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A modern day Tower of Babel

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Chaos, confusion, and division confound our society and may sometime define it. There's a related topic I often think about, and I've been searching for ways to address it. I'm referring to our deteriorating "common language."

I came upon an article bemoaning social media issues. The discussion presented an equivalency by relating it to the biblical Tower of Babel. I liked the presentation, but thought it fell short of adequately pointing out the modern relevance of the "Babel" story. I decided to expand on it.

The root meaning of the word "Babel" is "to confuse." The Genesis story describes citizens of the ancient world who considered themselves sophisticated and self-righteous. Steeped in arrogance, they decided to build a tower to heaven "to make a name for ourselves." God rejected their motives and actions, confused their language, and spread the population over the face of the earth.

Our modern society has the potential to react and move in unison, but only if communicating with clarity. Just like in the bible story, our common language is often not dependably consistent. Are we participating in a modern Babel?

What can this ancient account teach us about today's world? Is it challenging our use of knowledge and technology in an arrogant attempt to expand control? Alternatively, does it declare God's willingness to intervene in human affairs? Maybe it was an inspired explanation for a great mystery of that time. Perhaps all these explanations have relevance, but for me the message is all about our inability to communicate.

I've been taught that true cultures require philosophical consistency, ethical standards, and clarity of communication. Does the chaos and confusion warn of cultural changes? Or rather than creating a new culture, does the absence of standards and effective communication predict cultural deterioration? Consider some examples.

During the Senate approval hearings for President Biden's Supreme Court appointee Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson, the appointee was asked to define the term "woman." She didn't dodge the question. She simply answered "no." Who would have predicted that a Supreme Court appointee would be puzzled and even stumped by that question?

Another example can be found in the systemic racism and Critical Race Theory (CRT) debates. A leader of the CRT movement, Professor Ibram X. Kendi, author of "How to be an Antiracist," provides a mini glossary before most chapters. Understanding his theories requires using unique definitions which aren't well aligned with "Funk and Wagnalls." Using different dictionaries, debate participants inevitably talk past each other. Confusion and mistrust elbow out clarity and understanding.

News reporting reflects a similar problem. Consider the recent mass killing in a Colorado Springs gay nightclub. An early AP report recounted the facts and listed those killed. The killer was referred to using the pronoun "his." The next day, an updated AP report stated: "Suspect to be held without bail.....They were beaten into submission by patrons.....injuries visible on their face and head."

Was another killer identified? Or perhaps the pronouns "they" and "their" was a typo. I soon understood. The killer's defense attorneys announced that the suspect was nonbinary and uses pronouns "they/them." The trend in personal pronoun usage sadly discounts important descriptive absolutes such as "singular vs. plural."

The language of "moral relativism" fits this discussion. Sometimes, when asking whether an activity is right or wrong, moral relativism suggests an answer like, "Well, that depends." The reply typically contains vague references to personal opinions or feelings. Lack of standards removes the clarity necessary for deciding between right and wrong.

Successful cultures require effective communication and standards for ethics, morality, and accountability. Effective communication conveys context, perspectives, emotions, and opinions. Love, hate, bigotry, racism, and morality no longer send consistent messages. Used in combination, words are intended provide information critical to situations such as solving a crime or providing a warning. Today's lack of clarity stifles those expectations.

We are experiencing a modern day "Babel effect" of chaos and confusion. Words and phrases serve an important purpose as building blocks of language. Language must be consistently understood, or it shouldn't be classified as a language.

Let's work to retain the benefit of words conveying "right vs. wrong" with clarity. That will engender common understanding and accountability. We should resist the tendency for valid descriptive references to lose their meaning and artificially labeled as bigotry. And we can't tolerate useful common words, such as "woman," becoming abstract concepts.