

## Words matter. They govern our thinking. So why do we abuse them?

Just like the word 'Leadership', the good word 'heroism' is endlessly devalued by the labelling of chefs, guitarists, comedians, footballers, and indeed anybody that takes someone's fancy as a 'hero', although they have done nothing heroic in any meaningful way, and mostly they may have just done their job well. We see this in titles of TV series, book titles, in the content of lazy media and posts of the Twitterati who use this important word, the heading of an idea which we need to put to better use for thinking with, in the most trivialising of ways.



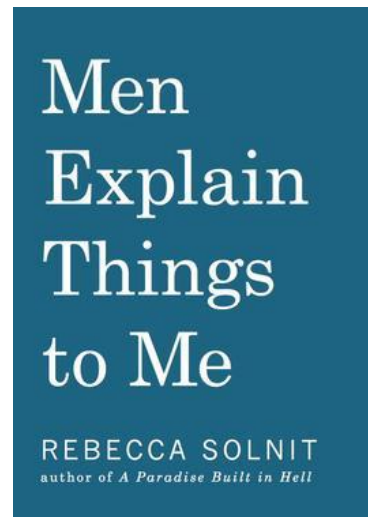
Rebecca Solnit. Image from <https://inews.co.uk/>

Now the awful situation in the Ukraine is bringing home a new reality, a new awareness, and that should include about the abuse of words.

Rebecca Solnit, an original thinker and a fine essayist, has written in *The Guardian* [this](#) week about the war in Ukraine, taking care to work with the word 'hero' in a meaningful way, making it a concept of her own and one that we might find useful too.

Writing in the context of Ukraine, she says,

...there is more to heroism than physical courage. It is first of all a commitment to something beyond the self in times of peace as well as war. It can be the steadfast dedication to a goal or principle, the choice of the more difficult but idealistic path, the commitment to others. It can be a disruptive force, since it's a characteristic of human beings who prize meaning, purpose, solidarity, and principle more than the things money can buy and corporations can sell. Selfishness and self-absorption make us good consumers and obedient citizens, or rather people not much bothering with citizenship as participation in public life and the collective good.

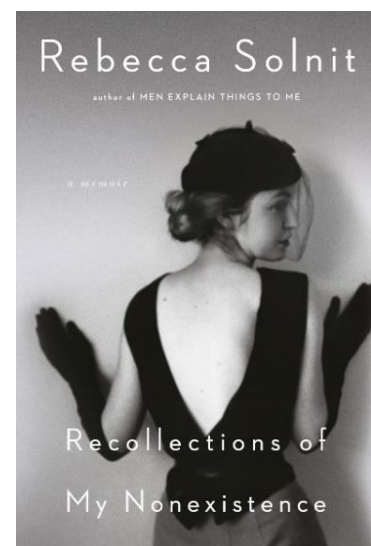


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The heroic as I'd like it defined is at odds with this kind of rampant individualism just as citizens are the antithesis of consumers. If the consumer is focused on acquisition and the self, the citizen is focused on participation and the wider realms of the community or the nation or the world.

...

Reminding us of who human beings can be, what it looks like to stand on principle, why it's worth fighting whether or not you believe you can win, is a gift Ukrainians have given us. They remind us who we can be, and in facing the other crises of our time, who we need to be.



Our words matter. They govern our thinking. Our thinking governs our conduct.

We note two observations about how words and language matter in general from two other thinkers. One is by John Maynard Keynes and the other by Benjamin Lee Whorf:

- “Language shapes the way we think and determines what we can think about” (Whorf).
- “Confusion of thought and feeling leads to confusion of speech” (Keynes).

These statements point to one important aspect of how we think: we think with language. And this matters because our thinking governs our conduct.

If there is any lingering doubt, that words and language matter is conclusively demonstrated by Victor Klemperer, who explored how the corruption of language by the Nazi Regime in Germany in the 1930s created the culture, climate of opinion, and cast of mind which brought the unprecedented and unspeakable evil of the Holocaust to the world.

Klemperer, a university-based philologist observed and recorded in a diary the daily corruption of the common language as the Nazis took total control of German society and created and imposed the ‘language of the Third Reich’.

Klemperer writes:

...language does not simply write and think for me, it also increasingly dictates my feelings and governs my entire spiritual being the more unquestioningly and unconsciously I abandon myself to it. *And what happens if the cultivated language is made up of poisonous elements or has been made the bearer of poisons? Words can be like tiny doses of arsenic: they are swallowed unnoticed, appear to have no effect, and then after a little time the toxic reaction sets in after all.*

Klemperer gives 'fanatical' as an example of how a common word with an established connotation, in this case with a negative sense of excessive, is corrupted by repetition of a positive sense of loyalty to Hitler:

If someone replaces the words 'heroic' and 'virtuous' with 'fanatical' for long enough, he will come to believe that a fanatic really is a virtuous hero, and that no one can be a hero without fanaticism.

If Klemperer doesn't convince us to take care of our words, our words will take care of us. Then we will remain in the trouble that has been our reality for the last decade.

If you'd like to learn more about how words matter, especially in business organisations, sign up to our newsletter [here](#) for news about our forthcoming book *The Leadership Mind* where Connell Fanning and Assumpta O'Kane provide a sustainable and workable concept for practitioners to use in their thinking and practice about leadership.

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