

the reactor

By Paul Azevedo



There's magic in words. Some good magic. Some bad. English is the great conglomerate of languages. It has absorbed words from hundreds of languages and cultures. I like to think that even a small difference in wording can change the mood of a sentence, a paragraph, or a whole article.

For example, last week, when I wrote about Pedro Rock, I described it as "moody, arrogant . . .", and added "If you can say those things about something that does not live."

THE EDITOR changed that last to "inanimate."

Same meaning, but latinized and too pretentious, I think.

Each of us speaks, and thinks, in a subtly different, even unique, language. No wonder we don't understand each other.

Words can change a man's life. Subtle differences in style and meaning can drag him down. Or lift him up.

I used the word "drunk" the other day in this column. A friend reminded me what a difference that one word can make in a man's life. If his problem is alcohol, and he can label himself "an alcoholic" rather than "a drunk," it may be easier for him to ask for help.

Same basic meaning, but one label lifts him up, the other label he either rejects, or it adds too heavy a burden of self-contempt.

TO SOME "drunk" says — "sidd row, flophouses, bottles shared in doorways." Because that isn't the way they live, they tell themselves they don't have a problem. They are fooling themselves.

So . . . they keep heading at top speed toward the edge of the ledge; hurting themselves, hurting others, losing wives, friends, jobs, even lives.

Seems odd that a simple self-label—"I'm an alcoholic", might move a man toward sobriety and a better life. But the AA meetings in various Pacifica locations are full of people aware enough to see their problem as the illness it is. It takes a lot of awareness to admit this particular illness, out loud.

The magic of words.

ALCOHOL has been a part of the Coastside for many years. Some of our oldest businesses are bars. Al Sohl's, Winters, and Danmann's (of friendly memory) weathered the transition from sleepy rural town to urban bedroom.

I'm told there were six bars and one church in Sharp Park, in 1943. If my count is wrong, I know someone will correct me. A lot of people are still around who knew how important both the Little Brown Church and the neighborhood bars were in those days.

Even before, prohibition brought about a thriving business in the dark of the Sharp Park night, getting the stuff through the breakers and on its way to thirsty customers.

IF YOU have a friend who is looking for the answer to his alcoholic problem, don't send him to me. I'm the furthest thing from an expert. My only experience is watching people as they let themselves be dragged over the edge. It's especially sad to see present-day teenagers turning to alcohol as a "safe" alternative to drugs, and realize how similar they are to kids of 17 18

21, the ones I saw 25 years ago as they started drinking heavily, for reasons they themselves couldn't explain.

So many are dead. Auto accidents, in many cases, but also disease. Since Prohibition did not work, each one had to make his own decision.

THERE IS HELP available for those who want to change

their original decision and get out of the alcoholic maze. Call Pyramid Alternatives or Alcoholics Anonymous (see the Tribune's Community Calendar for the several Pacifica meetings held each week). The library has books and magazines to help. If it's a relative who drinks try Al-Anon, designed for those whose alcohol problem is not their own.

The blight isn't much helped by talent, intelligence, or high position. To judge by several past examples, in Pacifica, Sacramento and Washington, politicians are particularly vulnerable.

If you have never had an alcoholic friend, spouse, fellow worker, or relative, you're lucky. But at any random time you may get involved with an alcoholic.

It could change or shorten your life.

THE DRUNKEN driver isn't always an alcoholic, but usually he is.

If he is lucky enough to be arrested, and he is a friend of mine, (as has happened a couple of times) I can expect a 7 a.m. phone call pleading with me to intercede with the editor and keep his name out of Police Beat.

Since, if I'm picked up for drunken driving, I can expect to have my name prominently displayed in said police beat, I can offer my caller little.

"You shouldn't have let it happen" is small comfort in the cold, foggy dawn.

Friends are too hard to come by. I hate to see them drain away like a bottle of bourbon behind a busy bar.