

# When good words turn bad

What do the words *politicaster*, *mongrel*, and *braggart* have in common? They end with a pejorative suffix, a few final letters that change a neutral or positive word into a negative one. Some languages are full of these suffixes. In Ojibwe you can add a pejorative suffix to almost any noun. “Shoe” (*mkizin*) can become “no good shoe” (*mkiznenzhish*), indicating strong negative feelings toward the shoe. An Ojibwe-speaker can say “no good blueberry,” “no good wife,” “no good anything.”

In English, we have only a few of these suffixes and they are currently not much used, but in the past they gave rise to quite a few interesting terms.

The most thoroughly pejorative of these suffixes is *-aster*. It expresses incomplete resemblance to something, so it means “not quite a \_\_\_” or, “a petty, bad \_\_\_.” A *politicaster* is thus an inadequate or contemptible politician; a *medicaster* is a

quack; a *criticaster* is a petty or inferior critic. But *-aster* words have never been particularly common, with the exception of *poetaster*, an inferior poet.

The suffix *-rel* is occasionally diminutive, indicating something young or small.

Thus a *pickerel* is a species of small pike. But in most *-rel* words, the suffix has a derogatory implication. *Mongrel* is from *mung* or *mang*, words for mixtures in the Middle Ages, plus *-rel*, meaning “a

mixed breed, a cross.”

It can refer to a dog but is generally disparaging when used about anything else – a *mongrel* policy, a *mongrel* wine – and offensive when used of people. *Doggerel* is bad writing, or comic verse. *Wastrels* are spendthrifts.

Similar to *-rel* is *-ling* in that it is sometimes diminutive and sometimes deprecatory. *Goslings* and *ducklings* are baby birds, but a *groundling* is an uncritical or unrefined person (too poor to pay for a seat in Renaissance theaters)

and a *changeling* is a child exchanged by fairies, or any kind of replacement of inferior value.

In the past 30 years or so, English has been evolving a new example. The pejorative suffix *-tard* denigrates a person who has a certain quality or believes a thing that the speaker deplors. It derives directly from *retard*, a word we increasingly condemn as a slur. *Glutard*, then, is a disparaging term for a person who doesn't eat gluten, *lactard* for someone who can't tolerate lactose, and *libtard* for a liberal.

One pejorative suffix made recent headlines when North Korean leader Kim Jong-un called President Trump a “*dot-ard*,” sending many Americans to their dictionaries. Though it looks like another *-tard* word, it actually comes from a distantly related suffix, *-ard*, which also gave us *sluggard*, *drunkard*, and *laggard*.

The insult did nothing to prevent the Trump-Kim summit, but Mr. Kim's use of the unusual word will probably guarantee this pejorative suffix a place in history. ■

## in a word

By Melissa Mohr

## Can God still love me if ...?

When I was in grade school my parents were unable to care for me, so I found myself living with other families in our city. That's a hard thing for any child to face.

But one day, at the Christian Science Sunday School I'd been attending, I was introduced to one of the most profound points in the Bible: “God is love” (1 John 4:8). My teacher explained that God's love, like sunlight, shines on everyone, no matter what. And from Monitor founder Mary Baker Eddy's book “Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures,” I learned that “Father-Mother is the name for Deity, which indicates His tender relationship to His spiritual creation” (p. 332).

I came to feel so tangibly that divine Love was my constant companion that I was able to go through those years without my parents and yet not feel alone. And ever since, I have valued every opportunity to help others feel that same impartial love of God for them.

Some years ago I was asked to give a talk

in a detention facility for teenagers who had committed crimes that, if they were adults, would have put them in prison for many years. The talk was about the nature of God as Love itself, and a girl in the back raised her hand and asked whether God could truly love everyone, no matter what they had done. Then her face turned red, she looked down in her lap, and she started to cry.

What happened next was powerful. We explored that idea of God's love, which I had been so helped by as a child and ever since. I was able to say, “Yes, God certainly loves us all, without any lapse and without any exception.”

I wanted them to know that we each have a deeper identity than it may seem on the surface, and that's how God is always seeing us. I considered with them what it means to be the purely spiritual offspring of a divine Father-Mother who, as Love itself, is always present and supremely powerful. This truly endless love of God purifies us, teaches us, corrects us, and guides us.

By then, a number of these teenage inmates were in tears, but they were strong,

good, hopeful tears. As I was leaving, I thought, “In just a few minutes, I will be gone from this facility, but I know that God – our Father-Mother, Love – will always be with each of these individuals, and no one can be separated from our divine Parent's caring, redeeming presence.”

I love what the Bible says of God's love in this passage: “As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you” (Isaiah 66:13). Divine Love's pure goodness tenderly nurtures us, as a caring mother nurtures her child. Opening our heart to the reassurance and love of our true Parent, God, brings strength and redemption. This leads us to think and act more consistently with our loved and loving spiritual nature as the children of God. We can glow in our divine Father-Mother's love. And we can grow in it, too.

As those teens in the detention center seemed to glimpse, it's a powerful thing to simply pause and feel God loving us. The reason we can feel His love when we do so is because it is always there for each of us.

– Mark Swinney

### A CHRISTIAN SCIENCE PERSPECTIVE



## Story map

### Covered in this issue:

Johannesburg, South Africa; London; Mexico City and Tecamac, Mexico; Paris; Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia; Vilnius, Lithuania; and the US

24

### COVER STORY

## Cleveland & the write stuff

How the city is using literature to empower youth and overcome social divides.

BY CHRISTOPHER JOHNSTON

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Melissa Cunliffe's third- and fourth-graders do a math exercise at Maple Street Magnet Elementary School on April 4, 2017, in Rochester, N.H.

17

### BRIEFING: IN U.S., SCHOOL SEGREGATION RESURGES

Nationally, school segregation by race and income has been on the rise, which has concerned many educators and civil rights advocates. But voluntary efforts to boost integration show promise. BY STACY TEICHER KHADAROO

18

### GOVERNMENT: POISED TO BE MEXICO'S NEXT PRESIDENT

Andrés Manuel López Obrador's unlikely rise after two failed presidential bids underscores a deep-seated desire for radical change. BY WHITNEY EULICH

