



CLUB PAPER
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NIMBLE WORDS

by
FRANCIS A. LACKNER, JR.

THE CHICAGO
LITERARY CLUB
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NIMBLE WORDS

Nimble, like agile, is a quality often ascribed to mountain goats and bighorn sheep but extends to anyone who is sure-footed when leaping from crag to crag, dancing across scree, while avoiding the tumbles that come with such activity. Being nimble implies a willingness to take calculated risks in leaping to the next solid ground: if you are a mountain goat, failure can be a long way down.

This essay is a series of vignettes of words that intrigue me. Some words bring entire landscapes to the mind, some are quite technical, some have very diverse meanings, some sneak up on you or latch onto your thoughts like a song you can't get out of your head. The most interesting lead the mind in entirely new directions. Hopefully you will find this essay nimble as we jump around from word to thought and back.



To quote *Webster's*: “Nimble: 1. Marked by quick light movement: lively, 2a. Marked by quick, alert, clever conception, comprehension, or resourcefulness, 2b. sensitive, responsive; synonym: agile.”

Nimble is derived from Old English and has a long pedigree. Think of people who are physically nimble: I think of dancers onstage, canoe

carriers on a portage, tennis players. Being nimble does not imply great strength, although that can be useful, but does imply quick decisions, accurate thinking, being able to change direction instantly while keeping an eye on the goal of the moment. It is a quality of political life, certainly, where the nimble move on to higher office while the less nimble retreat to the Senate. It can even be a quality of nations: the Dutch could be perceived as nimble, the Germans more stolid. These *États-Unis* could be seen as nimble during our growth spurt in the nineteenth century; I daresay that we have put on some weight since then. Navy SEALs are nimble. George Patton was nimble—but that is not the common view of the armored corps of which he was part.

If the quality of being nimble is “marked by quick light movement,” then what is required to gain it and to maintain it? Certainly “light” is essential: one cannot be carrying excess baggage, either physical possessions or those of the mind. They weigh you down, make you valuable, a solid citizen, responsible. Anyone or anything aspiring to be nimble has to be willing to shed the excess baggage, whether that is personal possessions, excess employees, divisions that no longer perform, or policies that don’t work—and substitute those that do. The excess will drag you down and ensure that you are the one at the bottom of the canyon, not the one eating the clover in the alpine meadow.

Equally, “quick” is essential: fast decisions about which way to turn when the rock in the stream under you is sliding are crucial to finding the next stable footing. You must have an accurate eye for the goal of your journey, whether that is a clover meadow, financial growth, or good public policy; and you must understand that achieving the goal may require changes of direction, leaps to rocks that momentarily prove unsteady, but equally the ability to stop and take advantage of good resting places when they are found.



As I sat at my keyboard to pen this essay, it occurred to me that the art of writing is now entirely separate from the instrument used to accomplish it, and has no relation whatever to the small enclosure used for your common sheep or cattle. The mariners amongst you may have thought of the related meaning of an enclosed dock area reserved for submarines, but these are diversions. So too would be any reference to the penal colony at Sing Sing in New York or any other penitentiary, commonly referred to by the enforced residents as “pens.”

Pens, as a writing tool, derive from the female swan, also called a pen, whose feathers served as the original implement. *Pen* derives from *penne*, or feathers—or more precisely the quills thereof, being among the earliest instruments used to hold and distribute ink on a writing surface. The instrument itself has since mutated through fountain pens to the now ubiquitous ballpoint, while the reference to a feather has divergently mutated to marine biology, lending its name to the internal horny feather-shaped shell of a squid.

The instrument has also lent its name to the art of writing and, although perhaps more accurate, one does not keyboard an essay nearly so nimbly as penning it. *Pen* has a more graceful, thoughtful, creative sense than do other synonyms: one may write a list or keyboard a computer entry, even dictate to one’s smartphone (does anyone remember Dictaphones?), but one could well be thought to *pen* a poem, essay, or novel.

