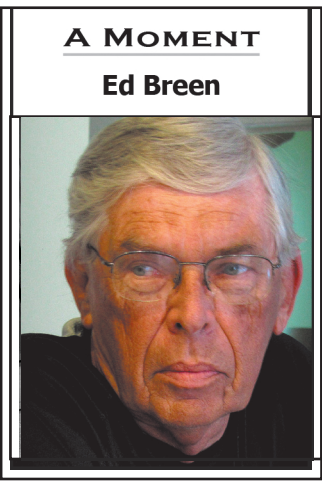


# 2020 brings pandemic and new words

Just a few words on words today, if you don't mind a dalliance. And we shall start with some silliness before we get to the heavy language.

Words like flabbergasted, hullabaloo, flummoxed, lollygag, fiddle-faddle and malarkey, for example. Or doohickey or wishy-washy. But before we start a kerfuffle here, we'll move on.

All perfectly good words, all included in either Mr. Webster's dictionary or Mr. Partridge's book of slang or maybe Mr. Menken's four big books of ruminations on the American Language, which is a lot like English, but not quite. Somebody once pointed out that we and the Brits are two nations separated by a common language. So it is. Someplace all these nonsense words have been written down and defined and they are wonderful to have when we need them. Like when we need to silence some snollygoster who is trying to flim-flam us, or



maybe even bamboozle us.

If something isn't quite right, not squared with the rest of the world or at least with what is on your plate at the moment, it is perfectly okay to say it is "cattywampus," right? I know what you mean, because we can all see that the thingamajig is discom-bobulated.

We'll come back to that in a few minutes, but first we have to visit the serious wordsmiths at the Oxford English Dictionary office who are doing their annual persnickety inventory of how we talk and write to and about one another.

*"I've never witnessed a year in language like the one we've just had. It's both unprecedented and a little ironic that in a year that left us speechless, 2020 has been filled with new words unlike any other."*

## President of Oxford Publishing

And this year of 2020, which was seemingly dispatched from hell, has given us new words that in a few short months now seem to have been with us always. "Covid" and "social distancing" and "self-isolate" and "shelter in place."

Not a thing there you don't understand, is there? But if I had suggested to you last Christmas season that we might soon be social distancing you would have done, well . . . just that; moved on to someone who made sense.

The head poohbah at Oxford – see what I mean about how perfect those nonsense words are? — the president of Oxford publishing, said the other day that "I've never witnessed a year in language like the one we've just had. It's both unprecedented and a little ironic that in a year that left us speechless, 2020 has been filled with new words unlike any other."

Each year the Oxford folks select a single word or phrase that sums up the year past. Sometimes, an entirely new

word; others, a new use. Last year it was "climate emergency." In 2018, it was "toxic."

Can't do it that way this year, they acknowledged. And they can't even confine it to the virus because this year also saw the rise of "Black Lives Matter" and "systemic racism" and "police defunding."

So they made two lists: Pandemic and protest, with a lexicon from each. And "pandemic" itself has new meaning. It's always been there in the dictionary, but we'd not had one in our lifetimes. We knew about "epidemic," as when most everybody on the bowling team got the flu and stayed home. But "pandemic" became something new when death was now reckoned in hundreds of thousands. Use of the word, say the Oxford language gurus, increased by 57,000 per cent over the previous year, or any other year before this one.

And as summer turned to fall and winter and we

wearied of it all, more new words made the rounds:

"Covidiot," a derisive term for those who either embraced too much or too little of Dr. Fauci.

And "Blursday" came into the jargon to describe those days in lockdown and sheltering in place, when one day was so similar to the day past and the day to come that in early morning we'd have to reckon which day of the week we were entering. Tuesday? Thursday? "Blursday?"

Remember when we thought "herd immunity" had to do with Lonesome Dove and cattle drives? And "flattening the curve" had something to do with auto racing? And a "superspreader," we learned, was not a farm implement.

But back to that wonderful list of silliness for just a minute.

It is time to skedaddle on out of here before the tomfoolery turns into a hullabaloo.

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