

COLORFUL WORDS

By Baruch Cohon

“Barnum,” a favorite Broadway musical of ours, features a song called “The Colors of my Life” which contrasts the personalities of the legendary showman P. T. Barnum and his sweetheart Chairy, using an allegory of color. Pastels reflect her delicacy, while blazing saturates reflect his flamboyance. Pinks and greys satisfy her tastes. He must have shining green and gold. But neither of them would settle for black and white.

Indeed color activates, informs and represents us in countless ways, most particularly in our speech. Take a few examples.

Red in the color of ink represents debt, commercial failure, and on my high school report card it warned of pending academic failure too. If you “see red,” you are working up a rage like a bull – a legendary bull, by the way, since we are now told that the color isn’t what makes the bull charge. A red-blooded man is a potential hero. But a scarlet woman is a walking scandal. A stop sign is always red, as is a traffic light. Colors of politics can be surprising, as in the current designation of “red states” for Republicans, and “blue states” for Democrats. Red for Republicans? And here we thought red was the color of Communism. Of course this would logically lead to “white states” for Independents or a third party, indicating that it takes all three flag-colors of Americans to make a nation.

White in our spectrum is the presence of all the colors that rainbows and prisms can reveal. It symbolizes purity, as in the bride’s wedding dress. Then again if we want to disguise something wrong we “whitewash” it. A white flag signals surrender. A white coat can stimulate panic in a patient. Maybe that’s why nurses don’t wear those starched white uniforms any more.

Black, the absence of light and all its colors, is the sign of mourning. But to be “in the black” is the absence of red ink, and the presence of profit. Black-hearted villains in classic literature represent evil. But in our time “black” became “beautiful.” As a racial designation, it identifies people most of whom are not really black at all – any more than other groups are really white or red or yellow.

Blue-bloods and blue-noses are snooty plutocrats. (Or pluty snootocrats, as the case may be.) Dealing with them can cause the rest of us to “sing the blues.” On the other hand, a blue sky means no clouds, no trouble, no worries. The old Gershwin tune recognized the contrast: “Blue days, all of them gone / Nothing but blue skies from now on.” Unless you lived in Philadelphia where they had Sunday Blue Laws. Suffering from cold weather or frustration can make you “blue in the face.” And from infancy on, blue is a male color.

Pink of course is the female color. Feeling fine and healthy means you are “in the pink.” As compared with feeling “blue,” does that mark the male gender as frustrated and the female as blossoming? No comment.

Alongside the pinks and blues, lately, come shades of lavender to represent a third gender. No comment.

Green brings us a handful of associations. It's the color of envy. The color of money, too, at least in the U.S. If you're a talented gardener you have a "green thumb." In the Old West a tenderfoot, a novice on the frontier, was a "greenhorn." On the East Coast the same word described a new immigrant. It was even taken into Yiddish – *Er is a greener*, they would say of a recent arrival. And when that streetlight turns green you'd better go; just listen to the horns honking behind you.

Of all the colors, though, it seems to me that yellow takes the bum rap. How did this happy hue of sunshine become symbolic of cowardice? "He's got a yella streak up his back a foot wide..."

Brown doesn't do so well either. Ever been in a brown study? And we won't even talk about an expression like "brown-nosing."

In fact, before indulging in any "purple prose" I should come to some conclusion here: is there any overall significance to all these colorful words?

Maybe there is. Certainly we sympathize with those folks whose colorblindness deprives them of some of the visual delight the rest of us get from the colors in our world. I wouldn't want to go back to the days of black-and-white movies or TV, would you? But perhaps the bottom line in this whole subject is the fact that the same color can suggest different ideas in different circumstances. Just as the same personality can create opposite impressions on you and on me. It takes all colors to complete the human spectrum.