

The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows by John Koenig

Today I want to talk about the meaning of words, how we define them and how they, almost as revenge, define us.

The English language is a magnificent sponge. I love the English language. I'm glad that I speak it. But for all that, it has a lot of holes. In Greek, there's a word, "lachesism" which is the hunger for disaster. You know, when you see a thunderstorm on the horizon and you just find yourself rooting for the storm. In Mandarin, they have a word "yù yī" -- I'm not pronouncing that correctly -- which means the longing to feel intensely again the way you did when you were a kid. In Polish, they have a word "jouska" which is the kind of hypothetical conversation that you compulsively play out in your head. And finally, in German, of course in German, they have a word called "zielschmerz" which is the dread of getting what you want.

(Laughter)

Finally fulfilling a lifelong dream. I'm German myself, so I know exactly what that feels like.

Now, I'm not sure if I would use any of these words as I go about my day, but I'm really glad they exist. But the only reason they exist is because I made them up.

I am the author of "The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows," which I've been writing for the last seven years. And the whole mission of the project is to find holes in the language of emotion and try to fill them so that we have a way of talking about all those human peccadilloes and quirks of the human condition that we all feel but may not think to talk about because we don't have the words to do it.

And about halfway through this project, I defined "sonder," the idea that we all think of ourselves as the main character and everyone else is just extras. But in reality, we're all the main character, and you yourself are an extra in someone else's story. And so as soon as I published that, I got a lot of response from people saying, "Thank you for giving voice to something I had felt all my life but there was no word for that." So it made them feel less alone. That's the power of words, to make us feel less alone.

And it was not long after that that I started to notice sonder being used earnestly in conversations online, and not long after I actually noticed it, I caught it next to me in an actual conversation in person. There is no stranger feeling than making up a word and then seeing it take on a mind of its own. I don't have a word for that yet, but I will.

(Laughter)

I'm working on it.

I started to think about what makes words real, because a lot of people ask me, the most common thing I got from people is, "Well, are these words made up? I don't really understand." And I didn't really know what to tell them because once sonder started to take off, who am I to say what words are real and what aren't. And so I sort of felt like Steve Jobs, who described his epiphany as when he realized that most of us, as we go through the day, we just try to avoid bouncing against the walls too much and just sort of get on with things. But once you realize that people -- that this world was built by people no smarter than you, then you can reach out and touch those walls and even put your hand through them and realize that you have the power to change it.

And when people ask me, "Are these words real?" I had a variety of answers that I tried out. Some of them made sense. Some of them didn't. But one of them I tried out was, "Well, a word is real if you want it to be real." The way that this path is real because people wanted it to be there.

(Laughter)

It happens on college campuses all the time. It's called a "desire path."

(Laughter)

But then I decided, what people are really asking when they're asking if a word is real, they're really asking, "Well, how many brains will this give me access to?" Because I think that's a lot of how we look at language. A word is essentially a key that gets us into certain people's heads. And if it gets us into one brain, it's not really worth it, not really worth knowing. Two brains, eh, it depends on who it is. A million brains, OK, now we're talking. And so a real word is one that gets you access to as many brains as you can. That's what makes it worth knowing.

Incidentally, the realest word of all by this measure is this.

[O.K.]

That's it. The realest word we have. That is the closest thing we have to a master key. That's the most commonly understood word in the world, no matter where you are. The problem with that is, no one seems to know what those two letters stand for.

(Laughter)

Which is kind of weird, right? I mean, it could be a misspelling of "all correct," I guess, or "old kinderhook." No one really seems to know, but the fact that it doesn't matter says something about how we add meaning to words. The meaning is not in the words themselves. We're the ones that pour ourselves into it.

And I think, when we're all searching for meaning in our lives, and searching for the meaning of life, I think words have something to do with that. And I think if you're looking for the meaning of something, the dictionary is a decent place to start. It brings a sense of order to a very chaotic universe. Our view of things is so limited that we have to

come up with patterns and shorthands and try to figure out a way to interpret it and be able to get on with our day. We need words to contain us, to define ourselves.

I think a lot of us feel boxed in by how we use these words. We forget that words are made up. It's not just my words. All words are made up, but not all of them mean something. We're all just sort of trapped in our own lexicons that don't necessarily correlate with people who aren't already like us, and so I think I feel us drifting apart a little more every year, the more seriously we take words.

Because remember, words are not real. They don't have meaning. We do.

And I'd like to leave you with a reading from one of my favorite philosophers, Bill Watterson, who created "Calvin and Hobbes." He said, "Creating a life that reflects your values and satisfies your soul is a rare achievement. To invent your own life's meaning is not easy, but it is still allowed, and I think you'll be happier for the trouble."