



April 12, 2013

Words Matter: Another Look at the Question of Language

By

**Eddie Ellis
President**

Center for NuLeadership on Urban Solutions

Words matter. They shape perceptions and understanding, both of past and present events and of future possibilities and, therefore, future events. Semantic and public acceptance of terms like “formerly incarcerated” or “returning citizens” (rather than ex-felon, ex-offender or ex-inmate) are of fundamental importance to the process of public opinion formulation, positive media images, effective social service delivery and, most importantly, progressive policy change. The creation of a NuJustice Paradigm, a paradigm rooted in the concept of human justice¹ -- which incorporates the tenets of social, economic, environmental and criminal justice -- requires a redefinition of the language we use. Language defines the way that we think and articulate our ideas. If the language that we use is framed in negative terms, then the thoughts, ideas and actions we discuss and move forward will be done from this frame of reference. If the language is dehumanizing then, by default, our thoughts and actions will reflect this also.

Eric (Easy) Waters, director of programs at the Osborne Association has written, “In our reentry work . . . we are very mindful of the oftentimes

¹ The concept of Human Justice was developed by the Center for NuLeadership on Urban Solutions to transcend the existing, traditional, criminal and social justice paradigms. It offers an instructive vision for what “justice” looks like in the context of the needs, aspirations and well-being of ordinary people. We define Human Justice as the merger between Human Rights and Human Development. The merger seeks to anchor the pursuit of justice within the fundamental principles of Human Rights –as articulated in the 1948 United Nation’s Declaration of Human Rights, especially articles 25 and 26 -- while ensuring that the course of justice is informed by the practice of human development.

dehumanizing language of the criminal justice system, that is, defining people by the crime they were convicted (murderer, robber, drug dealer, burglar) or their "status" in the criminal justice system (parolee, probationer, prisoner, defendant), and have made a concerted effort to eliminate this law enforcement language from our vocabulary. . . we talk about people, people convicted of crimes, people involved in the criminal justice system, people in prison, people on parole, etc. If we begin our reentry work with the above in mind, honoring people's humanity, then the people we work with will respond as the humans they are and we can begin to help people transform their lives, their communities, and we can all help in transforming the criminal justice system."

Margaret Love, former Pardons Attorney for the U.S. Department of Justice, puts it another way: "Felon is an ugly label that confirms the debased status that accompanies conviction. It identifies a person as belonging to a class outside many protections of the law, someone who can be freely discriminated against, someone who exists at the margins of society. In short, a "felon" is a legal outlaw and social outcast. But the word "felon" does more work than that. It arouses fear and loathing in most of us. I confess that it arouses those visceral feelings in me. I do not want to live or work around felons. I do not want to socialize with them. The word "felon" conjures up images of large, scary people (men, of course) whose goal in life is to steal my things and hurt me, the staple weekend fare on MSNBC. Affixing an "ex-" changes nothing. Felons deserve a wide berth and whatever opprobrium they get."

Activists from Critical Resistance, in their workshops on language have emphasized, "words alone can't save us. But our language does shape what we can imagine, and by using new words and old words differently, we can imagine new things." At the Center for NuLeadership on Urban Solutions, we use a teaching concept we refer to as "***magonal education***" which is specially designed to stimulate the ***imagination*** of our participants and to inspire that ***imagination*** to reach beyond its current confines to move towards ever new ***images*** of themselves and the possibilities for a fuller and richer life. It is based in part upon concepts developed originally by the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire while he was a consultant at Harvard University's School of Education.

Critical Resistance advocates have noted, “A major reason the prison industrial complex grows is that we are told there isn’t another option. We need to use language creatively to make healthy systems possible as we develop strong, specific challenges to the system.” The way people talk about policing, prisons, safety, and crime shapes what we think these things are, and forms the ways we imagine change can or should happen. Words are not neutral, and it’s important that we break down and reshape their meanings in our own materials, writings and conversations. We can use language to shift debates, make people see things differently, and challenge our own assumptions and fears.

All social justice and human rights advocates and criminal justice reform activists, academicians and others, must begin to revise their language – rethink what in effect has actually been law enforcement language that government agencies, individuals and organizations have adopted -- when writing and speaking about our population.

The proper, progressive and visionary way to refer to the 25 million people in the United States who have criminal convictions and/or have spent time in prisons must now be as “returning citizens” or “formerly incarcerated people,” not ex-offenders, ex-felons, ex- cons or ex-anything. We are not “ex-,” we are human beings. The derogatory and dehumanizing terms, formerly used so frequently, are no longer acceptable and, in fact, impede our process and progress towards human justice. If organizations and individuals of good will can be convinced or compelled into creating and using a new terminology, the long term impact on public perception and understanding of people returning to the community after spending time in prison, and those with criminal convictions, will be profound and constructive.

We can use language and ideas to transform how people think about public health and public safety. We can challenge the ways people are told to imagine what makes their communities safe and we can create public dialogue and materials that makes clear a vision of community safety that does not primarily rely on controlling, caging, or removing people as a response to socio-economic conditions, especially in under-served urban communities. We need to be able to determine and create safety for ourselves, without leaving anyone behind. In creating a new public conversation and the materials to facilitate it, we need to recognize how we

can best use language to make our ideas clear and common sense, without falling into the trap of “tough on crime” rhetoric that compromises the long-term vision of deconstructing a system we all agree is flawed beyond repair. The point here is not just to change the words we use, but to examine how changing our words changes what we can see. Changing the language will help point out what assumptions we might decide to hold onto and which ones to let go. We can agree, for example, that there is a fundamental difference between stealing a stereo or writing a fraudulent check and physically hurting another person, but saying “non-violent” and “violent” is only one semantic system for demonstrating that difference, one set up by the state through its laws. We validate that state action every time we use this distinction. We must create new terms and a new language that more properly expresses both our understanding of the present reality and our vision to challenge and change that reality for the future.

“Social liberals and fiscal conservatives alike pay lip service to the supposed American ideal of second chances,” Margaret Love has noted, “but our language, like our law, points in the opposite direction. We have schooled ourselves to avoid other stigmatizing labels that in the past were used to distance mainstream society from ethnic and racial minorities, and those groups from each other, because we understood that labels function to distract and excuse us from the hard work of building community. The word “felon” (and for that matter other less ugly but still degrading labels like “offender,” with or without the feckless prefix “ex-”) is no less dysfunctional. We can do better.”

Eddie Ellis,

January, 2013

Editor’s note: This is the first of a periodic series of “Essays for Change,” sponsored by the Center for NuLeadership on Urban Solutions. They are designed to stimulate thought and action towards challenging and changing policy, programs, procedures and practices within the criminal and juvenile punishment system.