

Euphemism

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Euphemism. Noun. From the Greek eu- (good) + pheme (speech).
1. The use of a word or phrase that is less expressive or direct but considered less distasteful, less offensive, etc. than another. 2. A word or phrase so substituted. (Webster's New World College Dictionary, 4 Ed., 2005)

Pro Se, the free publication of Prisoners' Legal Services of New York, recently conducted a survey of its mostly locked-up readership. The survey asked prisoners what they preferred to be called. The question appeared to have been prompted by one of those futile, disingenuous changes in nomenclature that sweep the penological zeitgeist from time to time, previous waves having gifted us with such glittering gems of rebranding as "corrections" (read: penology, punishment, prisons) and "offender" (read: convict, felon, prisoner).

The pitch this time? A real humdinger, a regular masterpiece of the euphemist's art: instead of dirty old "prisoner" or the tubercular "inmate," the State, in its infinite wisdom and unfathomable compassion, had decided that henceforth its wayward unwilling wards should be granted a full measure of syllabic worth -- a ten-count, no less; you see, it's more symbolic that way. (More symbols is more symbolic, right? And everybody knows that more symbolism is more better.) Yes, with the grandiloquent palate-slapper "incarcerated individual," lives would no doubt be changed, narratives would finally be rewritten, futures would -- very plausibly! -- take on a rosy daybreak glow. Would we prisoners, asked Pro Se, prefer that the magazine follow suit?

The answer was a resounding "no." Prisoners, it turns out, prefer to be called prisoners. We also like to call prisons prisons, rather than "correctional facilities," and guards guards, as opposed to "corrections officers."

Having been through the wringer of New York's highly-politicized criminal court system, we felons' bullshit detectors are highly sensitive apparatus, prone to go off at the merest whiff of sophistry, primed to pop the umbrella of disbelief at the first yellow drop of "rain."

You may wonder: why the name change? What's so important to the penological elite about nomenclature? Why not call a spade a spade?

In an essay written by a non-chattel, this would be the part where I might offer a short gloss of euphemism through the ages, perhaps touch on some humorous examples from antiquity (think of Geoffrey Chaucer, that infamous bawd, and his Alisoun's "nether eye"), or introduce the reader to some scholarly discussion of the subject.

This is not a real-world essay.

This is a dispatch from the land of euphemism itself, a magical place where people live in small steel cages rather a lot like the pay lavatories at truckstops. Some of them even have the 10-minute shower booth. They are called "housing units." Hm, that's odd. It feels a lot more like a fancy dog crate than a house.

Examples abound. Take the classic "assault on staff." That old chestnut! It used to mean six guards beating the Rodney King out of a man and dragging his half-conscious body to the box. Maybe for looking at one of them wrong, or maybe for something to do on a slow Tuesday, post-divorce. And sometimes for something more serious, like a fistfight or a stabbing. In any case, there were hundreds of them every year, a terrible plague of violent criminal behavior.

A few years ago, hundreds of cameras were installed here, watching every nook and cranny of the prison, and wouldn't you know it, but "assaults on staff" have become very rare indeed, rare enough to make the news, even. Not that the reporting news stations were anything less than completely credulous of the Department's absurd and utterly bass-ackwards explanation, but the abuse did stop, and I haven't met a prisoner yet who doesn't appreciate the improvement those little lenses have made to his quality of life. No more casual beatings; the guard who made sport of raping the homosexuals is gone; no more "finding a weapon" in a disliked prisoner's cell; no more rounding up everyone in the immediate vicinity of an incident and sending them all to the box -- many things have changed, but the Department's canny deployment of euphemism from the very beginning continues to cover their complicity in all the crimes against prisoners that came before.

But that is the point of euphemism, isn't it? To protect the status quo. To mitigate damage. To shape perception. To make parts of the language inaccessible to polite conversation, thus rendering the corresponding parts of people's lives unactionable. That this subtle censorship almost always serves the abuser rather than the abused need hardly be said. (Ha.)

"Assault on staff" reinforces public perception of prisoners in toto as violent, incorrigible reprobates, and casts prison guards in the cool shade of victimhood.

"Conspiracy to commit gang assault upon an unarmed man in handcuffs," however, does not play so well on the nightly news, as some DOCCS staff have now found out. It is no coincidence that many of the "old-school" guards retired soon after the cameras were switched on. The jig was up; the magic words lost their power of glamour.

Well, going forward, anyway.

Nevertheless, I am still here, still [ware]housed in my P. T. Barnum "Terrors of the Jungle" exhibit alongside the other lions, tigers, and bears; still observed at a safe distance "in a diorama representative of [my] natural environment" by tour groups of naive youngsters and importance-projecting business-primates in power attire; still wondering at the godlike foresight of the State, to recognize at once both the utter

worthlessness of my life post-arrest, and the necessity, in litigious New York, of putting a politically-useful face on the psychological horror of imprisonment.

I made an error last week, in composing this essay: I used a comma where a semicolon was called for. As an experiment, and an homage to the magical power of imprisonment to improve a man, I crumpled up the page and stuffed it in the grubby crack between my toilet and the wall. "Now, look here, you," I admonished. "You had better shape up!" I was out of correction tape, you see, and too cheap to buy any more. "A week of anti-cockroach patrol will fix you, see if it doesn't!" And I left it alone in the dark, there to contemplate its failings moral and grammatical.

A week has passed. I checked the paper knave this morning. Had the poor pathetic thing mended its wicked ways? Tenderly I dug it from its dusty crevice; with loving care I smoothed its wrinkles and inspected the offending spot. "Aha!" I exclaimed. There, above the comma, bloomed an asymmetrical blackness. "It worked! It really works!"

Hope blooming in my breast, I cast my mind forward in time. What wonders of good might be wrought in the next ten years, six months, and nine days? What manner of creature might emerge then from this chrysalis of steel?

I raised the reformed page before me and flicked on the light, for to bestow upon its winsome plane the kiss of benediction.

But in the flickering off-white fluorescence I saw the truth: it was only a spot of mold.