Pens also give us the art of calligraphy, in which the writing itself becomes art, separate from but hopefully related to the meaning expressed. Calligraphy is exemplified in illuminated manuscripts like the Book of Kells, but that leads us to a whole other discussion.

Pens may appear to be so common as to be valueless in current society, but I discovered early on that they can have great currency when scarce. I took a trip to Europe as a teenager, part of which included Hungary and other points on the Danube in then communist Eastern Europe. My parents, thinking they would be good exchange gifts with new

acquaintances, gave me a supply of cheap ballpoint pens with my name and address imprinted on them, and so they proved to be. In Eastern Europe they proved, like Levi's jeans, to be gold. It developed that the communist regimes of the period had paperwork for almost everything, usually in duplicate or triplicate, but the supply of ballpoint pens in no wise matched the supply of forms. Any official soon became my fast friend when I gave him a pen, and the requirements of paperwork evaporated.



“Ouch!” I said as I stepped on a ... while I hung a picture on the wall, or was that a bridle I just put on my horse, as I changed the direction of my sailboat, while waiting for a politician to change their opinion, and then waited for the paint or glue to attain the right consistency, whilst I quickly hemmed the cuff of my pants. What AM I talking about? *Tack*, of course. A wonderfully diverse word, *tack* derives most of its meanings from its ability to hold things together. But the derivatives have developed a life of their own over time, so that the sharp, pointed small nail used to hold carpet down or pictures up also became the point on a navigator's map holding the string marking the course of a ship, and particularly changes thereto, and that shorthand became the direction the ship was to take, or “tack.” Tacking into the wind, or close to the wind, implies a specific navigational skill. The reference in sailing also alludes much more specifically to a rope attached to a forward sail and, thus, to that sail as well. The reference to the direction of a sailing ship, as it changes course to sail into the wind, has become an allusion to the changing opinions of politicians as they veer this way and that to suit the imagined opinions of the electorate. The equestrian equipment used in equine endeavors is also referred to generically as “tack.” The temporary nature of a tacked fastening also attached to the function of a temporary fastening for clothing: seamstresses will “tack” a hem while they fit a piece of clothing, intending to later make the seam permanent as the garment is finished.

Tack, in the sense of a short, sharp fastener, is such a common, versatile word that it is hard to tack down with accuracy, but appears to have its source in Old North French *taque* or Middle Dutch *tacke*. In the sense of gear or equipment, it is a shortening of *tackle*. By the fourteenth century, the nautical inference made its appearance.



Ephemeron, like *trivium* or *memorabilium*, is virtually extinct in the singular. The plural, *ephemera*, things that exist or are used or enjoyed for only a short time, have a gossamer quality. The word derives from the Greek, meaning things lasting no more than a day. It can be applied to popular items, like Mickey Mouse ears, originally intended for a brief existence—which only serves to enhance their value to collectors. But it is that quality when applied to words and thoughts that intrigues me. It is the transitory thought, the passing notion, the idle observation, which in many cases caroms off a larger, more significant subject, thereby illuminating that greater idea, that I find fascinating.

A euphemism, which from a point of onomatopoeia may sound similar to *ephemera*, represents a distortion of meaning, a word meant to hide a clearer, but less appealing, original. Garbagemen become sanitation engineers. Janitors become facilities expeditors. It is a mild or indirect word or expression substituted for one considered to be too harsh or blunt when referring to something unpleasant or embarrassing. A person, especially a close friend or relative, does not die; they “pass away.” A gangster is promoted to be an “influential person.” *Euphemism* is from the Greek *euphemismos*, meaning “good speech,” and it’s a way that we paper over uncomfortable things with more-pleasant-sounding words. Suffice to say that clarity and brevity are more honest.



