Dog Whistles and Provocations: Navigating These Perilous Times

A mentor of mine on writing, Jacques Barzun, offered this quote, one of my favorites, concerning words and language. He wrote, "The writer who fairly steadily uses etymology to amplify or reinforce his intention is composing with chords instead of simple notes, and the listening ear needs training to receive more than the bare melody." In a stretch of the vernacular, it means, "If you want to understand what the dog hears, you need to have ears like a dog." Which brings us to the word *dog whistle*, that device that when blown, can only be heard by dogs.

The word *dog whistle* developed a secondary meaning as a political term in the 1990's defined as: "an expression or statement intended to be understood by a particular group of people." Such words are used as sort of a secret code in order to disguise offensive meaning. It has become so well-known a device that it is no longer a secret language, and the politically savvy understand it perfectly. Many words have become familiar as devious euphemisms. To disguise racist speech, for example, watch for words such as, "Law and Order," "Welfare Queen," "Urban Violence," "War on Terror."

Knowing the lexicon of dog whistlers can be helpful in recognizing an ideology. But, to paraphrase the Chinese proverb, do not try to remove a fly from a friend's head with a hatchet. Some people use these loaded terms without actually knowing their etymology and are only mimicking what they remembered from the latest demagogue's rally. Attempting to talk politics is a minefield for those unfamiliar with the landscape.

I was recently at a local convenience store to buy gas. A fellow was at the pump on the opposite side of the island and we exchanged pleasantries. He asked me if I liked my old pick-up truck. I told him I did, but replacing it would be expensive. He took the opportunity to remark, "Yeah, and gas is high too, but the price will go down as we get closer to elections." Did you hear a dog whistle in there? Might he have been suggesting that President Biden was controlling gas prices until it suits his political fortunes? I declined to acknowledge his attempt to test what might have been a shibboleth[1] of a common allegiance.

Then there are the bold provocations. As much as I revere the First Amendment, I do not understand how it serves our sense of community when an individual drives around town in a pick-up truck with large flags unfurled announcing in the most vulgar terms her displeasure with the Biden administration. And just what exactly is a devoted patriot trying to say by wearing into the Town Hall a tee-shirt with the image of an American Flag under which is the saying "Let's Go Brandon" and the initials "F.J.B.." For the unfamiliar, "Let's Go Brandon" is a distortion of a chant overheard at a NASCAR auto race, in which the crowd was shouting "Fuck Joe Biden," hence the tee-shirt initials "F.J.B.." One could surmise that the shirt is intended to lay a trap for the uninformed victim, with the shirted provocateur ready to pounce on the hapless prey when asked what all of it means.

There is some good that comes from these clear identification marks. A literate and informed person can immediately recognize the gang colors; Brandon tee-shirts and unfurled banners might just as well read "Ask Me About My Delusions," giving us fair warning that it is also possible that the individual has an abiding passion for the Second Amendment. Good to know. Learn to read the signs.

Richard Waterman

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[1] A *shibboleth* is a custom or tradition, usually a choice of phrasing or a single word, that distinguishes one group of people from another. Sort of a secret password. Yes, a dog whistle.