

village view

by Andrea Leonard

Some words carry far more weight and meaning than one might expect from single-syllable nouns. Although they define substances instantly recognized when the word is used, and leave no confusion because of sound or pronunciation, they are more complex than appears possible at first glance.

When you hear someone say "salt", you probably envision the white granular substance resembling refined sugar or snow-white sand that we use to season our food.

You may picture a salt shaker, first, rather than salt itself. We use this word widely to describe something that gives flavor and zest. We speak of salty language; we speak of a sharp lively wit as salty. A sailor, particularly when old and experienced, is called an old salt.

On the other hand, when we're skeptical about something we "take it with a grain of salt" and mean we have reservations about the accuracy of what was said or reported.

If a man is "worth his salt", he's worthy of continued support and deserving of sustenance.

If money is saved or hoarded, it's salted away; if something is stored for future use, whether an edible or a material possession, it's salted down.

When we hear a good speaker give a lecture, we might be impressed with the way he "salts his message with anecdotes", but if a mine, for example, were "salted" with valuable minerals, it would mean a fraud was being attempted.

When salt was a far rarer condiment than it is today, it designated one's social standing at a formal party. Those guests seated "above the salt" at a dinner table were considered most socially-acceptable. Those "below the salt" had less social position (and were grateful to have been included among the guests at all!)

A person described as "the salt of the earth" represents an exemplary people and possesses the most admirable elements of mankind. This expression is found in the Bible (Matthew 5:13.)

Another word that seems, at first, to have a single and unmistakable meaning is "ice". A second look reveals some unusual things about this little word.

First, of course, we mean water that's frozen solid; but we could also mean anything resembling frozen water, such as a dessert of sherbet. Some people refer to a diamond or a collection of diamonds as ice. A frosted cake is said to be iced.

We speak of "breaking the ice" by relaxing tension or easing formality in a social situation. We also use this phrase when we make a beginning or start a new venture.

When something "cuts no ice" with us it has no influence or effect, and when we put something "on ice" we delay it until a later date or perhaps forever.

"On ice" also means held incommunicado, as well as held in readiness. In a game of cards it can mean a hand is certain to win.

Sometimes we speak of someone treading on this ice, and we mean they're in a risky situation or an uncertain ground.

We use such words as these in combinations with others and find their meanings change again.

We call certain marsh grasses "salt hay", houses of a certain architectural style "salt boxes"; we describe any period marked by extensive glaciation an "ice age", we call a waterproof bag used to relieve a headache or pain and swelling of a sprain, an "ice bag".

When we say iceberg sometimes we mean a massive floating body of ice and sometimes, a cold and aloof person.

Everyone knows what ice cream is, even my cat.

An ice-breaker is a sturdy ship or a protective pier -- or a conversation piece; ice hockey is a game; icemilk resembles ice cream; an ice needle floats high in the atmosphere, while an ice floe, an ice pack, and an ice field all float on water.

An ice pick is a tool; an ice plant has fleshy leaves and stems, bears white or pink flowers, and grows in southern Africa; and the ice point is the temperature at which pure water and ice are in equilibrium in a mixture at one atmosphere of pressure.

Finally, an icicle is a tapering spike of ice formed when dripping water freezes.

Our language is rich in words that spice our conversation without our thinking about them. We speak of ice and salt as naturally as of sea or vinegar, for example, but it's remarkable how much more we communicate with ice and salt.

We use other words in a similar fashion. One that comes readily to mind (naturally enough) is pepper. Others are air, hot and cold, colors such as red, green and blue, but not especially orange or purple.

Fire is one of the most vivid words in English, and when compared to a word like "daft" which has but one single use and connotation; fire is remarkably facile. It relates to all phases of combustion and all kinds of burning - from fuels to desire.

Fire means enthusiasm, brilliance, and inspiration; it refers to feelings of love or rage, to sensations of warmth and also to torment or tribulation.

To fire is to discharge - either from employment of a weapon - and also to ignite and to excite.

If we delay firing, we hang it; if we're foolhardy we play with it. If we're attacked, we're under it; if we respond, we take it.

If we ask questions, we open it; if we've been in danger, we've been through it. If we're attacked in more than one place, we're between two; if we're enthusiastic, we catch it.

If we bake a ceramic pot in a kiln, we fire it; if we dry or cure tobacco by heat, we fire it; if we shoot a cannon, we fire it. If we fire away, we commence; if we fire up, we become emotional.

Sometimes writing a column, I mentally paw through hundreds of words for the just-right one, for the single perfect combination of sounds to impart the precise and exact meaning I want to convey.

To be sure I've really gotten it, I'll turn to my dictionary - and then I'm lost. The hours I spend there, following clues, going from one word to another, leaping from the esses to the aitches, then to the ems and back again through esses to tees, you'd think I've taken leave of my senses. No. It's that words fascinate me.

If this particular column bores you (and it may, I know) bear with me, for there are others who delight in such exercises, who prefer them to crossword puzzles or mystery stories, or reading the sports page.

In Village View there's a little something for everyone if I accomplish what I set out to do.