

In the one-to-one presence of one who fluently speaks a language you speak only haltingly, you may find yourself relying on the other's superior skill with the question

## "HOW DO YOU SAY.....IN.....?"

Let's play with this common human experience.

1 Here, Calvin & his imagined-alive pet tiger are playing with a slang word in American English and experiencing (1) the word itself as uproarious & (2) the conversation intellectually (!) uplifting. (Being fluent in American English, I did not need to look up this idiom, but did: "slang to vomit" [CAMB.DICT. OF AM.ENG.]; RH.DICT.<sup>2</sup>, "1955-60, expressive word of uncertain origin".)

To cast this in the mold of this Thinksheet's title, "barf" is how you say "vomit" in American slang.

### CALVIN AND HOBBS

By Bill Watterson



2 The present multilingual pope, the most traveled in Vatican history, has asked this Thinksheet's question thousands of times. He's a compassionate intellectual: both the noun & the adjective incline him to be idiom- & nuance-respectful. He does so well in getting it just right that I can't recall any newsworthy boo-boo (yep, more American slang) during his long incumbency.

3 How do you say "save" in Latin? You say "liberate." Anyway, that's the way it is in the Vulgate of Jas.4.12, which today I came across in my daily reading of the Gk./Lat. NT: only God has the power to save (σωσαι *sosai*) & destroy (απολέσαι *apolesai*-here, cause to "perish forever," as in Jn.3.16). The Latin of it reverses: the power to destroy and to "liberate" (*liberare*, translated from the Latin, in Ronald Knox's Bible, as to "set free"; since Cicero uses *perdere* for losing a lawsuit, Jerome [the Vulgate] may use *liberare* as the antonym: "the law-giver and judge" [as God is titled in this vs.] "set[s] [us] free" from the case--God's case!--against us; & of course Knox, a spectacular Latinist, picked up the courtroom atmosphere [as W.Brueggemann does in his OT theology, which claims the courtroom as the OT's dominant social metaphor]).

So what? Think of the resonances of "liberate" in American history, including **liberation theology** (which started south of our border, in countries speaking Latin-based languages). Think of the touching pathos of Woodstock & "the '60s" (but they weren't all James-Dean-like rebels without a cause). Think of all the victim cards played in the past forty years by millions having complaints, gripes, alienations, antipathies to what is in the name both of what should be & of what can never be short of kingdom come.

But it would be wrong to be either for or against "liberation" in general. And it would be wrong to let the Latin of Jas.4.12 (meaning "liberate," "set free") control the meaning of the word in the original ("save"): salvation includes, but is multilevel, more than liberation. The "**freedom songs**" of "the movements" these past four decades were utopian, promising more than was possible & judging more severely than was just.

INSTANCE: In his just-published JEFFERSON'S PILLOW, black-activist Roger Wilkins (born '32) repents of his having judged more severely than was just. He

was leading an anti-apartheid demo (with three other poster-carriers, in the rain) in front of the S.African embassy, Wash., DC, when suddenly he thought of what would happen to him if he were doing same in front of Pretoria's parliament: death or life-imprisonment (which Mandela got). Thinking about the difference, he gave thanks for our Founding Fathers, including the slave-owners among them. The slave-owners! Formerly he'd derided as hypocrites Washington, Jefferson, Madison, & Mason (the four this book of his studies).

Later, he gave thanks for the women's liberation movement, which taught him the truth that *all* American males born the year he was were sexists, so taught not only by their fathers but also by their mothers--as those four Founding Fathers were taught by their parents that slavery was natural & right. How, then, could he continue to be harsh on them for breathing in their culture's atmosphere? This pondering set him free--yes, "liberated" him--to give God thanks for those four slave-owners. To understand moral ambiguity & complexity, he says, "I had to get older."

PARALLEL: Today it's fashionable for intellectuals to decry, as postcolonialists & postmodernists, empire. But crush Tito & you get Milosevic; crush Rome & you get Mediterranean & European chaos. Rome: (1) Remember the empire as oppressor in the Bible's last book; but also (2) Think of the empire as liberating its peoples from internecine & international chaos & mayhem (e.g., Ro.13).

As Wilkens was (& is) free to demonstrate within very wide limits, for three years Paul in Ephesus was free to tell the Story in public places (the streets, the agora, the places of public entertainment [the theater, seating 25,000, being the largest in the empire]) & in private situations (the synagogue, which however after three months of hearing about Jesus as central to the messianic hope refused him further access; the school of Tyrannus, homes). (Two months ago, I imagined his presence as I walked through ancient Ephesus.) The imperial government was latitudinarian on religion (except for its insistence on the pinch-of-incense ritual, a rite warranting the empire's right to rule its peoples), & became concerned only when Paul's missionary efforts became so successful as to threaten a prominent business of the city (Ac.19.23-41;20.1--note the friendliness of "some of the provincial authorities," the unfriendliness of the Jews, & the mayor's theater-defense of Paul as not having "said evil things about our goddess"). Further, the government did not deprive Paul of his means of livelihood (tent-&-awning-making beginning before sunrise and closing at 11am, then five hours of missionizing, then return to work at 4pm till dark) on the ground of his becoming increasingly a public nuisance.

You anti-imperialists, do you really think, in light of the present horrors & impasses, that it was a Good Idea that the British left their "Palestine Mandate" (1948)? Is the Wilsonian "peoples' right of self-determination" sacred, untouchable even when it destroys people's hopes & sometimes the people themselves? (Am I a pro-imperialist? Of course not! But both it & its opposite should be among what Lincoln called "the dogmas of the past.")

4 Some 600 languages exist in written form because of the Bible: Christian-missionary **translators** millions of times asked the natives (aborigenes, whatever) the question which is this Thinksheet's title, phonetically jotted down the replies, determined upon an appropriate alphabet, wrote a dictionary & grammar, put the Gospel of John into writing, got "Jn." (then the other Gospels, then the whole NT, then the OT) printed, taught the natives to read. Of course as a linguist I find this history of translating-printing-distributing the Bible fascinating, especially the occasions when the answer to the question is "You don't. You can't word-for-word. So you must do it by dynamic equivalence (phrase-for-word). And if you do it from English into the native tongue, it's a case of cultural imperialism: Scripture (i.e., the Hebrew-Aramaic-Greek Bible) squeezed into your native tongue & squeezed again to "render" some particular English translation(s) into their speech--though a surprising number of the missionary-translators (i.e., the one who produced the Bible in Hawaiian) moved directly from the Bible itself (yes, in Hebrew-Aramaic-Greek) directly into the native language.

The Bible's great words need themselves to be heard-spoken-felt-thought.