

What's in a Word?

by Theodore Dalrymple

What's in a word, and how much can it express? Sometimes quite a lot, if it's just the right one.

The other day I had an example of how much a single well-chosen word can convey. I was at a conference to give a talk; it was held in a hotel in the country, not an old inn or country house but a modern establishment, a kind of comfortable barracks with standardised bedrooms, standardised corridors, standardised mechanical ventilation, standardised everything, built to host conferences, of which several were taking place at the same time. The temperature was as steady as sunset and dawn on the equator; it was built on two storeys and even the ground floor windows would open only two inches, whether to prevent intrusion, suicide attempts, or escape without paying I am uncertain.

There being no foreigners employed, the service wasn't very friendly and the food was mediocre at best, but it was comfortable enough in a somewhat dispiriting way. One might have been in a Scandinavian prison.

The hotel was very large. Its corridors seemed to go on for ever, and from time to time they crossed one another. They were identical, no distinguishing feature having been allowed to disturb their uniformity. Apart from the fire exits (health and safety!) directions to other parts of the hotel were infrequent and unclear. To change the metaphor from the Scandinavian penitentiary, it was like being in a hotel managed by Kafka.

The morning after my arrival I was trying, without much success, to find main entrance and to go from thence to the room in which the conference I had come to address was being held. I came to a cross-road of two identical corridors and

looked around me, trying to find some clue as to which direction to take. I must have looked bemused, for a guest was just about to enter his room, saw I was uncertain which way to go, and said, 'Quite.'

What admirable concision! How much that one, beautifully-chosen word expressed! He had obviously been under the same difficulties as I. He did not have to say what a badly designed or soulless place he found this hotel because 'Quite!' said it all. I thought then that concision – so rarely met with – is next to godliness.

The strange thing was, though, that I enjoyed the soullessness; it came almost as some kind of a relief. How pleasant it is, at least for a time, to be anonymous, to be merely the number of one's room.

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