

Our language is retreating from emotion. In the Me Generation, words are reflecting the inward turning of our nerves, and I'm sure that the use of "into" has spread so fast because it expresses deep involvement in a shallow, almost primitive manner. "I'm into it" substitutes for "I like it" or "I love it," phrases that convey sincere emotion. And we seldom say we love people anymore; we have "relationships" with them. Don't relationships lose something from the knowledge that people also have a relationship to weeds, concrete, sulfur dioxide, and every other object in the universe? Love is a conscious act of human and humane volition; relationship is a quality of even the most inanimate things.

I think there is danger in this retreat. The expressiveness of words is vital to the expression of emotions; it is fully possible that, if the word love atrophies, the emotion of love may shrink with it. The day could come when we will "relate" to everything and love no one.

Anyone who thinks I'm exaggerating the link between words and reality should look back at Nazi Germany, where words played a central role in making genocide acceptable. Alex Bein's study "The Jewish Parasite" shows how an endless repetition transformed mere words into a new "reality." After endlessly hearing that Jews "were" bacteria, vermin, parasites, viruses, insects, and worms, the SS men, and the German people in general, sincerely believed it. Nazi propaganda was able to transform murder into something that bothered no one's conscience; what we now call genocide they called "sanitation."

More recently, Vietnamese villages were "mopped up," as if cookie crumbs and dust balls were being removed from the jungle floor. When it is perverted, language rides the first horse of the Apocalypse.

Seen in this light, using language precisely--defending words from dehumanization--becomes a sacred duty. Words must be taken seriously; they have the power to kill and maim. Don't say "it can't happen here"; a hundred-million people have been slaughtered in the 20th Century, and they said it too, even while the tyrants were stockpiling words next to missiles. Being "into" a "relationship" numbs people just a little bit more to the saving and the killing power of the word. We must never for a moment forget that Hitler was an orator long before he was Fuhrer.