

Political Correctness

By Bill Hobby

During what was once referred to as the Christmas season, there was a sign across from my office at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs. It said: "Happy Winter Holiday of Your Choice." It was witty. It was cheerful. It was politically correct.

Those of us who have long since mastered the terms that accommodate both Christmas and Hanukkah must remember that there are those who celebrate the Winter Solstice.

The great debate over political correctness is interesting. It stirs strong emotions on both sides. My concern is not who is right and who is wrong. It's how to keep up.

It is not clear in today's lexicon whether one says Afro-American or person of color or Black. Is it Hispanic, Mexican-American or Latino? Or are all the above hopelessly passe?

Is Native American still OK?

Developmentally Disabled is preferable to mentally retarded, but proper usage requires one to say "people with developmental disabilities". Handicap may refer to golf, polo or horse racing but not to people.

People can be retired persons or senior citizens or elderly, but calling someone aged is bad form.

There was a bill in the Texas legislature last session that sought to end job discrimination against overweight people (Other-sized People? People with overweight?)

There are vast areas of linguistic fuzziness. Fortunately, there are courses which are not just available but mandatory in many government agencies.

I'm just not sure whether I need Diversity Training or Cultural Competence or Cultural Literacy. Perhaps Cultural Literacy is the pre-requisite for Cultural Competence.

One of these courses notes that the Golden Rule is no longer sufficient. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" is not adequately other-oriented. The Platinum rule requires that we do unto others as they would have us do. The problem is knowing what that is. It requires new powers of perception.

Nevertheless, there is much to be said for what author Robert Hughes calls America's "sugary taste for euphemism". Language wounds as surely as blows. Offensive words, racial slurs and ethnic epithets have no place in civilized conversation.

Good manners have always decreed attention to the feelings of others, regardless of race, religion or sexual persuasion.

But there is a need for some tolerance for those of us who may not have gotten the latest word.

Russell Baker notes in one of his columns that the goal of political correctness is high-minded--ridding the national mind of evil ways of thinking.

"It assumes," he said, "that the national mind can be purified by revising the vocabulary with which its thinking is expressed."

It may or may not. My complaint is that the vocabulary changes too fast. There is also the concern that the extremes have severely damaged the language. Most of us can live with waitstaffs and chairpersons but it's hard to find a suitable substitute for craftsmanlike and statesman.

Judging from current usage, females who act want to be called actors rather than the perfectly good feminine version of that word. Or do they?

Robert Hughes' book, "Culture of Complaint", aims a number of barbs at political correctness, along with Republican rhetoric, family values and whiners of all descriptions.

He also points out that "This has always been a heterogeneous country and its cohesion, whatever cohesion it has, can only be based on mutual respect. There never was a core America in which everyone looked the same, spoke the same language, worshipped the same gods and believed the same things.

"Even before the Europeans arrived, American Indians were constantly at one another's throats. America is a construction of mind, not of race or inherited class or ancestral territory."
Political correctness has excised some offensive and erroneous stereotypes from our history books. It has created an awareness that certain words are not permissible in polite society.

If political correctness builds respect for others, more power to it. Just grant me a little patience while I catch up.

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