There is a name for the sprites that got into aircraft engines in World War II, and that inhabit the inner workings of computers such that

the computer always needs to reboot for an update when you have just completed writing a chapter or nearly finished a spreadsheet, and that is *gremlins*. As a word it is of recent provenance, dating to the mid-1920s. It is of obscure origin: in its earliest attested use, a Royal Air Force term for a low-ranking officer or enlisted man assigned the most onerous duties; its later development was likely affected by the phonetic resemblance to *goblin*. Gremlins appear anonymously and invisibly, unlike Kilroy, who is of a similar vintage but whose half-hidden face became a ubiquitous symbol of World War II.



Idle thoughts lead to interesting queries: so, reflecting one day on Donald Trump's style, the word *demagogue* occurred to me. Reflecting on the meaning of that word, the other words with that suffix that occurred to me immediately were *synagogue* and *pedagogue*. Those three words are so diverse that I had to investigate the origin of the suffix. In so doing, I found that this is a fairly uncommon suffix; the longest list I could find had but sixteen words, including *cholagogue*, *emmenagogue*, *mystagogue*, *phlegmagogue*, and *sialogogue*, but no words nearly as familiar as the first three. There is also an article of horse tack used for training purposes to develop proper posture in the horse, popular in Europe, invented by René Gogue in 1948.

But back to the Greeks—we know how their politics turned out. *Demos* (the people) and *agogos* (a person who leads)—thus, in ancient Greece or Rome, one who was a leader or orator espousing the cause of the common people. The word has since come to mean one who gains power by arousing the people's emotions and prejudices, according to *Webster's*. Working through my limited knowledge of history, I recall the brothers Gracchus, tribunes and land reformers in Rome of the second century B.C.E.; Savonarola, the puritanical, fanatic friar of fifteenth-century Florence; and numerous instances in the French Revolution. Trump to a

T, but he might want to recall the unfortunate outcome that befell all of those individuals.

Now, we are all familiar with a synagogue as the building where a Jewish assembly or congregation meets for religious worship. While the suffix is the same as for *demagogue* in current usage, the derivation appears to be entirely different. Back to the Greeks, who combined *sun*, meaning “together,” with *agein*, meaning “bring,” to give them *sunagoge*, or meeting. That worked its way through Old French and Late Latin to become *synagogue* in Middle English.

Pedagogue, as you might by now surmise, relates to the Greek *pais/paid*, or boy, and *agogos*, again in the sense of leader or guide. In the Greek, *paidagogos*, via Latin, became *pedagogue* in Middle English, denoting a slave who accompanied a child to school, perhaps a combination tutor, bodyguard, and supervisor. *Mystagogue* returns us to the Greek sense of leader, as one who initiates their followers into a mystery cult or belief.

The others: *cholagogue* is a medicinal agent that promotes the discharge of bile; an *emmenagogue* is a plant such as mugwort, parsley, chamomile, or ginger that stimulates blood flow in the pelvic area and uterus in women; a *phlegmagogue* is an agent to expel phlegm, while a *sialagogue* is a substance that increases the flow of saliva.

What of *agog*, in the sense of one full of intense interest or excitement? Rather than the sense of leadership or medicinal agents noted above, this is a separate word, not a suffix, and its origin comes from Middle French *en gogues*, meaning “in mirth.” Returning to my original thought, I see little mirth in this year’s politics.



The Internet—could I offer an essay without reference to that universal marvel and abomination?—offers some intriguing new words, likely to be more ephemeral than permanent but amusing in the moment: *eglaf*, a “word that has no meaning but can be used in place of any other word.” An

electronic means of clearing your throat, perhaps? An *internest* is the pile of blankets, pillows, and other comforts gathered around oneself while spending long periods on the Internet. Related to ephemera, perhaps, is *epiphantot*, an idea that seems like an amazing insight to the conceiver but is really just pointless, stupid, mundane, or incorrect. A *nomonym* is a food that tastes like another. Have you ever experienced an *afterclap*—being the last person to applaud after everyone else has stopped? Or have you experienced a sense of euphoria when climbing into bed at the end of a long tiring day, perhaps when your sheets have been warmed, so that you enjoy a *bedgasm*? I will leave you to invent your own neologisms for future use of the language.



