

Verbicide

He entered my office for advice as a freshman advisee sporting nearly perfect SAT scores and an impeccable academic record—by all accounts a young man of considerable promise. During a 20-minute conversation about his academic future, however, he displayed a vocabulary that consisted mostly of two words: “cool” and “really.” Almost 800 SAT points hitched to each word. He could use them interchangeably, as in “really cool” or “cool . . . really!” He could also use them singly. When he was a student in a subsequent class I later confirmed that my first impression of the young scholar was largely accurate and that his vocabulary, and presumably his mind, consisted predominantly of words and images derived from overexposure to television and the new jargon of computer-speak. He is no aberration but an example of a larger problem, not of illiteracy but of diminished literacy in a culture that often sees little reason to use words carefully, however abundantly. Increasingly, papers from otherwise good students have whole paragraphs that sound like advertising copy. Whether students are talking or writing, a growing number have a tenuous grasp on a declining vocabulary. Excise “uh . . . like . . . uh” from most teenage conversations, and the effect is like sticking a pin into a balloon.

In the past 50 years, by one reckoning, the working vocabulary of the average 14-year-old has declined from some 25,000 words to 10,000 words (Spretnak 1997). This is not merely a decline in numbers of words but in the capacity to think. It also signifies there has been a steep decline in the number of things an adolescent needs to know and to name in order to get by in an in-

creasingly homogenized and urbanized consumer society. This is a national tragedy that goes virtually unnoticed in the media. It is no coincidence that in roughly the same half century the average person has come to recognize over 1000 corporate logos but can now recognize fewer than 10 plants and animals native to his or her locality. That fact says a great deal about why the decline in working vocabulary has gone unnoticed: few are paying attention. The decline is surely not consistent across the full range of language but concentrates in those areas having to do with large issues such as philosophy, religion, public policy, and nature. On the other hand, vocabulary has probably increased in areas having to do with sex, violence, recreation, and consumption. As a result we are losing the capacity to say what we really mean and ultimately to think about what we mean. We are losing the capacity for articulate intelligence about the things that matter most. “That sucks,” for example, is a common way for budding young scholars to announce their displeasure about any number of things that range across the spectrum of human experience. But it can also be used to indicate a general displeasure with the entire cosmos. Whatever the target, it is the linguistic equivalent of duct tape, useful for holding disparate thoughts in rough and temporary proximity to some vague emotion of dislike.

The problem is not confined to teenagers or young adults. It is part of a national epidemic of incoherence evident in our public discourse, street talk, movies, television, and music. We have all heard popular

music lyrics that consisted mostly of pre-Neanderthal grunts. We have witnessed “conversation” on TV talk shows that would have embarrassed intelligent 4-year olds. We have listened to politicians of national reputation proudly mangle logic and language in less than a paragraph, although they can do it on a larger scale as well. However manifested, our linguistic decline is aided and abetted by academics, including whole departments specializing in various forms of postmodernism and the deconstruction of one thing or another. They have propounded the idea that everything is relative, hence largely inconsequential, and that the use of language is primarily an exercise in power, hence to be devalued. They have taught, in other words, a pseudo-intellectual contempt for clarity, careful argument, and felicitous expression. Being scholars of their word they also write without clarity, argument, and felicity. Remove the arcane constructions from any number of academic papers written in the past 10 years and the argument—such as it is—evaporates. But the situation is not much better elsewhere in the academy, where thought is often fenced in by disciplinary jargon. The fact is that educators have all too often been indifferent trustees of language. This explains, I think, why the academy has been a lame critic of what ails the world, from the preoccupation with self to technology run amuck. We have been unable to speak out against the barbarism engulfing the larger culture because we are part of the process of barbarization that begins with the devaluation of language.

The decline of language, noted by commentators such as H. L. Mencken,

George Orwell, William Safire, and Edwin R. Neuman, is nothing new. Language is always coming undone. Why? First, it is always under assault by those who intend to control others by first subverting the words and metaphors that people would otherwise use to describe their world. The goal is to give partisan aims the appearance of inevitability by diminishing the sense of larger possibilities. In our time, language is under assault by those whose purpose it is to sell one kind of quackery or another: economic, political, religious, or technological. It is under attack because the clarity and felicity of language, as distinct from its quantity, are devalued in an industrial-technological society. The clear and artful use of language is, in fact, threatening to that society. As a result we have highly distorted and atrophied conversations about ultimate meanings, ethics, public purposes, or the means by which we live. Because we cannot expect to cope with problems that we cannot name, one result of our misuse of language is a growing agenda of unsolved problems that cannot be adequately described in words and metaphors derived from our own creations such as machines and computers. The words and metaphors derived from our own creations, in other words, are inadequate to describe the major flaws in these same creations.

