

Insincerely Yours

Tired of being thanked “for your patience” and told to “have a nice day”? Perhaps it’s time for a refresher on speaking from the heart. By John Sedgwick

When my Internet service went down the other day, I knew the drill. Call customer service; be put on endless hold while a recorded voice repeatedly apologizes “for any inconvenience”; grind teeth. That’s the cost of living in the modern world, I figured. For me, the profound distress came later, when a human being finally did come on the line—and offered generic apologies in the same robotic tones of automated sorrow that I’d gotten from the machine.

It was the impersonality of the exchange that was so galling. The woman on the phone wasn’t apologizing to *me*. She was merely apologizing. Indeed, she kept shifting to the first person plural, that grand, anonymous “we,” instead of the more authentic “I.” And her words were pure cardboard. She didn’t say anything human like “I know that can be a pain” or “It happened again? I’m so sorry!” No, she stayed relentlessly on message, like some mindless pol in front of a TelePrompTer.

It’s not just my Internet service that specializes in canned speech. Key words and phrases have grown invisible quote marks around them that render them inoperative. People aren’t sorry; they are “sorry;” which is to say they are not sorry at all.

“Have a nice day” now means something closer to “Go jump in a lake.” “Thank you for your patience” is particularly empty, since, at the point we hear it, our patience is already gone.

Then again, many of these phrases are meaningless to start with. Take that “any inconvenience.” The “any” is so all-inclusive, the “inconvenience” so trivializing, that the saying does nothing except dismiss my individual, unique suffering.

This phenomenon must be contagious, because so many of our everyday utterances have all the flavor, bite and food content of tofu. We don’t have surgery; we undergo a “procedure.” No jams for us; we experience a “situation.” We don’t have complaints, but “issues.” Sins are out; wicked behavior is merely “inappropriate.” Only postal workers are ever ticked off, venomous, ready to kill; everyone else has “concerns.” Mild concerns, really, as there is no other type.

Emotionally, we seem to live in a wee world, where experiences come in one size only—small. It’s like on airplanes: when pilots casually note “a little bumpiness,” it really means that your 747 is being slammed by hurricane-force winds that have dropped it 1,000 feet. We have all endured the “slight delay” that leaves us baking on the tarmac for hours or been treated to the “bit of a snack,” which is actually just that.

But this miniaturization comes in a more insidious form too, one in which tiny emotions are wildly exaggerated to look like big ones. It’s not just the movie critics burbling about how they “love!” some big-budget spectacular flopperoo. They find it “amazing,” “incredible” or (if they’re Brits) “absolutely brilliant.” Everybody “loves!” everything nowadays. Which is to say they experienced mild relief that the subject in question was not quite as dull as they’d feared. Unless, of course, they “hated!” it, in which case, sadly, it was.

The plain truth, honestly expressed, is powerful stuff, and I’m not suggesting we can take too much of it. Terminal cancer, religion, an accurate description of what one person genuinely feels for another—all of these topics require

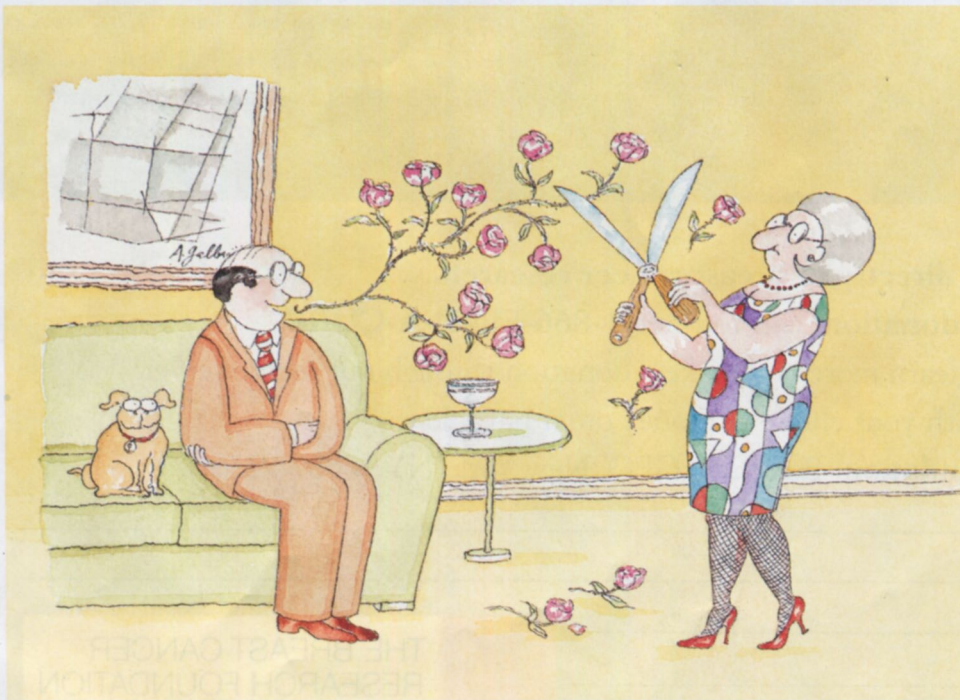


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delicate handling, no question. There is nothing worse in a social situation than calling a spade a spade. Or, I might add, more memorable. One time when Winston Churchill had had a few too many, an elderly constituent upbraided him: "Why, Mr. Prime Minister, you're drunk!" "Yes, madam," came the unforgettable retort, "and you are ugly. But I will be sober in the morning." To politicians nowadays, no one is ugly, least of all a voter. That same unctuous caution has caught all of us in its goo. It's not just political correctness either. Technobabble, illiteracy, bureaucratise and the fear of lawsuits have all done their bit to take the zing out of public discourse.

Ironically, while language in the real world is being emptied, the dramatic arts, at their best, offer us glowing examples of concise, pungent and, at times, heart-wrenching speech.

There is no question of Rick Blaine's state of mind in *Casablanca* when Humphrey Bogart utters the desperate line, "Of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world, she walks into mine." Who doesn't feel for Marlon Brando's character in *On the Waterfront* when he laments that he "could've been a contender . . . instead of a bum, which is what I am." And who among us would doubt Jack Nicholson's sincerity when, playing a crabby obsessive-compulsive writer in *As Good As It Gets*, he tells Helen Hunt, "You make me want to be a better man." Such lines may be artful, but they nonetheless convey powerful emotion directly and urgently. They connect.

But the best lines, of course, aren't lines at all. They come from the heart and go to the heart. This means skipping the bureaucratic clichés and technospeak, addressing yourself directly to your audience, telling the truth and doing your best to sound sincere. That wouldn't have brought my Internet service back, but it would have provided a connection that would have, right then, been more important—the human one between her and me. ❖

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