Some words have developed emphatic modifiers that always accompany them. Have you ever encountered a *dudgeon* that wasn't *high*? Do you even know what a *dudgeon* is? In my case, he is an English actor (Hugh Dudgeon) whom I hold in esteem for underplaying his parts to great effect, but that's not to the point. *Dudgeon* is a fit or state of indignation, an emotional state of sullen, angry, or indignant humor, a feeling of offense, resentment, or anger. *Dudgeon* may imply imminent departure, but not until your *dudgeon* is high, as for example, "Slamming the door in Meg's face, Aunt March drove off in high *dudgeon*" (Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*). Lost in the mists of Middle English, the origin may be related to an obsolete term for a particular wood used especially for dagger hilts. Draw your own conclusion.

Have you ever been given short shrift? I certainly hope not. This is another archaic phrase where the original base word, *shrifft*, has fallen into disuse, along with many religious terms, meaning as it does "a remission of sins pronounced by a priest in the sacrament of reconciliation." A short shrift, on the other hand, refers to "barely adequate time for confession before execution." The phrase in common parlance now means "to make short work of, to give little consideration to." May all your shrifts be long...

Other words are compounds in which the root word has fallen into disuse. Such a one is *feckless*. Presumably one who is feckless has lost his feck, but that word has fallen out of favor, so to the dictionary again: “Feck is a form of effect, which is in turn the Scots cognate of the modern English word effect. However, this Scots noun has additional significance: efficacy; force; value.” *Feckless?* Need more be said?



It is a given premise of dictionaries that the definitions offered not be circular; in other words, the word defined should not be used in the definition thereof. In that context, let me offer the word and concept *time*. I challenge you to define that term without reference to the word itself.

Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary has a hard time evading this issue: “1.a) the measured or measurable period during which an action, process or condition exists or continues; b) a continuum which lacks spatial dimensions and in which events succeed one another from past through present to future.” *Webster’s* goes through thirteen variants for the noun, five for the verb, and three for the adjective form. There are two columns of related compound words.

Time can be a fascinating topic. I gave my first paper on the measurement of time, and Phil Liebson gave his presidential address on the subject. Dick Spofford, in a related paper, described how the accurate measurement of time on the open sea was crucial to the establishment of accurate longitude for the Royal Navy, the direct forebear of our Global Positioning System.

Newspapers seeking an image of both gravitas and urgency will frequently name themselves *The Times*: we thus have the *Chicago Sun-Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Times*, *The Times of India*, *The Straits Times* of Singapore, and of course the granddaddy of them all, *The Times*, understood to be of London. *Time* also refers to the eponymous magazine, and to its parent corporation.

Physics after Einstein cannot be discussed without reference to time as a fourth dimension, frequently referred to as the space–time continuum, but that level of physics is well past my ken. Consider, however, the fascinating stories that the concept of time thus enables. Rip Van Winkle, he of the twenty-year snore, predates Einstein but foreshadows many later stories. *A Christmas Carol* would not vex us on the boards of the Goodman were it not for Scrooge’s time travel. Jack Finney’s *Time and Again* is a romance set in New York, but New York in both 1882 and the present; the crux of the story is in the main character’s ability to travel between the two until he is forced to choose not where to live, but when. Dr. Who regularly travels through this dimension in search of, or being chased by, his villains. *Back to the Future*, from 1985, is predicated on the ability to travel through time to foil various miscreants. The ability to travel through time figures frequently in the novels of Terry Pratchett. In early April of this year, I attended an excellent tap-dance show, *Time Steps*, that explored the choice of the principal character when offered the chance to return to the past in order to avert the pain of his present situation. H. G. Wells, Isaac Asimov—the list goes on and on. Creative artists since Einstein have been fascinated with the concept of time and our desired ability to travel through it.