Second, language is in decline because it is being Balkanized around the specialized vocabularies characteristic of an increasingly specialized society. The highly technical language of the expert is, of course, both bane and blessing. It is useful for describing fragments of the world but not for describing how these fit into a coherent whole. But things work as whole systems whether we can describe them or not, whether we perceive it or not. And more than anything else, it is coherence our culture lacks, not specialized knowledge. Genetic engineering, for example, can be described as a technical thing in the language of molecular biology. But saying what the act of rearranging the genetic fabric

of Earth means requires an altogether different language and a mindset that seeks to discover larger patterns. Similarly, the specialized language of economics does not begin to describe the state of our wellbeing, whatever it reveals about how much stuff we may buy. Over and over again the simplistic and seductive language of the specialist displaces that of the generalist—the specialist in whole things. A result is that the capacity to think carefully about ends, as distinct from means, has all but disappeared from our public and private conversations.

Third, language reflects the range and depth of our experience. But our experience of the world is being impoverished to the extent that it is rendered artificial and prepackaged. Most of us no longer have the experience of skilled physical work on farms or in forests. Consequently, as our reality becomes increasingly artificial, words and metaphors based on intimate knowledge of soils, plants, trees, animals, landscapes, rivers, and oceans have declined. “Cut off from this source,” Wendell Berry writes, “language becomes a paltry work of conscious purpose, at the service and the mercy of expedient aims” (Berry 1983). Our nonparticipatory experience within the confines of a uniform and ugly artificial environment is engineered and shrink-wrapped by the recreation and software industries and pedaled back to us as “fun” or “information.” We’ve become a nation of television watchers and Internet browsers, and it shows in the way we talk and what we talk about. More and more we speak as if we are voyeurs furtively peeking at life, not active participants, moral agents, or engaged citizens.

Fourth, we are no longer held together, as we once were, by the reading of a common literature or by listening to great stories, and so we cannot draw on a common set of metaphors and images as we once did. Allusions to the Bible and other great books no longer resonate because they are simply unfamiliar to a growing number of people. This is so

in part because the consensus about what is worth reading has come undone. But the debate about a worthy canon is hardly the whole story. The ability to read serious things in a serious way is diminished by over-stimulation by television and computers, with their rapidly changing images that mock concentration. The desire to read is jeopardized by the same forces that would make us a violent, shallow, hedonistic, and materialistic people. As a nation we risk coming undone because our language is coming undone, and our language is coming undone because one by one we are being undone.

The problem of language, however, is a global problem. Of the roughly 5000 languages now spoken on Earth, only 150 or so are expected to survive to the year 2100. Language everywhere is being whittled down to conform to the limited objectives of the global economy and homogenized in accord with the shallow imperatives of the “information age.” The languages being lost, in Vine Deloria’s words, often “convey deeper and more precise meanings than does English” (Delori 1999: 176). This represents a huge loss of cultural information and a blurring of our capacity to understand the world and our place in it. And it represents a losing bet that a few people armed with the words, metaphors, and mindset characteristic of a transient, failing industry and technology can manage the Earth, a vaster, infinitely more complex, and longer-lived thing altogether.

Because we cannot think clearly about what we cannot say clearly, the first casualty of linguistic incoherence is our ability to think well about many things. This is a reciprocal process. Language, George Orwell once wrote, “becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts” (Orwell 1981: 157). In our time the words and metaphors of the consumer economy are often a product of foolish thoughts as

well as evidence of bad language. Under the onslaught of commercialization and technology we are losing the sense of wholeness and time that is essential to a decent civilization. We are losing, in short, the capacity to articulate what ought to be most important to us. And the new class of corporate chiefs, global managers, genetic engineers, and money speculators has no words with which to describe the fullness and beauty of life or to announce their role in the larger moral ecology. They have no way to say how we fit together in the community of life, indeed no idea beyond that of self-interest about why we ought to protect it. They have, in short, no language that will help humankind, including themselves, navigate through the most dangerous epoch in its history. On the contrary, they will do all in their power to reduce language to the level of utility, management, self-interest, and the short term. Evil begins not only with words used with malice but also with words that diminish people, land, and life to some fragment that is less than whole and less than holy. The prospects for evil, I believe, will grow as those for language decline.

