

## I won't "Pass On"

### Death

Is the editor claiming eternal life? Hardly! "Passing On" is just one of the many euphemisms, some of them harmless, others quite the opposite, which we in North America have come to accept like the weather or higher local telephone bills.

Personally, I don't complain about the fact that I will die within a relatively few years, but I don't know about "passing on." Human beings have a unique characteristic, which, as far as we know, does not affect other creatures of this earth. We are part of the Animal Kingdom: Phylum – Vertebra; Class – Mammalia; Order – Primates; Family – Hominidae; Genus – Homo; Species – Homo Sapiens. In our capacity as members of the Kingdom, we are born, many of us reproduce, and all of us eventually die, just as do horses, dogs, cats, mice and birds. However, most human beings also hope for some kind of life after death, that is, a migration of the nonphysical aspects of the person, or "soul" to some other place in the universe. I have no particular quarrel with this desire, but it should not lead to a denial of our being physically part of the Animal Kingdom. Such a denial has caused us many problems ever since we have lived in some kind of social structure. Let me first die, and then see what comes after that. For this reason I will not be "passing on," a euphemism which I don't support but which is essentially harmless.

### Used Cars

Formerly, an individual or family who needed a car but could not afford a new one, would buy a used one. The used car market was for generations a useful institution. But nowadays it is nearly impossible in the United States and very difficult in Canada to buy a used car. The only vehicles of this type are now defined as "pre-owned." What is the difference between a used car and a pre-owned one? It is physically the same automobile, but is currently sold with the understanding that, while there has been at least one owner between the dealership and you, the vehicle may never actually have been driven. This implication is completely phony in 99.99% of the cases. Why do we need it? Isn't there enough dishonesty in the life of complicated industrial societies without us having to abandon useful and descriptive words?

### Handicapped People

According to the Oxford Dictionary, the word "handicap" is of obscure origin but in modern times has come to mean a horse race in which a "handicapper" required some horses to carry extra weights in order to make the race more competitive. Merriam-Webster has among other definitions "a disadvantage that makes achievement unusually difficult" and "a physical disability." Whatever the dictionary, the word signifies to the ordinary person a situation in which someone or some horse carries an extra load. This has a similarity to the "used car." Everybody

knows what is meant by a used car. Everybody knows what is meant by a "handicapped person" because we have friends or relatives or are ourselves handicapped. Why then are all of these persons suddenly "challenged"? Just as handicapped persons in a wheelchair don't want to be called "cripples" or persons with alcohol problems "drunks," there is only a small vocal minority who wants to be called "challenged." What is wrong with calling someone who is handicapped "challenged"?

It is this: One expression honestly describes a situation, the other introduces a value judgment, which in many instances is phony. I asked a friend of mine, who was paraplegic as a result of an accident in which he was blameless, whether he wanted to be called "challenged." He told me that if someone called him that, he would throw up. Interestingly, there really are people who regard a handicap as a challenge. They play basketball in wheelchairs, ski on one leg, participate in Special Olympics, do volunteer work, earn a living, have chess games with players in Japan, Chile and Russia, and so forth. These individuals should not only be supported financially, if that is necessary, but given moral support as well. But the adjective "challenged" has an undertone of fun. Questions: "Why did you climb the Matterhorn when it has been done so many times already?" Answer: "I considered it a challenge." Some handicapped people are working hard to come to terms with their situation, some mourn, some are angry and all have a right to be respected. A change in nomenclature is unhelpful.

### Less Developed Countries

During the Cold War, it was fashionable to divide countries into the "Free World", the "Communist World" and the "Third World." This system of naming produced many problems. The "Communist World" was easy because it defined itself. But what about a particularly vicious dictatorship allied with countries in the "Free World"? After the Cold War, when attention shifted to economic development, the expression "Less Developed Countries" came into vogue. It was not ideal. Some countries which are economically poor, are rich in the arts, oral history, poetry, dance, theatre, agricultural and medicinal know-how, etc. To be accurate, they should really be called "Economically Less Developed." But instead of positively revising the expression, it was altered into one which is often phony: "Developing Countries." Unfortunately, many of these so-called "developing" countries are either not developing or are regressing. In Africa one might include in this group Egypt, The Sudan, Republic of Congo, Liberia, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Rwanda, Nigeria, Burundi and Sierra Leone. Again, what is the harm? The amount of economic aid (not just money but also human effort) to better the situation in the LDC's as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product is very low (.03%) in Canada, and pitiful in the U.S.A. Calling places "developing" which urgently need well-thought-out help, which is respectful of the geography and the people involved, has a reassuring effect on readers and listeners in the rich countries. If they are "developing," the thinking goes, things can not be all that bad. No need to rush. Whether the

euphemism actually discourages aid or not, is very hard to measure. But dishonest use of names is never helpful.

**Unintentional Civilian Casualties**

One of the nastiest euphemisms is “Collateral Damage.” This expression is used to describe death or injury unintentionally inflicted on civilians. During WWII, civilians were deliberately targeted and the names Coventry, Rotterdam, Dresden and Hiroshima still represent unbelievable cruelty. However, in modern hi-tech warfare the targets are primarily enemy troops, equipment and facilities, and most of the time efforts are made not to harm civilians. Obviously, accidents are bound to occur. What these are called is “Collateral Damage.” The expression deliberately disguises what is really happening. If traffic accident occurs, are ambulances called to take “damaged” drivers and passengers to a hospital? Why then are civilians “damaged” if a bomb is dropped too close to them or they are strafed by a pilot? Again, we should not substitute dubious words for accurate ones, and falsehoods for the truth.

Language is a wonderful gift and some people are able to use it almost as they would play a musical instrument. The rest of us can at least refrain from destroying it.

*Author : The Editor*

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