

## **PDF - Lancaster - Sunday, February 6, 2022 - Who Decides the Words We Use - Wil Darcangelo**

Who decides if a word is racist or not? How do we know when discrimination is happening? When is it possible to know if gender plays a role in how professional decisions are made? These are among the questions of our Great Human Reckoning.

Society has increasingly made decisions about these things every day. Lines get drawn in the sand. Sometimes the lines move as we discover greater details about what should lie on which side. We can look at the history of the n-word, for example, and the birth of the idea that it represented hatred. A hatred we slowly decided was no longer appropriate.

That gradual decision drew a line in the sand. A line that our society would increasingly turn to over the years and decades which followed, and continues to this day. A line beyond which were placed other non-loving, and non-inclusive words, and terminologies, and phrases, and eventually even product logos depicting the oppressed, and team mascots that unfairly portrayed whole races of people. That is the line in the sand that was drawn by our decision to no longer use the n-word in police society.

A rule begins to develop. A rule whose infant language may or may not end up representing its intent in the long term. Or, it may very well be created with such perfection that it takes centuries to live up to its ideals. Like our US Constitution.

Our Constitution is ultimately at the heart of line placement when it comes to the words we use, adapt, or relegate to the dustbin. At least when it comes to equality for women, people of color, children, the disabled. Whether intended for all human beings or not at the time of the Constitution's composition, the declaration that 'all men are created equal,' ultimately means 'all' even if not consciously thought of at the time. 'All' means women and people of color, too. Thomas Jefferson literally owned other human beings as property at the time he wrote these words. Does that make them less true?

Putting in print lofty ideas is only a declaration of intent, it is not the act of enforcing it. The act of protecting the words "all men are created equal" and attempting to live up to them is what gives them weight. Believing in words of equality is what gives them power.

There are natural consequences to the exerting of all forms of power, both good and evil. Exerting good power is what draws lines in the sand about what is right and what isn't. Exerting negative power, in the end, typically manages to accomplish much the same thing. Good often occurs from learning what not to say, what not to do.

There are a lot of words that we now consider to be socially off-limits. Many people have given much thought to the words we use. Eventually giving rise to the need for a term to describe that methodology: politically correct speech.

Of course, this methodology is upsetting to many people. Including kind, loving people who mean no harm in the words they choose. Words and terms they grew up with, and often innocently meant, were found to be on the wrong side of the line by some. Then more. Then lots.

Once we decided upon a metric for evaluation of all the words we use, a trend emerged. Now suspect became words that were meant to describe various races of people, and various types of people, including the handicapped, and the intellectually disabled. The elderly and those with autism.

Word by word, we have evaluated the merits of each based upon whether or not they diminish our humanity through their use. That is a real thing, whether people choose to acknowledge it or not. It may not be a conscious act by many, but otherwise loving people use harmful words inadvertently every day. Check yours.

Try to be at ease about this process of sifting and sorting through our language. We learn more every day about the power of our words. We can't help it. We are designed to improve, to seek the higher thought, to find the more loving way. And as we do, we discover more about ourselves, and our character as people.

We have not been dissuaded from our progress. It continues on course. There are actions and beliefs we now find obsolete which only a few decades ago were commonplace. Just think of ashtrays on grocery carts and tell me if you don't know what I'm talking about. Just think about family picnics to a hanging. The last public execution was only 85 years ago. Thousands of men, women, and children attended it.

This is good but difficult work. It is sacred. It is the result of centuries, even millennia, of attempts to create a more equitable world. We are closer now than we have ever been. Keep it up.