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Words have much at stake

Language Matters

My attention was drawn recently to a suggestion that the word *stakeholder* must go. I have sympathy with the view that this word is overused and might cover too wide a range of roles associated with an organisation, but a striking claim linked to the suggestion was that it should be dropped because of some colonial connotations. These include links to the use by settlers of wooden stakes to mark land that they claimed as their own and even to the notion of burning someone at the stake.

The Oxford English Dictionary suggests that *stakeholder* in fact derives from having a financial interest in something. The earliest uses reported in the OED are from the 18th century and refer to people or organisations with whom money is deposited, including the holder of a bet. Where the financial or betting meaning of the word *stake* itself comes from is unclear. One claim is that it derives from a custom of placing on a post or stake the object that is being offered as a wager, but the OED notes that there is no evidence that such a custom ever existed.

The re-interpretation of *stakeholder* as indicating someone who has hammered stakes into the ground to claim land ownership is an example of folk etymology.

Etymology is the study of the histories of words and expressions, including how words change not just their meanings but also their forms.

Etymologists generally rely on recorded uses of words in books, newspapers and so on.

Occasionally, however, the users of the language (i.e., the “folk” rather than the experts) provide an explanation that reflects their own sometimes creative and often quite understandable interpretation of the word’s origin, usually involving an analogy with a word that sounds similar and has a meaning that seems to fit.

The word *burger* has an interesting etymological journey. The city of Hamburg in northern Germany gave birth to the Hamburg steak or Hamburger steak, which was subsequently taken abroad to America and elsewhere by migrating Germans and became known as the hamburger. It was a dish made of flattened balls of chopped beef (no ham in sight!) mixed with egg, chopped onions and seasoning. The presence of the word *ham* in *hamburger* resulted in a reinterpretation of the form of the word and the insertion of a new boundary, and the form *burger* was calved. Now of course it is combined with other food types, giving *beefburger*, *fishburger*, etc., and the word *burger* has a rather vague meaning, usually meaning a roll or sandwich that contains one of the specified foods.

Etymological processes have also led to changes in the shapes of many words “borrowed” from other languages. Another frequently cited example is *crayfish*, from Old French *crevisse* via Middle English *crevisse*. The crayfish is of course a crustacean and not a fish, but both the fact that it is a sea creature and the strong similarity of the second syllable *-visse* to the Southern Middle English form *vish* (for “fish”) resulted ultimately in the modern English *crayfish*.

Folk etymologies such as giving *stakeholder* colonial connotations reflect perhaps our human tendency to want to explain things in a way that suits us, which can lead to novel meanings. When in *Through the Looking Glass* Humpty Dumpty says, “when I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less”, Alice asks whether one “can make words mean so many different things”. In some cases it seems we can.



Road sign messages of hope displayed during the Covid-19 pandemic.

STUFF/MONIQUE FORD

We all need hope, but how do we cultivate it?



Donna Miles

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When my son, Oliver, finished high school, he was undecided on what to do next. He knew he wanted to go to university but found it difficult to pick a course that matched his interests.

He eventually found his way but the initial experience of not knowing what to do was unsettling for him.

Looking back, I think the source of his anxiety was the lack of hope and the uneasy feeling that the future might not be as good as the past. To him, the fun days of childhood and the certainty of school life were over and what lay ahead seemed harder and more uncertain. To hope, one has to believe the future will be better than the past.

When I was Oliver’s age, the prospect of going to university and starting an adult life felt super exciting because it meant freedom and independence.

In the UK, where I completed my higher education, university fees were paid by local education authorities and means-tested annual grants were available to cover living costs. This meant students were not overly burdened by financial worries. Today’s other major concerns did not exist either.

Climate change was not yet a crisis. House ownership did not seem out of reach. There was no global pandemic, no threat of nuclear war, no talk of terrorism or rise of fascism. For many in my generation, the future looked bright and hopeful. And this mattered to our sense of wellbeing.

Despite the importance of hope and its major impact on our lives, we don’t tend to think or talk about hope much. We might ask our family and friends if they are happy, sad, or coping – but hardly ever, do we ask if they feel hopeful about the future. We don’t often ask ourselves this question either.

But assessing the level of hope in our lives is important because researchers tell us that we can create hope if we lack it and that having hope is a psychological strength that can help us overcome adversity and past traumas.

Some people might think of hope as a bit of an airy-fairy concept. But hope is actually a well-researched area. Authors of the book *Hope Rising*

say: “Hope is not just an idea. Hope is not simply an emotion. It is far more than a feeling. It is not a wish or even an expectation. Hope is about goals, willpower, and pathways. A person with high hope has goals, the motivation to pursue them, and the determination to overcome obstacles and find pathways to achieve them.”

Think of hope as a simple formula: Hope = goals+ roadmap+ willpower. This makes it easier to remember its essential elements and is a good reminder that we can create hope by setting goals for ourselves and directing our energy to achieve them.

Hope is also measurable. You can assess your hope level by using the Adult Hope Scale (AHS) which contains 12 simple questions that score your confidence in two essential aspects of hope: your ability to find pathways to your goals, and also your motivation to achieve them.

Despite hope being critical to our sense of wellbeing, much of it seems entirely absent from our news. Most news organisations seem to focus on problems without reporting on possible solutions. The assumption is that negativity sells but in fact many people are being put off by constant bad news and some are even switching off from listening to or reading the news altogether. The solution is not feel-good stories about cats or small acts of kindness. These stories lack the problem-solving element that inspires hope.

A hopeful story would point out how a reported problem has or being addressed elsewhere – or at least how the said problem can be improved in some way.

For instance, a report on the rise of mental health could mention the useful programme offered by Te Pou which offers Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) where participants learn how to provide initial support to friends, family or colleagues who may be experiencing mental health challenges. MHFA can be offered at high schools so teens can learn how to step up for one another in moments of mental health crisis.

It is not just our media that needs to be aware of creating hope.

All public and private organisations can think about how best to cultivate hope, not only among individuals but across their entire operations, in schools, in prisons, in welfare programmes and elsewhere. Researchers at the Hope Research Centre at the University of Oklahoma in the United States have found that this type of training would reduce burnout and improve wellbeing.

So don’t let bad news in the media or in your personal life deprive you of a sense of hope. We all have a capacity to create hope and the sooner we learn how to use it, the better it is for us and our whānau.

“To hope, one has to believe the future will be better than the past.”