

The Uses Of Language In Promoting Or Discrediting Initiatives For Justice And Equity (by Bill Woods for StreetVibes)

Language is the way humans communicate. The process of compiling words into sentences created the possibilities of a much more complex system of communicating with each other. The development of written languages extended these possibilities even further. It allowed for literature, scientific research, and very sophisticated ways of expressing our ideas and feelings.



The theme of this issue of StreetVibes is "Justice and Equity in Language," and there are thousands of examples of how justice and equity have been enhanced or diminished through the use of language. For instance, the use of written and spoken words to communicate the values and teachings of religion have often promoted equity and justice.

Two well-known sentences from the Christian Gospels illustrate this point. "Love thy neighbor as thyself." "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

A more recent example of the power of language to impact positive change is the preaching of the Rev. Martin Luther King in favor of the enactment of basic Civil Rights in the 1960s. The soaring words of his "I have a dream" speech in 1963 had long term impacts on millions of people who heard them in person or on television. To this day, his followers have carried on this oral tradition of using religion to promote Civil Rights and new reforms.



Even with all these positive achievements, language, both oral and written, has also greatly increased the potentials for evil and misunderstanding. In fact, the Civil Rights movement was a major effort to overcome years of written and oral justifications for segregation and the denial of rights to African-Americans in this country. Further, language was an important factor in spreading the hate driven movements of Mussolini and Hitler in pre-World War II Europe. The fiery oratory of Hitler was as effective for promoting evil as the Rev. King's words were for promoting justice.

Where are we today in terms of language and equity and justice? At the moment, misinformation and lies are in a battle with factual information for influencing the minds of the American people. From this writer's perspective, the promoters of lies and misinformation are usually in the anti-equity and anti-justice camp.

The election of Donald Trump in 2016 really spurred this era of "alternative facts." His rally speeches and Tweets that made non-European immigrants the scapegoats for everything wrong with America reminded some historians of Hitler's scapegoating of the Jews. He also

used language that provided a nod of approval to his white male base for their racism and often violent rhetoric. The prominence of social media and the tendency of like-minded people to isolate themselves on sites that create their own versions of reality only added to this crisis of misinformation.

Finally, democracy itself took a verbal assault that not only fostered "the big lie," but set the



stage for the January 6th insurrection that aimed to reverse the results of the 2020 Presidential election. Although the coup failed, repetitive pronouncements by Trump about "a fraudulent, stolen election" have created a situation where a majority of registered Republicans in this country still believe this lie. Certainly advocate

of equity, justice and the democratic process have had their hands full during this period of rampant misinformation and lies.

As we begin a new year, what can be done to diminish and counter the language currently promoting injustice and inequity? Some pundits pronounce that the losses absorbed by right wing extremists in the Midterm elections show that things are getting better. However, recent hateful rants and violent acts against Jews and the Gay community reveal that major problems still exist.

One necessary response is supporting fact-based journalism. With daily newspapers on the decline, we need to champion as many forms of responsible journalism as possible in order to counter the flood of misinformation and lies available through social media sites. Furthermore, a growing number of publications like StreetVibes, that are fact-based but also advocate for addressing inequities, also deserve our backing.

A final note should be aired concerning language and equity and justice. In this period when right wing extremists loudly express their untrue and hate filled views, we need a new generation of Martin Luther Kings to inspire people with their powerful words. Concerned citizens often need that kind of soaring rhetoric to give them hope as they work to combat homelessness or achieve more affordable housing.