

16 May 2021

Dear Friends of Elmwood,

When my narrow vocabulary failed me in childhood, I'd make up my own words to fill in the gap. It couldn't be a nonsensical word, though, like the ones Lewis Carroll used in *Jabberwocky's* fantastical verses:

*'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.*

I always feel like I'm on the verge of understanding these lines, but I never quite get there. (I've heard sermons that sound like *Jabberwocky*. Have you? But not from me, right? Hold on, don't answer that.)

Neologisms and Malapropisms

I wanted my made-up words to pass for real words because I wanted them to carry my real meaning. They had to sound convincing.

Spontaneity was my ally. The trick was not to overthink it, but take a daring run at the sentence, as I would at the long jump on Field Day, hoping the new and needed word would appear in mid-flight, and I could use it to land a 'good one'.

Here's a word that appeared in this way, fully formed, when I was seven or eight years old: 'invict'. (Spell-Check just asked me, "Did you mean 'indict'?" No, Spell-Checker, I did not mean 'indict'. I meant 'invict'. Now go away.)

Though I still use this word, sparingly and privately, no one else does. It never entered the lexicon of approved neologisms, as 'yahoo' and 'meme' did, thanks to Jonathan Swift and Richard Dawkins, respectively.

'Invict' sounds a bit like 'convict'. To be convicted in a courtroom is to be found guilty under the judgment of the court. The prosecution won and you lost. Most words with a '-vict' in them, like 'victim' or 'victor', suppose a situation where one has defeated another. "To the victor goes the spoils."

As a boy, I knew nothing about the derivation of words from Latin. Not *consciously*. But unconsciously, I knew more than I knew I did.

Children are language sponges. Our infant brains came hard-wired with 'depth grammar', as neurolinguists call it. It's an instinctive feel for syntax, for

stringing sentences together. This allows us, not just to understand other people's sentences, but to construct our own from an early age.

Though we take it for granted and rarely ponder it, our ability to wield words that *mean* something to someone else is an astonishing power.

Mind you, our unconscious minds may misfire at any age. We may utter 'malapropisms' that miss our meaning's mark. These are phrases that 'descend the staircase gracefully', as it were, until they miss the bottom step. For example: "Jesus healed the leopards", "Don't upset the apple tart," and "Encyclopedia Britannica is a suppository of human knowledge."

My made-up word, 'invict', didn't carry connotations of defeat, but it still sounded a note of victory. It simply meant that something or someone has been victorious, in a good way, at grabbing my attention and holding my interest. To be 'invicted' was to be positively enthralled and entranced by something.

I remember the moment I invented this word. It fell from my lips when, having splayed myself in front of the TV to watch an episode of *Bonanza*, my brother called me away to play.

"Sure," I said. "I'm not *invicted* yet anyway." There it was. What was I trying to say?

I'd noticed that there came a point in every experience of TV watching when I'd become hopelessly *invicted*. If I didn't, I probably wouldn't carry on watching; not unless I was made to do so, as when my siblings and I were made to watch the Queen's Message before opening Christmas gifts.

But if I truly wanted to continue watching, it was because I'd reached that precious point in time when the drama had begun to enthrall me. Would Gilligan and the Skipper get off the Island this time? I needed to know. Would the Professor's jerry-rigged radio work? Where would the plot take them next week? I was, in my own word, 'invicted'.

The TV writers who put those clever, dreaded words at the end of an episode, "To Be Continued..." – I even remember it happening at the end of a *Get Smart* episode, if you can believe it – must have had a feel for the experience I call 'inviction'. They used it to ensure my return the following week, "same Bat-Time, same Bat-Channel."

Why is there no word for this experience? There ought to be. I propose 'invict'. Like good religion, good drama *invicts* me. And, I'm fear, so does a lot of bad drama. Bad religion too? I hope not.

The Drama of an Invicted Life

Most plays, movies, TV shows, and novels purport to be a 'slice-of-life', even if it's a science fiction blockbuster with alien life forms set in a galaxy far, far away; or maybe it's a children's tale and all the characters are animals; or it's Middle Earth, peopled with Hobbits, Elves, and Orcs. Whatever it may be, its source lies in our own humanity.

