

LYLE'S LAWS

Lyle's Law of Whining

Curse the darkness—but not for long

HAVE YOU EVER NOTICED THAT many families develop a special language—words or phrases that make no sense to an outsider but convey a meaning to other family members? In our family, we ate *mitmy* because that was as close as our oldest daughter could come to saying *ice cream* when she was learning how to talk. When someone went unstable, they were said to *spaz out* or *go beseeched* (never mind where those came from). And my son and I still say that things are *simular* instead of *similar* because that was a pronounciational peculiarity of one of his teachers. We had dozens of such expressions, and even now when we are together some of these words surface, much to the consternation—and mystification—of newcomers to the family.

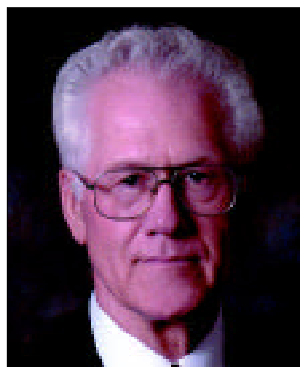
Of course it is not only natural families that generate special languages. When I was *deaning*, the associate deans and I formed a very close-knit group and, in the manner of a family, shared some expressions that others found a little strange. For instance, when we were discussing an issue and it became apparent that it was outside our area of expertise, it would be identified as an *atomic-bomb problem*. We didn't know much about atomic bombs, either.

Probably the most useful expression, however, would usually surface when we were faced with an unpleasant situation such as a budget cut, insufficient laboratory space, or a bad printing job. We would grouse about the situation for awhile and make all of the usual observations about how unfair it was and how others were being treated better, and so on and so on. Eventually, however, someone would invariably say, "Well, now that we have cursed the darkness . . ." That was our signal to move on. The whining had been done, but now it was time to figure out what we were going to do.

The complaining was not totally unproductive. It was a form of catharsis, letting us vent our spleens and express our frustrations (I love that spleen-venting expression). I know that spleen means ill will and bad temper and other such stuff that we need to get rid of or vent. On the other hand, the expression conjures visions of a visceral organ exuding some nasty stuff—much more colorful. The downside of darkness cursing, though, is that it tends to focus attention on what others are doing to us and not on what we can do for ourselves.

Students often develop a penchant for darkness cursing. I presume this is because many of the unpleasant things that happen to them are, indeed, associated with an action taken by someone else. An example might be a

pop quiz given by a teacher. CURSE that teacher who gave a quiz when I wasn't prepared! Or the student might have to take a class at 8:00 a.m. when he really preferred an 11:00 a.m. section. CURSE that person who schedules the classes! Or the cafeteria food isn't as good as Mom's. CURSE that food service cook! (A little Navy wisdom here: NEVER curse the cook.)



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Of course, the practice is not limited to students. When I received my bachelor's degree, I went to work for a large aerospace company where I started in what was known as the evaluation department. The new engineers didn't have desks. Instead, we were located at workbenches, where we got the not-so-subtle message that we were there to work and to get our hands dirty doing it. At the bench next to mine was a guy who griped from the time he arrived in the morning until the end of the workday, an event that he

observed with great punctuality. While most engineers spent a few months to a year in evaluation before moving to design or another more advanced job, this guy had been there for about three years. And I presume that he was cursing the darkness all that time. It never occurred to him that all of his cursing wasn't solving his problem. I have no idea whatever happened to him, but I know he was still there when I left.

So, once the darkness has been dealt with, what should you do? Well, the first thing to do is to change the focus. Instead of concentrating on the outside and analyzing what others are doing to you, look inward—at yourself or your organization—and see if you are contributing to the situation that has you so upset. The student who flunked the pop quiz has no reason to curse the teacher.

The problem was not with the quizzer, but with the quizee. And the engineer who couldn't get out of the evaluation department? I can't believe he was not bright

enough and well educated enough to be successful. He just needed to get his attention turned from the outside—the people he perceived as giving him bad assignments and bad evaluations—back to himself. He needed to light a candle—or an even bigger fire.

Of course it is quite possible that we are not a part of the problem. It does happen that unpleasant situations are inflicted upon us by others and that we are now simply faced with new facts of life. The student who didn't like the eight o'clock class probably didn't do anything to deserve being sentenced to a semester of early rising. But that doesn't change the need to redirect the focus from the outside to the inside. The world is not going to change to alleviate your darkness. It is you who have to

take some action to mitigate, to adapt to, or perhaps even to take advantage of the new situation.

The best thing to do, then, is to go ahead and curse the darkness—for a little while. It feels good, and you need it. Once that is done, however, it is time, as the coach used to say, to pull up your socks and start solving the problem. Stop looking at the outside, and start looking at yourself. If you are part of the problem, see what you can do to change. If you are not contributing to the problem, come to grips with the fact that it is you who will have to come up with a solution, and get started. Whatever the source of the problem, you are the source of the solution.

See you next issue.

—Lyle D. Feisel, *Iowa Alpha '61*, Ph.D., P.E.

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