they had done some research
and found that the name Nielsen-- because it was a common name maybe, and it seemed to cut
across class and economic lines-- actually came pretty close to a representative sample. I knew
this wasn't the way they measured public opinion now, but it seemed like the Nielsen surveys had
been around for a while. And I figured they were just a holdover from a more primitive, less
statistically rigorous time. After that, I really didn't think about it again. Or if I did, it was only
with a mild curiosity. I wonder why TV still does it that way?

Fast forward 20 years. I was talking with a friend of mine, who was telling me about her friend,
who had been selected to be a Nielsen family. And I said to her, isn't that weird that they're all
named Nielsen? My friend looked at me for what seemed like a long time. Somewhere during
her very long pause-- because of the very long pause, in fact-- I realized, of course they're not all
named Nielsen. That makes no sense at all. At the time of this conversation, I was 34 years old,
and I couldn't believe I had gotten this far without ever stopping to think it through. It made me
wonder what else I'd missed, and if this has ever happened to anyone besides me.

**Jodie Mace**
When I was a kid, and I would see the school crossing signs, and there's the picture of the little kids walking, and it would say school x-ing And I thought that the x-ing was a word. And I pronounced it zing.

Alex Blumberg

Turns out, I'm not alone. I've been talking to people about this for weeks. And there are a lot of us out there-- like me and this woman, Jodie Mace-- carting around our childhood beliefs well into adulthood. Jodie thought there were lots of zings, deer zings, railroad zings. That makes sense.

Jodie Mace

When I was in my 20s, and I was walking into work, and about 10 geese walked in front of me on the sidewalk. So I just turned to my coworker and casually said, it looks like they should have a zing sign there for the geese. There was a sort of long, awkward silence. And I thought that he was thinking, you know, that really is a good idea. But instead, he finally said, you know, zing isn't a word.

Alex Blumberg

In talking to people, I found out that a lot of these lingering misconceptions involve mispronunciation. And often, the mispronunciation survives into adulthood because the mistake just sounds better, or makes more sense.

Jodie Mace

It should be a word, and it should be zing. You don't want a kid to walk slowly across the crossing. If he's smart, he's going to zing.

Alex Blumberg

Consider the word misled. I talked to three people, including my own father, who used to pronounce it mizeled. All three believed it was the past tense of a nonexistent verb, mizel, which means to deceive or to mislead. There's another guy I spoke to who thought, well into his early 20s, that the word quesadilla was Spanish for what's the deal?

Most of the common childhood myths, like that babies come from storks, get corrected sooner or later. They're not obscure enough to sneak into adulthood unscrutinized. But occasionally, even a very popular childhood myth can make it through, like unicorns.

Kristy Kruger

In my head, a unicorn wasn't really any different than a zebra.

Alex Blumberg
This is Kristy Kruger.

Kristy Kruger

I mean, in terms of believability, I think the unicorn is really ahead of the dinosaur.

Alex Blumberg

What do you mean?

Kristy Kruger

Well, I mean, when you think about a dinosaur from a kid's perspective, a dinosaur is these really large, monstrous animals roaming the Earth. And then you have a unicorn, which is basically just a horse with a horn.

Alex Blumberg

As Kristy Kruger grew up, she says that if she ever thought about unicorns, they were on a grassy plane somewhere in Africa, drinking from a watering hole with the wildebeest and the impala. And then one night, she found herself in a conversation at a party.

Kristy Kruger

It was about a group of five to seven people, kind of standing around the keg, just talking. And somehow a discussion of endangered species came up, in which I posed the question, is the unicorn endangered or extinct? And basically, there was a big gap of silence.

Alex Blumberg

As you might be gathering, at some point in all these stories, you come to a big gap of silence.

Kristy Kruger

And then everybody laughed. And then that laughter was followed by more silence when they realized I wasn't laughing. And I was like, yeah, oh God, unicorns aren't real? Oh no.

Alex Blumberg

Sometimes a ridiculous belief will survive into adulthood, and it's our parents who are to blame. Robin didn't think there was anything strange about the way she was raised. She lived together with her sister and her parents in a nice house in the suburbs. She went to school like the other kids, watched TV and did her homework. And she ate the exact same thing for dinner every night of her life, baked chicken.

Robin
It was like Monday, chicken. Tuesday, chicken. Wednesday, chicken. Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, chicken, chicken chicken, chicken, chicken, chicken, every night of my life until I left for college. At the end of the first week of college-- when everyone's desperately trying to fit in, and it's important that you act cool and sophisticated and whatever-- everyone begins complaining about the food that we're being served. What was the hard stuff in the sloppy joe? What was that mystery meat? What animal did it come from?

