



“Social Distancing” must be the do-not-use-word* of the year!

In Germany, we established an award for the “UnWort” of the year. Social distancing must be that word this year. Because it is just plainly wrong. And crazy enough,.. it stuck in many languages and in different countries. Native English or not.

We Germans get expressions and their meaning that stem from other languages or cultures sometimes wrong. So I am not wondering anymore if we are using them in a different way than intended (as are Americans often too, btw). But when the expression “social distancing” was used in the States in the same way as in Germany, I thought “who the heck was thinking”?

With COVID (or whatever you are calling it) we do not need “social distancing” – we need **physical distancing**. We may practice this by “distant socializing” to stick with the word play, but anything that drives wedges to frail social systems will only harm us in times of perceived crisis. Those that are vulnerable feel even more helpless; those that are socially disadvantaged, find themselves even more isolated.

Words form our thinking and can become unifying or divisive. And constant talk about socially distancing ourselves did not create the rifts that are showing in many societies now, but they certainly did not help to mend them.

Carelessness with language is accompanying the thoughtless handling of resources and our superficial engagement on the inter-human level. Neither of the three should be our goal or even acceptable norm.

Lets work towards becoming clearer in stating what we mean,... and many conflicts will be reduced in scale. Clearer around trade-offs and repercussions of our actions. Clearer also in our expectations from our fellow human; our friend, colleague or neighbor.... It can only help.

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* <http://www.unwortdesjahres.net> Translated definition: Linguistic expressions become do-not-use words when they are used by speakers either thoughtlessly or with intentions worthy of criticism, and this in a public context (see the criteria of the action). The criticism of them is an expression of the hope for more responsibility in linguistic action.
