

Letter from Vancouver

Take Back Our Language

The transition from youth and idealism to old age and treachery can be extremely traumatic for oldsters who have failed to shed their idealism and never found their way to treachery.

To me, one of the most agonizing events in the downward spiral of our quality of life is the corruption of language. Today's political and social discourse makes the dictionary not a tool but a handicap. In the service of greed and its handmaiden, money, politicians still indulge in the vocabulary of yesterday. Hope is still offered as political coin, but most voters recognize that coin as inflated beyond any ability to buy the world it promises. The result is cynicism at best, denial at worst. Shut your eyes to the tomorrow that looms and maybe it will go away.

Cornering wealth and power has become the end game for those who play it hardest. They willingly pay big bucks to flaks who distort our language to convey the opposite of its true meaning. When greed and ignorance can co-opt the word "wise," and abuse can masquerade as "use," then the power of language that once separated us from the other animals can send us back.

It's not reassuring to note that the other animals are meeting us halfway. Jarod Diamond, in his 1992 book, *The Third Chimpanzee*, notes that the common, cat-sized African monkey known as the vervet, is fully as capable as we of dissembling through what amounts to their language. They have been documented using their warning cry for "leopard" not to alert their own band to leopard danger, but to mislead a rival band into fleeing the scene of the rivals' almost certain victory.

Together with others dedicated to alerting our human band to dangers more lethal than leopards, I once strove to describe wise use as a means of preserving the biosphere for sustainable life. Today, the big bucks and animal cunning of those who would ignore wisdom or label it as "robbing us of our personal property rights," are clearing the way for ecological disaster by turning our human vocabulary into a new Tower of Babel.

The rapid dwindling of the natural resources on which our civilization rests, and the proliferation of wastes that we have fewer and fewer places to put, have sharpened our, as yet, only dimly realized perception of danger. Robbed of the weapon of language that gave us our survival edge, too many of us are fighting

tooth and nail to “git while the gittin’ is good” or simply shrugging and throwing in the towel.

One of the towels marked “hers” is mine, and I am loathe to throw it in, but as I see language corrupted in the service of ignorance and avarice, bought by money and fueled by fear, I find it increasingly hard to find reason for hope.

George Orwell, a prescient philosopher who wrote half a century ago, noted that if you rob a people of their language by deliberately distorting its meanings, you take away their ability to frame thoughts and communicate their thinking. In his 1947 essay, “Politics and the English Language,” (contained in Volume 4 of Orwell’s collected essays, titled “In Front of Your Nose”), Orwell notes: “In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defense of the indefensible.” He deplors the growing practices of “euphemism, question-begging, and sheer cloudy vagueness” and declares “all issues are political issues, and politics itself is a mass of lies, evasions, folly, hatred and schizophrenia” where thought corrupts language and language corrupts thought. Reality is replaced by whatever the idea-mongers are selling.

Today’s discourse represents a gross extension of what began as mere euphemism. There is hardly a self-serving, reprehensible action today that does not have a mind-bending label making it sound not just acceptable, but wise and preferable. And there are more and more lazy listeners who buy into the euphemistic “meaning.”

Which leaves this old language hen wondering where our culture failed us. Why do some of us find it so hard to identify with most of our chronological contemporaries? What is our task, if any, as we continue to try to make our voices heard? Do we “point with pride,” “view with alarm,” clear our elderly throats and “advise,” tax our aging muscles into “taking up the cudgels” one more time? Or do we just shut up and try to find a compatible corner in which to live out the dire consequences we warned of a quarter century ago?!

I can think of several additional “hopelessnesses” to add to Brown’s depressing list. One is the reasoning behind the opinion of some of today’s leading scientists and science writers that there is no chance of any other life like ours in the entire universe. They contend that the billions of years of lead time necessary for the flowering of our exalted human condition would culminate anywhere (including here on Earth) with extinction of the species—doomed by its seemingly irresistible lust to murder its fellow beings and foul its planetary nest.

The few positive notes are the scattered candles of dawning maturity that flicker here and there around the Earth. They need to be blown on gently, cradled in care, and rescued from the killing effects of language perversion.

If it’s not already too late.

