

Euphemisms – or – A Rose by Any Other Name?

Leaving aside the epistemological issue of words as pointers to reality, the use of euphemisms is designed to benefit the user in three ways. First, to cover up or lie about the underlying reality. Second, to make the user feel better about himself. Third, to make other people feel better about him. Or, as the OED puts it a euphemism is a word “that is less precise or accurate.” Put simply, a sort of lie.

Euphemisms can be grotesque, such as the Nazi’s referring to their rounding up Jews and killing them as “resettlement.” Resettlement certainly covers up the reality and sounds better. Or euphemisms can be more innocuous, such as the homosexual lobby preferring to be called “gay” Gay actually means “light-hearted, carefree” which certainly conceals the reality of what they do. Gangs, pressure groups, special pleaders, racial and religious lobbies, businesses all seeking public approval often create euphemisms to hide the reality of what they are doing and boost their status. In essence, to make them feel better about themselves and plead for public opinion to look more favorably on them.

So what has all this to do with the funeral and cemetery business? Well, fortunately, or, unfortunately depending on your point of view, the death industry is notorious for dreaming up euphemisms that are less harsh, less accurate, to describe, help conceal and boost the prestige of what they do. In reality, when someone dies an undertaker picks up the corpse or body, sometimes cleans it up a bit, puts it in a box and carts it out to the graveyard. But the actual reality doesn’t sound so good – a bit harsh.

So... the undertaker (in use for centuries) morphed into mortician (first used about 1895). A big push by 200 of the leading American undertakers in 1917 led to general adoption of the term mortician. Has a nice ring, sort of like “physician.” And copied by all sorts of people – like “beauticians”, “cosmeticians” and so forth. But “mort” (from the Latin morticinus meaning dead) still has connotations of death, so in recent decades the term “funeral director” has come into more general use (a director is “higher up” and worth more money than a simple undertaker). Other terms are sometimes used: “mortuary consultant” (a counselor is more dignified – like a lawyer perhaps?). How about a “funeral engineer.” All designed to raise the status (and income) of the practitioner. And the euphemism “grief counselor” (again with the lawyer association as “counselors”) has spread like wildfire in recent decades. Actually, the term “grief counselor” brings to mind an overpriced lawyer (shyster?) trying to make his customer (oops, sorry, his “client”) feel better about his losing their case or their bill, or both.

And the dead box has morphed from the “coffin” (in use since about 1525) to a “casket” - the casket implying some sort of cask or container, like an expensive jewelry box perhaps? The more flowery term “slumber cot” hasn’t stuck too well, although the more upscale “funeral establishments” may still be trying. Picking up the corpse has changed to “recovering the deceased loved one” or some such. Embalmers seeking to upgrade their status have been known to call themselves “sanitarians” - but that hasn’t stuck too well. The euphemism “case” (lawyers have “cases”!) though has generally replaced the use of more accurate and realistic “body.” The “funeral counselor” has “cases” to work on.

The high point of this nonsense was probably the mid 1960s when, in the pricier and more upscale “establishments”, the dead body was “recovered” (picked up) and the family was offered services such as “inurnment”, “entombment”, “empirement”, “disemination” or “eternalization”. Understandably, the reader might have a hard time figuring out what all of these actually mean! The “waiting ones” (family) were offered the opportunity to visit the “blessed loved ones who had passed over” (the dead person) and engage in their “leave taking” (viewing the corpse) in the “slumber room” (room to view the

corpse). Naturally they could select the “slumber room ensemble” (clothing) and special shoes “designed to comfort the curled feet in rigor.” And so forth.

For anyone interested in the subject of euphemisms in the death business we highly recommend the movie *The Loved One* (1964) starring Jonathan Winters (in two roles) and many well known character actors. It is filled with euphemisms, inside jokes and such. It was filmed at Forest Lawn in Los Angeles one of the first transformative burial grounds. The movie is, of course, a satire but nonetheless realistic. Having personally spent an entire day touring it in the 1970s I can assure the reader it was a realistic portrayal of what you will see in the movie – whether it has deteriorated since then I cannot say. One of the funniest lines is by Jonathan Winters (playing “the Blessed Reverend” as chairman of the board) when, realizing they are running out of space, leans back in his chair at a board meeting and says “I’ve got to figure a way to get those stiffies off my property.” No euphemisms there! He decides to turn the cemetery into a retirement home for the elderly, since the “turn-over” is more brisk, and comes up with a scheme to remove the bodies by offering “resurrection now.”

Others in the trade (again with the euphemism “trade” in lieu of the more realistic and descriptive “death business”) have jumped on the bandwagon. “Grave yards” and the even older “church yards” have morphed into “cemeteries”, and, in the early 20th century, among the more creative practitioners and owners, those morphed into “memorial parks” and other pleasant sounding names for what is, in reality, a place to store dead bodies. And, of course, the “park” is “zoned” into various areas designed to appeal to different types of people with “features” such as statues and such. Even the lowly tombstone maker now sells “memorialization,” in essence, one or more pieces of rock stuck on top of a dead person’s grave with the name on it to mark where the corpse is being stored.

In any event, euphemisms have their uses for anyone, or any special pleaders and others seeking to upgrade their status, to think better of themselves, get others to think better of them, and, to conceal, or at least soft pedal, what is reality.