

ABOVE AND BELOW

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In the very first issue of *Word Ways*, published in February, 1968, an issue I had the honor of editing, I discussed word ladders, citing some interesting examples. Somewhat in the nature of a casual afterthought, I mentioned the fact that a seemingly very difficult problem was that of constructing a ladder to convert ABOVE into BELOW.

I didn't give the problem much further thought, waiting expectantly for readers of *Word Ways* to jump into the fray and devise the required word ladder. I have now waited patiently and despairingly for more than five years. At this writing, it is July, 1973, and no one has come forward with the desired ladder . . .

One would think that a lustrum was a decent length of time for hundreds of readers to convert five measly little letters into five others. Not so, apparently.

There's nothing like doing a job that needs to be done oneself, I suppose. Accordingly, I have constructed the word ladder, taking only nine steps to achieve the allegedly impossible. Here it is:

ABOVE
 ABONE -- 16th-century spelling of ABOVE
 ALONE
 ALINE -- alternate spelling of ALIGN
 BLINE -- 13th-century word meaning "to cease" or "to delay"
 BEINE -- French village east of Rheims
 BERNE -- capital of Switzerland
 BEROE -- genus of ctenophores, jellyfishlike animals
 BELOE -- 16th-century spelling of BELOW
 BELOW

The Oxford English Dictionary has graciously provided ABONE, BELOE and BLINE (variant of BLIN). With equal generosity, The Times Index-Gazetteer of the World has supplied BEINE (which, parenthetically, is the ordinary German word for "legs"). BEROE makes its appearance through the courtesy of Webster's Third New International Dictionary.

This success is evidence to support the view that any five-letter word can be converted into any other one, in a reasonable number of steps. But now I must return to my favorite occupation, that of trying to grow a mushroom in the shape of a pair of suspenders!