We have an affinity for language, and that capacity makes us human. When language is devalued, misused, or corrupted, so too are those who speak it and those who hear it. On the other hand, we are never better than when we use words clearly, eloquently, and civilly. Language can elevate thought and ennoble our behavior. Abraham Lincoln's words at Gettysburg in 1863, for example, gave meaning to the terrible sacrifices of the Civil War. Similarly, Winston Churchill's words moved an entire nation to do its duty in the dark hours of 1940. If we intend to protect and enhance our humanity, we must first decide to protect and enhance language and fight everything that undermines and cheapens it.

What does this mean in practical terms? How do we design the right use of language back into the culture? My first suggestion is to restore

the habit of talking directly to each other, whatever the loss in economic efficiency. To that end I propose that we begin by smashing every automated answering machine. Messages like "Your call is important to us . . ." or "For more options, please press five," or "If you would like to talk to a real person please stay on the line," are the death rattle of a coherent culture.

Second, the proper use of language is a slowly acquired art that is easily corrupted by technological contrivances that increase the volume and velocity of communication. Whatever the gains in speed and convenience provided by the Internet, I seldom receive any email message that could pass a sixth-grade composition exam. Worse, many people are simply overwhelmed by the volume of email. We cannot disinvent the Internet, but for our sanity we can and should limit the use we make of it.

My third suggestion is to restore the habit of public reading. One of my most distinctive childhood memories is attending a public reading of Shakespeare by the British actor Charles Laughton. With no prop other than a book, he read with energy and passion for 2 hours and kept a large audience enthralled, including at least one 8-year-old boy. No movie has ever been as memorable to me. Further, I propose that adults should turn off the television, disconnect the cable, undo the computer, and once again read good books aloud to their children. I know of no better or more pleasurable way to stimulate thinking, encourage a love of language, and facilitate a child's ability to form images.

Fourth, those who corrupt language ought to be held accountable for what they do—beginning with the advertising industry. In 1997 it spent an estimated \$187 billion to sell us an unconscionable amount of stuff, much of it useless, environmentally destructive, and deleterious to our health. Often using only seductive imagery, advertising fuels the fires of consumerism that are con-

suming the Earth and our children's future. Advertisers regard the public with utter contempt—as little more than sheep to be manipulated to buy whatever at the highest possible cost and at any consequence. Dante would have consigned them to the lowest level of hell, only because there was no worse place to put them. We should too. If we lack the gumption to do that we ought to require by law full disclosure of the damage consumer products do to other people, to the environment, and to the buyer.

Fifth, language, I believe, grows from the outside in, from the periphery to center. It is renewed in the vernacular by the everyday acts of living, doing, and speaking. It is renewed in the streets, shops, farms, and rural places where human life is most authentic. It is, by the same logic, corrupted by contrivance, pretense, and fakery. The center, where power and wealth work by contrivance, pretense, and fakery, does not create language so much as exploit it. To facilitate control, the powerful would make our language as uniform and dull as the interstate highway system. To preserve the places where language grows, we must protect the independence of local newspapers and local radio stations by forbidding non-local ownership. We need to support regional publishing houses and small, independent bookstores. We need to protect local culture and local dialects from highbrow ridicule. We need to teach the young to honor difference in speech and dialect. And we must protect those parts of our culture where memory, tradition, and devotion to place still exist, because it is there that language is often most vibrant.

Finally, because language is the only currency wherever men and women pursue truth, there should be no higher priority for schools, colleges, and universities than to defend the integrity and clarity of language in every way possible. We must instill in our students an appreciation for language, literature, and words well crafted and used to good ends. As teachers we should insist

on good writing. We should assign books and readings that are well written. We should restore rhetoric—the ability to speak clearly and well—to the liberal arts curriculum. Our own speaking and writing ought to demonstrate clarity and truthfulness. And we too should be held accountable for what we say.

In terms of the sheer volume of words and data of all kinds, this is surely an information age. But in terms of understanding, wisdom, spiritual clarity, and civility we have entered a darker time. We are drowning in a sea of words with nary a drop to drink. We are in the process of committing what C. S. Lewis once called “verbicide.” The volume of

words in our time is inversely related to our capacity to use them well and to think clearly about what they mean. It is no wonder that, in a century of gulags, genocide, global wars, and horrible weapons, our use of language has been increasingly dominated by propaganda and advertising and controlled by language technicians. “We have a sense of evil,” Susan Sontag has said, but we no longer have “the religious or philosophical language to talk intelligently about evil” (Miller 1998:55). If that is so for the twentieth century, what will be said at the end of the twenty-first century, when the stark realities of climatic change and biotic impoverishment will become fully manifest? Can

we summon the clarity of mind to speak the words necessary to cause us to do what ought to have been our obvious course all along?

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