

Literally

by Ken Davis

I work as a copywriter for a nonprofit organization. You would think that someone who works with words for a living would appreciate them. But for a long time, I neglected to do that. I guess I dealt with them for so long, they lost their significance. Then one day I noticed them again and they blazed with life.

I owe this to my daughter.

My daughter is a fit, bright girl of thirteen, blond, a lover of cats and running. She also has autism.

Autism comprises a broad spectrum of brain disorders. These disorders affect social skills, communication, and information processing, among other things.

One of the many ways my daughter makes life interesting is that she takes words literally. If I ask her what she is doing, she will answer that she is talking to me, since that's what she is doing at that moment. If I ask her if she knows the time, she will look at her watch and say yes. She won't tell me what time it is, because that's not what I asked.

It took time, but I have come to love this sort of thing. And her preciseness has been a great gift to me as a writer.

Words are objects that fill our lives with both meaning and misunderstanding. They have a nuanced, muddled ambiguity and complexity. I appreciate them now more than ever because I share my life with an autistic person.

I've learned a lot from my daughter's relationship with words. I especially love her writings. Her sentences are simple and direct and her words are unpretentious. She doesn't care about impressing readers. She only cares about communicating with clarity. Her tools are plain speech, active voice, and taut, concise lines. I find it very refreshing. Even scholars, scientists, and presidents should be able to share complex ideas with focus and lucidity.

Lately I've been reading the work of a scholar named Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure was an early 20th-century Swiss linguist. He was also a literary theorist, in the structuralist school.

Saussure said there was no inherent connection between a word and what it represents. (Onomatopoeias may be a notable exception.) The meaning we give to a word is subjective, and that meaning is preserved by convention only. Says the fair Juliet: "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet."

This is a no-brainer, of course. A fork is a fork because we call it a fork. Cognitive scientist Steven Pinker calls this a trick, "a memorized arbitrary pairing between a sound and a meaning."

We could call a fork a spoon and it wouldn't change what the object is or what we tend to use it for.

But Saussure also believed words are relational; i.e., they can't be understood in isolation from other words. Now this is an inspired idea. Think of a beach. Can a beach be a beach without an ocean? If you remove the ocean, do you still have the beach? Or is the beach now a desert?

This line of thought is probably too abstract—too nonliteral—for my little girl. But the point is, it exhilarates me, and I owe that to her. I never cared about this sort of thing until she came into this world, pensive and curious like a cat. Now I love to study words and language. Without my daughter, I wouldn't be doing this, one of the many ways my world would be smaller and less rich.

My daughter also taught me that a literal use of language can still be poetic. One day when she was a toddler, we took her for a walk in her stroller. It was a warm and breezy summer day. The sky was clear. She was a bewitching little sprite of a person, laughing and kicking her feet. She talked to the birds, like St. Francis. Then at some point, she pointed to a blazing blue horizon and a sugar maple swaying in the wind. She said:

"Tree dancing with the sky?"

Wordsworth couldn't have said it any better. It was tender and accurate and sublime. To this day, it's my favorite line of verse. I remember it each time I see a tree on a windy day.

What I love most is that my daughter wasn't speaking metaphorically. She was being her usual, precise self, full of uncompromising wonder. That day, she saw a tree dancing with the sky. Wouldn't you love to see the world the same way?