

Words

by EARL F. PALMER

“Know the meaning of every word you use.” C. S. Lewis gave this advice to an American student who had written to him to ask for help in becoming a writer.

Lewis himself had learned his advice the hard way. When he was a teenager, he was tutored by a demanding teacher, W. T. Kirkpatrick. On the very first day they met, Lewis felt obliged to say something to the old gentleman as they stood together at the train station near Kirkpatrick’s home in Surrey, England. Lewis observed that the landscape looked “wilder” than he had expected. His teacher startled him:

“Stop!” shouted Kirk with a suddenness that made me jump. “What do you mean by wildness and what grounds had you for not expecting it?”

I replied I didn’t know what, still “making conversation.” As answer after answer was torn to shreds it at last dawned upon me that he really wanted to know. He was not making conversation, nor joking, not snubbing me; he wanted to know. I was stung into attempting a real answer.”

— C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, page 134)

I have wondered about Lewis’ youthful experience. Is this the reason that C. S. Lewis is such a totally clear writer? Is it because he is always aware of the presence of that demanding tutor just over his shoulder, who insisted that his student write and think clearly and that he only say in words what he really wanted the words to say?

Words can be powerful and by the use of words we are able to communicate convictions like hope, love, and faith. But words are sometimes confusing and words are even able to cause harm too; therefore we need to learn how to hear clearly and to be careful of what we say for others to hear. If our goal is to communicate what matters the most when we speak or write, we should beware of three kinds of language traps.

First, beware of hollow words, the empty shells that easily float from one side of the room to the other. They are words that move into the spaces between ideas so that their sounds appear in a sentence but we don’t really intend them to be interpreted by a listener. They are dangerous because

they attack language like a virus: some are crude expletives, some words, like “awesome” are reverent, some are almost technical, like “actually,” some are flattering, like “dude,” “you know,” and some just keep the sentence going, like “and” even after we have completed saying what we said.

Every poet and writer knows how deadly this kind of language use can be. Don’t tell me the landscape is “wild,” make me feel the wildness. Don’t tell me that the evening was depressing and that you therefore feel helpless, tell me that the “evening was spread out against the sky like a patient etherized upon a table” (T. S. Eliot, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*). We should always avoid such words as “picturesque” for this very reason. And in the same way, we who are trying to share our faith and our deepest convictions about life should not speak with generalized language when clear and plain language is available. We need to avoid empty words in our interpersonal communication. Don’t tell someone that you want to get together sometime — why

not set a date?

Beware of fighting words. They should be avoided because they do harm. These words are intended and crafted to punish and isolate. Their goal is not to communicate, but to fix and discount the person or group targeted. They are fighting words; they may be shouted or spoken calmly, blatant or subtle, and obvious or disguised. I need to continually test my language choice. What is my goal with words: to push away, to push down, to draw in, to build up, to encourage? The wily mayor in *The Music Man*, Mayor Shinn, was right in his advice to young Tommy Djilis, “watch your phraseology.”

Beware of code words. As a Christian I am grateful for the wonder-filled words of faith, like “gospel,” “salvation,” “hope”; but when I am sharing these words I need to make clear what the words are saying in everyday language. They should not trip off my tongue too easily as insider terms, especially at the closing minutes of a sermon. One strong argument in favor of the exposition of a biblical text is to watch that moment when the words in a text catch hold of our attention and we see their meaning for ourselves not because it was told to us but because we saw it; we figured out what the words meant.

EARL F. PALMER is pastor of University Church in Seattle, Wash.

b.e.n.e.d.i.c.t.o.r.y