

Not “Just Semantics” By Mel Schwartz

How little attention we pay to the words we use. Yet, they are the most valuable and dearest means of our communication. Every thought and every feeling that we have are both internalized by words and at the same time formed by them. The way that we believe the universe to work; how we feel about others, our beliefs, loves and angers are all formulated and shaped by words. But, what does the word really mean? So often, we confuse the word with actually being the thing itself. It merely represents the thought or the feeling. Words often make very absolute statements about the truth of things, which upon some analysis prove to be untrue. In our very hurried world, sentences become too abbreviated and properly thought out statements and genuine expressions become the exception. We tend to abbreviate our thoughts and most of our sentences are punctuated with the word *is*.

When we use the word *is*, we tend to misrepresent things and make them absolute and fixed. For example, “Joe *is* lazy.” Perhaps Joe appears lazy when he’s uninspired or bored. Or Joe overeats, which makes him fatigued and hence he seems lazy. It would be better to say, “Joe seems lazy today.” As well, the use of the word *is* fixes things in time. Joe *is* lazy doesn’t sound relative or conditional. Could it be that Joe appears lazy now but will be highly motivated at a different point in life? When we use *is* in a negative self-referential way it is absolutely destructive to our self-esteem. This of course refers to all components of the *to be* verb (be, been, were, was, am, are, is) Let’s look at the statements, “I *am* a failure,” or “I am stupid.” It would be far healthier to say, “I feel like a failure,” or “I haven’t learned how to succeed yet,” or “I feel stupid when I don’t know the answer” so that we can permit ourselves to move out of these feelings.

When we use the word *is* it cements an identification that creates a self-limiting constraint. The use of the word *is* originates from Aristotelian philosophy, which proposed that something either *is* or *is* not. This duality appears to be artificial and not representative of the way the universe actually works. *Is* precludes change.

The word *is* deludes us into believing a false reality. So, in fact, our words block us from seeing life in a more representative way. Our reliance upon the word *is* becomes instrumental in our resistance of change. It actually roots us in a determination to keep things status, which they never are. Heraclitus, the Greek philosopher believed in inexorable change. Change appears to be a universal constant. Our use of the word *is* portrays an unreasonable perspective. Nothing simply *is*. I was recently discussing this concept over dinner and a nine year old girl at the table asked, “If there is no use of the word *is*, doesn’t that mean there are no facts?” An excellent question, indeed! This may exactly be the point. Facts simply portray our representations of what we see. Over time, the facts seem to keep changing. Yesterday’s truths become tomorrow’s folly. Try to contemplate a truth with the word *is* in it and then search for some way to make it more relative. With Einstein’s relativity, we’ve come to see that even time is relative. But our words trick us into forgetting that insight. We are taught about absolute truths, which upon reflection are indeed quite relative.

When we eliminate *is* we remove the absoluteness that triggers so much conflict. We take ownership of our feelings, as well. For example, “Bill *is* a selfish husband,” sounds vastly

different than, “Bill appears to be a selfish husband to me.” When we eliminate *is*, we move out of the passive voice and take authorship of the statement and at the same time the words become subjective. When they do so, there is much less room for contention. The universe reveals itself not to be objective, but participatory. In other words, we participate in making the truth or the reality of what we see. When we reflect that in our communication we gain clarity. When we do so, we are creating a more reflective world and taking more responsibility for our words as representations of our thoughts and beliefs, as opposed to making authoritative statements about *the truth*. The political, environmental, religious and personal conflicts so prevalent in the world typically tend to be fought on the battleground of what *is* or *is* not true. Our words shape our thoughts and our world. We need to choose them with care.

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