“HAVING TOUGH CONVERSATIONS IS NEVER EASY”
Another Roundup of Risible Redundancies

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A major corporation ran a full-page newspaper ad conveying a public-service message. Included was the assertion: “Having tough conversations is never easy.”

I suspect that many readers responded: “Duh!” You’d think the communications specialists at such organizations, or the layers of executives and consultants who presumably reviewed drafts of the ad, would have known better.

Of course, it’s possible that the redundancy was deliberately facetious. But given the context, which was deadly serious, it’s unlikely that coruscating wit was intended. A search turned up the identical phrase, also without apparent humorous intent, on two business sites devoted to advice on employee management and motivation.

This is the third article on redundancies I’ve written for Word Ways (see November 2010 and August 2017). But this genre of linguistic solecism (not a tautology because other kinds of solecism exist!) is committed so frequently that I’ve since collected a passel of new examples from the media. So it’s time for another roundup of unintentionally amusing real-life repetitive utterances. If you don’t immediately see the problem in any of these specimens, read it again more carefully. There will be an “exam test”!

- “He is a man without comparable peer.”
- Interviewer on a radio show: “In the time we have left remaining. . . .”
- Headline: “Trailblazers Far Ahead of Their Times.”
- “The iconic British brand [Rolls-Royce], whose cars start at $250,000 and up. . . .”
- “There are 20,000 or so known proteins in the human proteome, as the collective sum of proteins in any organism is called.”
- In an obituary for a young-adult novelist: “Suddenly I began to notice how many things were unfair to girls, and how angry people got if you complained about it,’ Barbara thinks to herself in one passage.”
- “One frequently cited Harvard study showed that improving air quality caused mental cognition to soar.”
• “He selectively cherry-picks data in support of the existing distribution of power.”

• Heard on The Moth, the popular storytelling radio program and podcast: “She was the most beautiful thing walking on a pair of two legs.”

• “The article is a sober alarm about how many species we’ve lost while no one, except for a small few, has even noticed. . . .”

Also, in a Sharper Image catalog, I found a light bulb that “levitates in midair.”

Regarding many of these examples, you wonder if an alternative could exist. “Mr. Aliyev was a trained surgeon when he married. . . .” One hopes there are no untrained ones!

And from a TV review: The science-fiction show The Orville “emulates the original [Star Trek] series to a degree somewhere between sincere homage and creepy necrophilia.” Is there any other kind?

The question arises: Why do people commit these errors? One reason is a misguided desire to convey emphasis, as with “free gift” and “advance warning.” In other cases, a phrase has become so embedded in the language that it’s used unconsciously, such as “above and beyond,” “bits and pieces,” “cease and desist.”

Almost always, redundancies are mistakes. They make the writer or speaker appear ignorant or illiterate or stylistically inelegant. Richard Kallan, the leading authority on the subject, says: “More often, however, the use of tautologies is unintentional and problematic. The excess word or phrase tends to weigh down the text and slow the reader. Too, it may cloud what is meant. . . . Such inadvertent comic constructions undermine the writer’s authority.”

The above exegesis is from the Introduction to Kallan’s clever collection of amusing redundancies: Armed Gunmen, True Facts, and Other Ridiculous Nonsense (Pantheon, 2005). The book is still in print in hardcover and Kindle editions.


Celebrity gossip news flash: Jennifer Lopez and Alex Rodriguez are engaged. Both are friends with Jessica Canseco, the former wife of Jose Canseco, who has accused Rodriguez of sleeping with his ex-wife. On March 12 of this year, Jessica tweeted: “Those false accusations Jose is making are not true!”

To conclude, we should always aim for literacy and respect the standards of the English language. In other words, let’s “raise them up,” not “lower them down.”

Credit: Thanks, as always, to Richard Kallan, this time for the excerpt from his book, the list of locutions, and the Canseco tweet.