And I'm looking at these people like they are crazy. The variety we are getting here every night. Every night there's a different meal. One night it's mac and cheese. One night it's mystery meat. One night it's sloppy joe. I was like, how can you criticize? I mean, it's a testament to what great chefs they must be that they can make a different meal every single night of the week. And they just kind of stared. And they're like, what? And I'm like, what, what?

What's running through my head is, wait a minute, these people are implying that they had variation in their meal plan for their entire life. It's mind-bending. I mean, I don't care what I learned throughout college. This is the revelation that has stuck with me. This is what I've learned. All of a sudden like, holy God.

Alex Blumberg

When Robin came home for Thanksgiving that year, and confronted her mother with the startling fact that everyone else ate things besides chicken growing up, her mother just shrugged her shoulders and said, you liked chicken. Robin had to concede the point. Even when they'd gone out to restaurants, Robin ordered chicken. They all had.

Here's one more. When Harriet Lerner was a girl, her family was going through some lean years. There were two kids, the house needed repairs. There wasn't much money for holiday gifts. Harriet was seven and she wanted a bike. Her sister Susan was 12. She wanted a set of encyclopedias. But when they came downstairs on Christmas morning, there were only two small boxes waiting for them.

Harriet Lerner

What was inside them-- and we both had exactly the same gift-- were these real ugly, metal tissue holders painted black, with these corny red and yellow roses. They were painted with these cheesy looking red and yellow roses. And I looked at my tissue box, and I started to cry. And I looked at my big sister Susan, and I thought, of course she was going to cry too. And she looked like maybe she was going to cry. But then she sort of put on a big smile. And then she told me that the boxes were painted by trained monkeys.

Alex Blumberg

The box became Harriet's prized possession. She kept it on display in her room through elementary school, through high school. Her friends asked her about it, she'd say, oh yeah, it was painted by trained monkeys. Nobody ever challenged her on it, maybe because she believed it
herself so completely. And then one day, she was home from college, back in the house where she grew up.

Harriet Lerner

And I'm going through some papers, or maybe I was snooping through Susan's papers, and I found a composition, and it had her name on it. And she had written it in high school. And it was called "The Tissue Box Story." So I sat down on the floor of Susan's bedroom to read this composition. And Susan told the story just as I told it, except that she wrote how she felt when she saw me crying. And how she then looked at my parents, and saw that my mother was about to cry too. And how she looked at the tissue boxes, and then she remembered that my father had a friend who made them. And she knew how much my parents hated taking charity.

And suddenly, even though she was about to cry, she forced herself to smile. And she pretended those boxes were painted by trained monkeys. And of course, I didn't know any of this. But the funny thing she wrote in her composition is that she just rushed upstairs and started crying all over her pillow. And she wasn't really sad about the gift really, is what she said in the composition. She wasn't sure why she was crying, except that it was sort of like she had volunteered to be a grown up before she was even ready for it.

Up until that moment, I had never thought to question my sister's story. I had never subjected it to the scrutiny of a grown up mind. I mean, I was 20. I don't know, I had this tissue box that was painted by trained monkeys. And then it wasn't painted by trained monkeys, really.

Alex Blumberg

Up until reading that story, Harriet thought that her sisters lies had been only to torment her, like the time Harriet swallowed an apple seed, and her big sister convinced her that she had an apple tree growing inside her. She had always been jealous of her sister, always wanted to be the big sister. But reading her sister's story that day made her realize how responsible her sister felt for her, and for their entire family, and how there were benefits to being the baby. It was good to learn all that.

But the vision of the lie-- that we live in a world where monkeys can be trained to paint-- is hard to give up.

Harriet Lerner

And really, it's just that I can still picture this tissue box, and how much I loved it, this tissue box painted by trained monkeys.

Alex Blumberg

I know what she means. For me, there's something appealingly weird about a world where only people who happened to have been born with the name Nielsen get to decide what goes on television. And not long after the day that Jodie Mace's coworker set her straight about the word "zing," she found herself on the opposite side of the exact same situation. She was having a
conversation with another coworker, and he asked her if elves were real. Elves? Like that live in the forest, she asked, with the pointy toes? He nodded. She paused. And then she said, yeah, of course they are.

Ira Glass

Alex Blumberg is one of the producers of our show.