Why? Time is linear, one-dimensional, and uni-directional. We cannot, as a practical matter, return to or change the past or know the future. We are caught in an eternal present. It is that uncertainty that floats the MetLife blimp, as we insure against future mishaps. Time travel would allow us to travel to the past to fix wrongs, prevent wars, change the course of Cupid’s arrow, and generally muck up the present with unintended consequences. What if . . . Frederick III had not died prematurely of throat cancer in 1888? As John Ungashick explored recently in “An Alternative History,” the course of history would certainly have changed. The First World War might well not have happened, thereby making the second unnecessary, and equally the Cold War that followed. Chuck Ebeling and

Bill Nissen would not have gone to Vietnam, and we would have been deprived of several good papers.

Time, when combined with the three dimensions of space, offers a continuum that has been likened to a fabric. Fabrics can, of course, be rent and torn, they have great flexibility, they deform, stretch, and recoil as objects bounce and roll around on them. Writers and philosophers more skilled than I have taken much license with this image.

Time frequently appears to compress space so that one is traveling in a tunnel; often this is seen in a movie as a subway tunnel through which the character is hurtling forward as if through time at superspeed. Have you ever noticed that during particularly intense activities time appears to slow down? The seconds tick by at the same rate, but the action of a performer onstage, an athlete competing, or a car accident or other life-threatening event will appear as if in slow motion?

Time is frequently referred to as the fourth dimension, after a point, line, and volume. You cannot, however, touch it or see it, unlike the first three dimensions. Time lives in the present—past, present, future all present in the ever-changing *now*.

I will simply note that *my* time has come, and move on.



Light enables us to see; it is the speed of light that defines the very atomic nature of our being and thus relates it to time ($E = mc^2$). Painters seek a northern light in which to work; dancers, especially, are defined by the light with which they are revealed. Light offers plants the energy to grow and thereby powers our existence. When intensely focused, it can cut steel or fabric or assist surgeons. Light is the opposite of heavy—like feathers or zephyrs.

Listen to some of the synonyms for *light*: illumination, brightness, luminescence, luminosity, shining, gleaming, brilliance, radiance, luster, glowing, blaze, glare, dazzle. Light, like time, overwhelms the dictionary

with six different categories of nouns, and two more each of verbs and adjectives. We have light that “stimulates our visual receptors”; light that informs understanding of a problem; a person notable in a field is a light or beacon to that field; windows that do not open are sometimes referred to as “lights” as they open a wall to the light of the sun. A light can start a fire, as would a match. Desirable rooms are said to be light or airy. You may refer to your significant other as “the light of my life.”

Light defines. It defines what you can see, but even more, how you see it. It can be mysterious or bold, even blinding. It can be faint. It can define spaces, lead paths, reveal dancers. Lasers are a line defined in light. Light defines in color. Light reveals shape. Light is the very definition of ephemeral.



A beautiful sunset, a rainbow, a wonderful dream right before your alarm clock goes off—all of these could be described as evanescent, or fleeting. But more than merely fleeting, it conjures up intense, almost spiritual, overtones. There is an ephemeral quality, a shimmering vision, quickly dispelled but cast into your memory. The sun rises—or sets—and the moment is past. But, to truly *evanesce*, the vision must lock itself into your memory. I think of one particular sunrise in the Quetico, facing east on a small island in Lake Oriana, the rising sun casting an orange glow through trees on another island in the morning mist, another of our party sitting by the lake in the foreground. The moment was magical, memorable, *evanescent*—and then the morning broke upon us.



As I draw to the conclusion of this exploration of a few of the words that have intrigued me, I would be remiss if I did not include the legal process by which a parish priest is appointed to his living in the Anglican Church; the process of determining the differences between two texts in the detailed bibliography of a book; or the act of estimating the value of

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intestate property. You may, more likely, be familiar with the process of assembling written information, or pages, into an established order, usually before binding. But the reference I propose to use here is to a light meal in some religious traditions: a *collation*. May I invite you to join me thence?

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