Of course, it's all *fiction*. Fiction means 'made-up'. But made-up things *can* depict reality. They truly can. In fact, fiction reveals depths and aspects of our human reality that we'd otherwise never know.

And reality, seen clearly, is very *invicting*.

We recognise ourselves, our real humanity, in every kind of drama. It's present in the kinds of character on display, in our understanding of their motives, in the scripted lines they speak as though they're thinking them up on the spot, in their actions and reactions to each other, and in the plot that carries them along like the current in a river. We 'get it' because we 'get them'.

If we didn't get it, if we couldn't recognise some aspect of our own humanity set in a time and place that we find credible (however fantasy-filled), the drama would never have the power to invict us.

Drama *distills* reality. It can never *replicate* reality word for word, item for item, and deed for deed. It shouldn't. What point would there be in that?

Paint, once it's applied to a wall, must be allowed to dry. But who would *pay* to watch this happen? (Strangely, and perhaps sadly, *avant-garde* fans of 'performance art' might.)

In this sense, too, all drama is fiction. It strips away life's boring bits. It reveals reality by removing most of it from view. We never see the hero in a 'made-for-TV' crime drama prepare a whole meal and eat it, make the bed, sleep for eight long hours on the screen, or wait for forty minutes for a doctor's appointment while staring at the clock. These 'real life' events may be *suggested* on the screen, even depicted in part, but they'll never be shown 'as is'. That would never invict us.

Instead, when the wizened detective heads for the crime scene, we see him stub out his cigarette and take a surreptitious swig from his hip flask. He yells at the starry-eyed rookie to hurry up and get in the car. He gets behind the wheel and pulls into traffic without looking. They exchange a few words that somehow hint at the detective's tragic past. But a journey that should take thirty minutes in real life takes thirty seconds of 'screen time'.

When they arrive, they find that ‘forensics’ have encircled the body with yellow tape. The detective rips through it, crouches down, examines the corpse for twelve seconds, winces, stands, sighs, lights another cigarette, and growls, “Looks like blunt force trauma. Time of death?”. Another ninety-five seconds have passed.

By the time the credits roll, he’ll have quarrelled with his ex-wife, then his boss (who won’t fire him because he’s just too damn good at what he does), fired his gun in vain, sustained an injury in hand-to-hand combat requiring a surprising level athleticism (on the part of his stunt double?), solved the crime, put the ‘perp’ behind bars, bought the rookie a drink, and growled in a gravelly voice, “You may just make senior detective after all, kid.” All in ninety minutes.

Even ‘documentary realism’ distils its subject matter. The director edits many hours of footage, finding and keeping only those moments that, when knit together in just the right way, most truly reveal its subject matter. If they do this well, and if we’re interested in the subject, the film will invict us.

But this kind of distilling doesn’t just happen in drama, does it? It’s how whisky and other ‘spirits’ are made. Distillation concentrates the essence, the ‘spirit’ of something, condensing it and bottling it. It packs a powerful punch. It’s a bit dangerous, too, but very invicting. For that word, ‘whisky’, comes from two Gaelic words, *uisge beatha*, “the water of life”.

Curious, isn’t it, that those words, ‘spirit’ and ‘water of life’, should have a home in religion too?

But why shouldn’t they? The Bible is a book of foundational *stories*. They distil life’s meaning in dramatic fashion, revealing life’s deeper reality. If its spirit speaks to us, it will intoxicate us and invict us. Otherwise, we won’t ‘get it’. Christian worship is a kind of drama, too; though it’s hard to discern drama in the clumsy, chatty informality of so much Protestant worship.

Perhaps it’s because we fear intoxication. Perhaps we fear inviction in the drama of our own lives. Perhaps we shouldn’t.

There’s more to this. There always is. But let it be for another time, lest I unin vict you.

Yours in the faith,
Andrew