

Lazy language distorts reality

By Ruth Ostrow

I'M confused about the way we are using the word "tragedy". If the recent terrorist bombing in London, with loss of eyes, limbs and children, is a tragedy, then can we use the same word in relation to one man in his fifties dying of cancer?

A life cut short is of great personal sorrow to those close – speaking as one who lost her Dad young and still grieves it. But a tragedy? Not by nature's standards. The law of averages has animals of all species dying all the time. Some turtles make it to shore, the rest get eaten by fish, by disease, by time. Some animals bash into things they can't see and break their necks.

If a mother tragically loses her four children in a house fire, then how can newspaper headlines scream "It's a tragedy" in relation to a footy team losing? And what about that overused word devastated? People are no longer simply upset. They are devastated by their daily dramas, no matter how trivial.

Are we simply linguistically barren? Someone said to me that the ancient Greeks probably had as many words to explain catastrophes and calamities of a global and human scale that involve suffering as the Eskimos have words for ice.

It's the same with the word "love". We don't have real distinctions. In Yiddish there is the love that comes when partners grow used to each other over time: tzigavoin. No English substitute exists. There is eros and agape in Greek. What about a word for the love that is equal to the hate you feel for a beloved?

And to take on a controversial topic: if a person who has sex with a two-year-old child is called a paedophile, can that word accurately be used to describe someone who has sex with a 14- or 15-year-old teenager? Not to diminish the damage done to all children of any age who are preyed upon, the psychology of the two offenders is different, the crimes are different in nature, and the term should not be a lazy homage to political correctness because no-one is brave enough to broach this loaded subject or search for better words. Why not infantophile, paedophile and puberophile for openers?

At the recent Byron Bay Writers' Festival, Julian Burnside, barrister and author of *Wordwatching*, said that in the current political climate, words used incorrectly can misrepresent reality in a way that is dangerous.

Certainly by being lazy we render some subjects less serious than they deserve to be, and others more.

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