

What's in a Word?

Categories: Uncategorized

We rarely stop to think about the place of words in our lives. They are like the air we breathe and, like the air, we take them for granted. Without words, we would have to communicate with grunts and snorts. In the world of school, words are the coin of the realm. Everything that happens comes back to words. Reading, writing and even arithmetic are all dependent on the use of words. Words really give meaning to the life we live, yet I find it interesting just how little we respect words.

I grew up in a home where the use of words was revered and where words were bandied about in all sorts of ways. My father was a minister and he used words to call others to find their highest purpose. Around the dinner table the words were used to make bad puns. But he taught me to respect and love words. With that as my heritage I find myself growing more and more concerned with how language is used and abused in our culture.

I am not talking merely about the fact that our political leaders and our pop culture use words in the grossest and most debasing ways. I do admit it is a little shocking to hear the president curse from the podium. It isn't that I haven't heard those words before, or even that I haven't used them myself, but I find the context for their use jarring. I can't imagine Abraham Lincoln, in the Gettysburg Address, saying, "we are going to knock the s**t out of them." All those in positions of leadership and responsibility should be more careful with their use of words. They model for the rest of us, and most especially for our children.

Of course meanwhile our children are listening to music, watching movies and television and swimming in social media where the language would curl my father's hair. Those purveyors of the popular culture also bear a major responsibility for the degradation of our language. But, even so, our language would probably survive all these onslaughts. Rough usage is one thing. Purposeful misuse is something else.

The real danger we face is the use of words in such a way as they are rendered meaningless or that they are used to communicate the opposite of what they really mean.

For years teenagers have used the word "like" for no apparent reason. "Like" has a specific meaning that connotes approval. "I like ice cream." But for years like has been used as space holder that is a higher class version of "um." In this way, I have come not to like "like." We should try to discourage its use as a placeholder for "I can't think of what I want to say so, I will just say, like." The space between words should be filled with silence not meaningless words.

A relatively new abuse is the use of "no problem." Again, it has a specific meaning. It connotes that something can be done easily or readily. "Could you take out the garbage?" "No problem." But this phrase has come to mean "you're welcome." "Thanks for giving me the card." "No problem." I have a problem with "no problem" even if I seem to have no problem misusing it myself. It is just wrong. It's a problem.

But lately language has come to be misused purposefully. It is one thing for a teenager to say "like" or "no problem." It is something quite different for a political leader to suggest that any reporting they don't like is "fake news." During the election there were

examples of fake news. These were items created purposefully to mislead readers into believing something that wasn't so. One of the more striking examples were reports that one candidate was involved in sex trafficking and that it was being conducted out of the basement of a certain pizza parlor in Washington. This gained wider attention when one of the readers of this "fake news" went to the parlor and shot it up because he believed he was stopping the sex trafficking that was taking place in the basement. The problem was that there was no sex trafficking and no basement. The whole story had been fabricated to undermine one candidate. That is fake news. It is news that is made up.

When a credible source of news reports a factual story that is counter to what someone wants to hear, it isn't fake news-it is an inconvenient truth.

This leads to the biggest problem I have seen lately-the advent of "alternative facts." This concept was offered by a high ranking White House official to explain why something that another official had said was counter to the facts as everyone understood them. The problem is that facts are stubborn little things and there isn't an alternative. It is either a fact, or it isn't. There can be alternative ideas or theories, but as the late Sen. Patrick Moynihan put it, "Everyone is entitled to their own opinions but not their own facts."

The idea of "alternative facts" isn't just troubling, it's dangerous. We see people denying science in the name of alternative facts. We see people drawing conclusions about others that may impact their health or safety in the name of "alternative facts." As they used to say on The X-Files, "the truth is out there." Yes it is, and it isn't subject to interpretation or alternation. The truth is the truth because it is true. If it isn't true, it is a lie.

The role of education in today's world is even more critical than ever. It isn't merely the task of a teacher to teach children the "words." The teacher must teach them when and how to use the words and how to discern between words of truth and words of falsehood. This is difficult and potentially dangerous, but it is the task of the teacher.

I recently reread a version of "The Emperor's New Clothes." We remember the story of the Emperor who was tricked into thinking he was given wonderful new clothes, but, in fact, there were no clothes. He was scammed to think he had something he didn't. No one wanted to upset the Emperor so they "ohhed and ahned" over his new clothes. It took a child to see through the scam and shout that the Emperor had no clothes. The role of education has and will always be to lift up children's insight so they can see and speak the truth. And that's a fact. We need to teach children what my father taught me-words are precious and should be revered. They aren't something to throw around and misuse.