

OPENING THE FLOODGATES TO A PANDORA'S BOX OF WORMS New Mixed and Mashed Metaphors

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In past *Word Ways* articles, I've differentiated between true mixed metaphors, which combine incongruous, absurd, or unreal images ("It's the whole kettle of fish in a nutshell") and what I call *mashed metaphors*—where clashing tropes and clichés aren't contradictory or impossible, but which nevertheless create an awkward and ludicrous effect because of their proximity ("Investors smelling trouble can vote with their feet").

This installment presents new examples of both species.

First, my logophilic friend and mentor Richard Lederer generously shared his private collection of mangled metaphors perpetrated by students, including these choice specimens:

"Skating on thin ice can get you into hot water." "Please don't sweep the dirty linen under the rug." "It's time to step up to the plate and cut the mustard." "She's robbing Peter to pay the piper." "The president hit the bull's eye on the nose."

Now, here are examples I've garnered over the past year from newspapers and broadcast media. These four meet the definition of a genuine mixed metaphor:

- "We look for any opportunity to put a toe into the cultural stew."
- "I was definitely on the fence, but decided to go with the flow."
- "We don't want to be playing chicken with the debt ceiling."
- "Studios have been shifting their resources toward what are variously called blockbuster, event, or tent pole movies. . . . 'We haven't seen many tent poles blow up,' [said an industry expert]."

The more abundant mashed metaphors:

- “It was a little too close to the bone, and I didn’t want to blindside people.”
- “Were we to make a similar mistake, we’d be right back in the penalty box. So we’re not really out of the woods.”
- “But history shows that Iran always lands on its feet. I’m not abandoning ship.”
- “We’re going to continue to work through the bumpy road, and we’re hopeful that we can get it back on track.”
- “The two executives, and other like them, often have great difficulty recognizing their condition and pulling themselves up and out by their bootstraps before the depression snowballs downhill.”
- “As an addict and alcoholic, the end of my road was different. . . . But we were all in the same boat.”
- “Sheldon G. Adelson . . . is a major supporter of Israel, where he is a larger-than-life lightning rod.”
- “Everybody agrees that the hunt and recovery [of some valuable paintings] was not going to be a walk in the park. . . . But it’s disappointing that they are throwing in the towel.”

A pair with *multiple* mashed metaphors:

- “We need them to step away from the brink, stop the gridlock and work with Democrats to make progress. . . . If they don’t, a train wreck is inevitable. . . .”
- “The professor’s maverick views [on foreign aid] fly in the face of an enormous global effort, and he paints with a very broad brush. . . . Aid is not a door that should slam shut.”

Finally, this gem from a news report quoting a geek explaining how security problems in open-source software can be found and fixed by mobs of techies: “Given enough eyeballs, all bugs are shallow.”

Credit: The amusing multiple mixed metaphor that serves as the title of this article was found here: <http://www.esmerel.com/circle/wordlore/>