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"BLACK" - CAN YOU DIG IT?

by

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I.

Whether you work with computers, personnel, education or any other field, it is important to be able to communicate with other human beings. Are you? Well, maybe you are. But are you as adept at communicating with a particular group of human beings - namely Black Americans? Let's see if you are.

In 1619 a group of people were stolen from the continent Africa and brought here to become slaves. Those people were black in color. Since that time, laws, custom and tradition have produced an experience of oppression in this country.

In 1970, you find yourselves having daily contact with some of the 20 - 30 million descendents of those Africans. On the job you most likely find yourself communicating with Black people as well as with white people. Now the words we use to communicate with people are the same whether we are talking to Black people or white people. The words we use can be found in the dictionary which gives the definitions of the words taken from the usage by the people.

II. BODY

The message I want to bring to you today is to make you aware of one word in the English language which carries negative connotations and may very well block communication between you and the Black person with whom you may be trying to communicate.

The word I refer to is the word black, and phrases which include the word black.

Let's begin with the word black itself. Using Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary as my source, copyright Date 1967, the word black is defined as soiled; dirty; throughly evil; wicked; expressive of condemnation or discredit; invoking the supernatural and especially the Devil; gloomy; calamitous - marked by the occurrence of disaster; sullen, hostile.

Now this is the understanding of the word black I presume, by the American people. Is it? Let's see! How has the word black been incorporated into our language? Does it express a feeling of positive or negative? Good or bad? And does this express the feelings of the people of the country as to how they relate to the word black? Let's examine some examples.

The the word blackball. To blackball someone as used in our language means to reject that person. No one wants to be blackballed- that's negative. If you get on someone's blacklist, especially your manager's, that's bad news, very bad. What about this one - blackmail- bad indeed. I wonder why they didn't use the word whitemail to describe that evil and illegal action. This is an interesting one. To show you the association of the word black with evil - what color is Devil Food Cake? Dark! Now what color is Angel Food Cake? White! Could one believe that there is some subtle subconscious teaching going on?

The color of clothing also expresses something in our language. If you attended the old cowboy movies you will recall that the hero always, without exception, wore a big white hat. While the villian wore a big black hat. Gene Autry, Tom Mix, Roy Rogers, Hoot Gibson,

Tex Ritter, Bill Hickock, Charles Starrett, and other heroes who became the idols of children all over America, all wore white ten gallon hats and rode white horses. While the villians who were always beaten by the heroes at the final minutes of the movie and put in jail, all wore black hats and rode black horses. Black clothing is worn during a time of sadness, to mourn a death. While white clothing is the symbol of angellic virginity. Whoever drew the first witch put black clothing on her. The person who drew the devil, made it red; while the person who drew the picture of Jesus Christ put white clothes on him.

Other interesting words and phrases are:

(1) Blackguard, which is defined by Webster as kitchen servant; a rude or unscrupulous person; scoundrel; one who uses foul or abusive language.

(2) Blackhand - a lawless person engaged in crime.

(3) Blackshirt - member of a fascist organization

Then there are words more familiar to us like:

(a) black market

(b) black magic - connoting witchcraft

(c) blackout - a period of darkness; a state of unconsciousness.

(d) black day - bad experience

(e) black cat crosses your path and you are doomed to have bad luck.

(f) to be the black sheep of the family is to be an outcast. As Webster puts it, "a discreditable member of an otherwise respectable group."

III. Conclusion:

I hope that this talk has made you aware that everyday, simple words that are taken for granted and appear to be so innocent, may carry with them some charged emotion to the ears of a knowledgable Black co-worker. During a period when Black and white people are working out serious differences, and when Black people are trying to reverse the negative connotation of the word black by using black in a positive way such as "Black is beautiful, it pays to be aware of the dangers of using certain words when communicating with certain people.

Now, lest I be accused of painting a black picture, I will acknowledge a couple of words which carry positive connotation. Black gold is certainly favorable. And everyone when balancing the bank check book or looking at the profit and loss financial statement, certainly wants to be in the black. But that could possibly be off-set by telling little white lies.