

Love in a Time of Coronavirus

“What’s in a name? That which we call a rose

“By any other name would smell as sweet...”

~William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*

Sorry, Mr. Shakespeare, but I beg to disagree.

“Rose” glides from the lips like a musical note, perfumed and sweet in sound as the flower itself.

Suppose for argument’s sake that the prickly perennial so long celebrated by poets wore a different name: grub onion. On Valentine’s Day, Jim returns home from a trip to town with a bouquet for his beloved Julie, who cries in delight, “A dozen grub onions! That’s so sweet!”

Yuck.

Gertrude Stein once wrote “A rose is a rose is a rose,” leaving some of us confused by the meaning of that sentence and wondering whether Ms. Stein was enjoying her French wine a bit too much. But “A grub onion is a grub onion is a grub onion” is about as ugly-sounding a sentence as they come.

So names do matter.

Recently, some members of the media blasted President Trump for referring to an infective agent as “The Chinese Virus,” branding him a racist for daring to remind us of the origins of our present pandemic. Though there’s nothing new in attaching a place or a country to a specific disease – the 20th century battled Spanish Flu, Asian Flu, Hong Kong Flu, Russian Flu, and German Measles – some assailed Trump’s word choice as if he had pulled a sheet over his head and joined the Ku Klux Klan.

As for me, I personally prefer the generic “coronavirus” to describe our assailant, as the first three syllables of the word please the ear and ironically derive from the Ancient Greek word for “garland or wreath.” If it’s accuracy we’re after, then we should call this contagion the “CCP Virus,” thus putting the blame for this horrible outbreak not on the already burdened Chinese people, but on those blundering members of the Chinese Communist Party who spent valuable weeks back in December trying to cover up this whole mess.

Which brings me in a roundabout way to language, gender, and sex.

This past week I was reading Douglas Murray’s [*The Madness of Crowds: Gender, Race and Identity*](#) when I suddenly realized that so many of the terms we use in our brave new world of gender and sexuality are just plain old plug ugly.

Trans, for example, cuffs the ear with its harsh r and n. Every time I come across “trans man” or “trans woman,” I not only become confused – which way does that coupling work again? – but for some weird reason trans also inserts all sorts of images into my head: a kid’s train set, the Six Million Dollar Man, electrical grids, and the Pontiac Firebird.

Equally off-putting are terms including the word “gender.” Agender (not identifying with a gender), cisgender (yours truly), genderqueer, also known as non-binary (someone who is all over the gender map), bigender, gender variant: How on earth does anyone keep these categories straight? (Oops, wrong word. Scratch “straight” and substitute “in order.”)

“Gender fluid” and “intersex” are the worst. Though the former means someone who feels like a man one day and more like a woman the next, this turn of phrase brings to mind sexual acts, thoughts possibly roused by that other hideous term “an exchange of bodily fluids.” “Intersex,” which refers to people

born with variations in sexual characteristics, summons up images of orgies, Martian experiments on human beings, and traffic directions, as in River Road intersects with Baldwin Drive.

Many of these designations smack of the social sciences that invented them. They sound academic, the cold, stiff language of a laboratory. They are attempts at accurate descriptions, perhaps, but clangorous when they meet the hammer, anvil, and stirrup of the middle ear.

When we think about it, this ugliness of language vis-à-vis sex and gender has a long history. Anglo-Saxon references to the sexual act and to various body parts are for the most part crude, harsh, and nasty, so much so that we have turned them into obscenities. Once confined to the private sphere, and then later to male institutions like the military, these words, many of which consist of four letters, have entered the mainstream and are now routinely used as offensive weapons by celebrities, politicians, and even ordinary citizens.

Though the ugly Anglo-Saxon naming of acts and parts and the unattractive pseudo-scientific language of gender groupings are quite different from each other, perhaps both are acts of distancing and removal, ways of clothing the nakedness of the human body and human emotion, the mysteries of human sexuality and the sex act. Both the crude and the refined languages recognize sexuality, the former through repellent names, the latter through biological classification, but perhaps this inadequate language unconsciously seeks to mask the power of the sexual act and all that it entails: desire and fear, a yearning for love, affection, and touch, and even the wish, however deeply buried, for children.

Words do matter.

But some things, we can surmise, are best said in the silence of our hearts.

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