Alberta Doctors' Digest

Reading my new dictionary

Attending medical school, now a handful of decades ago, I was much taken by the new vocabulary I encountered in clinical studies, and I'd like to think that many, if not most, of the words I discovered remain part of my vocabulary. I recall "festinating", for example, as in a "festinating gait" – the quick, small, shuffling steps commonly seen in Parkinson's disease; the verb form "festinate" means to rush or hurry.

"Cachexia" is another word I came across early on, referring to the weight and muscle loss associated with severe chronic disease. It, too, has become useful, especially in its adjectival form, "cachectic", connoting wasting, frailty and infirmity.

"Hippocratic facies" is an allied term that persists for me, denoting the sunken eyes and hollow cheeks that portend death that are seen in advanced peritonitis.

These and other clinical terms captured me, and once my formal training was completed, I began to look more widely for other words that were foreign to me. Arch-conservative William F. Buckley was popular at the time and was always good for a few impressive nuggets, though I wasn't always taken with his politics. "Anfractuous" (winding or tortuous) was a word I picked up from Buckley. I felt somewhat pompous using it, but it could often silence an interrogator if the need arose.

Not all the words that fascinated me were long, however; some of the gems I found were only three or four letters long. I read Cormac McCarthy's post-apocalyptic novel *The Road*, for instance, and found "nub", as one example. It's used to describe the little buds on trees that will become branches, although it is also used to describe the heart or essence of something.

As a budding "logophile", or lover of words, I began to look for word origins. As might be expected, Shakespeare was an early master inventor and gave us words as commonplace as frugal, gloomy and hurry. Much more recently, Norman Mailer coined the term factoid in his biography of Marilyn Monroe, referring to items of information.

The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows is a gem

With this prelude, I want to move on to a book that came on to my radar several years ago that I recently picked up at my local bookstore. It's a bestseller called *The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows.* It's written by John Koenig, an American poet, advertising executive and video maker born in Minnesota but raised in Switzerland. Koenig began coining and compiling new words in the early 2000s, with a website, a YouTube channel and even a TED talk, culminating in a book published in 2021 as a slim volume of 250 pages that even includes pictures.

It's a gem. Koenig has given us a compendium of words that he has invented to cover facets of everyday experience and emotions that aren't covered by standard vocabulary but which we will all recognize.

Some of the words have been cobbled together from snippets of Middle English, German, Japanese and other languages. Some have made it, or nearly made it, into common vocabulary. An early invention or neologism of Koenig's is the word "sonder". He defines it as "the realization that each passerby is living a life as vivid and as complex as your own." It has become the namesake for several albums and eateries as far off as California, Wisconsin and Kosovo.

Others of the author's inventions are less common but have diverse origins. "Idlewild", for example, was the original name for John F. Kennedy Airport, but Koenig has appropriated it to mean the common feeling of gratitude one feels on being temporarily stranded in one's travels, thankful nevertheless for the respite from responsibilities.

Koenig's words often pertain to our disappointment at world affairs. "Kuebiko", for instance, is derived from the Japanese word for scarecrow and is Koenig's word for the helplessness and exhaustion which one can feel when recognizing global tragedies and violence. A related creation is the word "anthrodynia", referring to the exhaustion one can feel at how cruel people can be. And then there's "lyssamania", the irrational fear that someone you know is angry at you.

Perhaps useful for psychiatrists and psychologists, another term – "intuit", from the Italian word for insight – is bundled with another to become "intuito ameroso", or the moment when two people working through an issue achieve a moment of clarity and appreciation for each other.

Prompting memories and emotions

And on it goes. Each new word prompts memories and accompanying emotions from the reader's past – moments of recognition that our lives, though disparate, are more than similar; they are linked through common experiences that may have been hitherto inexpressible.

The fate of Koenig's concoctions, his neologisms, is unknown. All words have had to be novel at some point, and we add technological terms continuously. On the other hand, when words or phrases identify experiences that we commonly yearn to identify, we have no trouble assimilating them from other languages. In particular here, I'm thinking of two words we've borrowed from German: "zeitgeist" (the spirit of the time; what's going on?) and "schadenfreude" (pleasure at someone else's misfortune). As well, we've gotten "déjà vu" (the feeling that one's present experience has happened before) from the French, and we would have a hard time without it.

At one time, I thought that expanding my vocabulary with new words would augment my thinking – more horsepower. The jury's still out on this; it may or may not be true. The real reason Koenig's words are delightful, however, has to do with the memories they trigger.

Take "etterath" for example. It means the feeling of emptiness one experiences when one of life's weighty and significant processes is over: the end of school, a job or a relationship. This will almost certainly reverberate, setting off a torrent of reminiscences in every reader, the uniquely powerful endings that punctuate our lives.

I suggest there's a best way to read Koenig's dictionary. Read it in a comfy chair, with excellent light, when it's quiet. Read just one or two entries – start anywhere – and wait

for the recollections that will tumble into memory like old friends and, alas, old enemies. But memories still.

Let me add that Koenig has scattered thoughtful pictures throughout the book, briefly outlines his sources and suggests pronunciation for each entry.

The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows is an easy-peasy read, as they say. It doesn't matter where you start and neither do you have to finish it.

Enjoy this little treasure. Return to it, ad lib.

It's memorable.

Editor's note

The views, perspectives and opinions in this article are solely the author's and do not necessarily represent those of the AMA.

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