

Concerning Political Correctness -- A Rose by Any Other Name
by Richard Bloodworth

I once worked in a summer camp for disabled children and we were told in a handout to try not to use the term "handicap" because the origin of the term derived from disabled beggars who would hold a cap in their hand to collect money from passersby. Now with "handicapped parking" signs everywhere (as they were at the time the camp was held) that meaning has dissolved and the word has been ensconced into daily use. That is just an illustration of how meanings and connotations of words can change over time.

Nowhere -- except perhaps in prison or between rival street gangs -- would someone hear "I heard your ol' lady kicked the bucket"; indeed, probably not even "I heard your mother died" or "I'm sorry, I heard your mother died". Possibly someone might hear "I'm sorry to hear that your mother passed away". But most likely someone would hear something like "I'm sorry to hear about your mother". The statement is phrased that way because the speaker is being sensitive to the listener's feelings at a difficult and mournful time in the listener's life. So very often euphemisms are used in order to soften the blow of tragic news or to indicate sympathy or empathy.

I think most of what is called political correctness is in fact courtesy by another name. It is mostly a verbal movement involving definitions of words and the attempt to use words that are not offensive to most people. There are emotionally charged words that are meant to stir up and inflame negative or sensual emotions such as the notorious "four letter words" and derogatory and defiling words that classify groups or types of people in a demeaning and insulting way and these are words that most people try to avoid using.

And there are words and terms to describe people and occupations. How much more difficult is it to say "sanitation worker" rather than "trash collector" if that term gives that individual more of a sense of dignity about himself? After all, without them, we would be living in an unsanitary world amidst piles of garbage.

So I think "political correctness" falls into the category of politeness or courtesy. Living in or visiting Japan can be a pleasure to most people because there courtesy is the rule rather than the exception. The United States, for all of its greatness, still has many areas it could improve in and one of them is in the area of courtesy. Often people, under the guise of freedom of speech, treat each other rudely without any attempts at courtesy when a rational, courteous approach could have served just as well.

Some people may say that political correctness or incorrectness provides material for comedians but, in reality, no one really wants to be the brunt of a joke and comedy is usually about behavior that people should not engage in or about people mistreating one another or making mistakes in general. For example, no employee would advance very far within an organization who expressed disagreement by throwing a pie in his supervisor's or boss' face, however, that is permissible within a comedic situation.

I think the concept of political correctness is a way for fellow members of society to try to give dignity to the lives of all people and to respect and to be sensitive to the feelings and beliefs of others. Although it can be overly euphemistic at times, I think "political correctness" is an attempt by society to terminologically and culturally incorporate the principles of the Golden Rule.