

Why Is Everyone Overwhelmed?

It seems that the term “overwhelmed” is getting a significant amount of ink these days. What does it mean and why do people use it so often?

According to the online etymology dictionary, it is a mid-14th Century word describing, “to turn upside, overthrow, knock over.” It is allegedly from the Middle English *whelmen* “to turn upside down.” So “overwhelmed,” as I suspected, is even worse than just being “whelmed.” When someone is overwhelmed, they are not just knocked down or thrown; they are completely submerged.

It appears that the word may have its origin in the nautical realm. It might have to do with a boat being washed over by a big wave.

Today everyone seems overwhelmed, not merely whelmed, mind you, but overwhelmed. How did we get to the point in our society where people feel not just flooded over but devastated? Everyone feels whelmed from time to time. After all, life presents us with challenges whether it be work, parents, siblings, or children. Sometimes we are like a boat just being hit by a big wave, but fortunately most of us do not get rolled over by that wave; in other words, we are not really overwhelmed.

Yet in modern parlance, it is typical to overstate everything. Our political opponents are not just disagreeable or even wrong, but rather they are evil and they seek the destruction of civilization. Our annoying friends are not just irritating, but rather they seek our demise and want nothing more than to degrade us.

Being whelmed is not enough. We feel suffocated, immersed, drowned and in a word, overwhelmed.

When someone says to me they feel overwhelmed because they have a lot to do at work or tons of assignments in school, I am reminded of my father’s response when I complained about my first year in law school. “Son, why don’t you quit law school and go down to the river and learn how to slug rats?” It was not exactly the most comforting fatherly advice, but it did make me realize that I could be doing a lot worse than working 60 hours a week on the law and holding a part-time job, while making sure that I could cobble together \$.60 for a beer at one of the better Washington, D.C. establishments. That’s right, \$.60 in those days. It seemed like a lot back then, but it was worth it since every Saturday night an elderly gent would strum on his guitar, “Georgia on My Mind.” He was every bit as good as the original by Hoagy Carmichael but try as he did, he was no Ray Charles. A beer and some music Saturday night enabled me from being overwhelmed and instead I was merely whelmed.

I propose that we all get more realistic about our use of language. Perhaps instead of complaining that we are overwhelmed when we get an extra assignment at

work, or less than an A+ in school, we ought to start describing ourselves as merelywhelmed. Think of all of the other words that we can downgrade, so that we do not have to be so full of angst and anger. Instead of saying that we “hate” Donald Trump or Joe Biden, we can say that we do not understand or appreciate their approach to the political environment. Okay, that is too complicated. It is easier to say that we just hate our enemy, since most of us find it impossible to follow the dictate of Leviticus 18 & 19 that we should not hold a grudge but rather love our neighbor as ourselves. “Hate” is just one word and therefore easy to subscribe to. Loving, forgiving, and all that sort of stuff takes a lot of work, and all those extra words create a barrier whereas simple hate; all it takes is just one word.

Other descriptions, less utilized but still part of the English lexicon, are; overtaxed, overwrought, oversight, oversized, overthinking, overkill: You get the idea. We are a society that is “over.” It is not enough to just “kill,” we must “overkill.”

I am sick and tired of all of the “overs.” I think it is time to be more realistic and just say it like it is, without the added drama. Another dictionary, online, attributes “over” to the Old English *Ofer*, from the root *uper*. “Over” and its dramatic relations, says the internet, are widely used as prefixes, and sometimes could be used with negative force. Well knock me over! I did not need to read the online dictionary to know that over could be used negatively.

I also learned, studying this most interesting subject which is putting most of my readers to sleep, that “over” is to be compared to the Gothic *ufarmunnon* “to forget,” *ufar-swaran* “to swear falsely.” In Old English the word is alleged to originate from *ofercraeft* “fraud.”

There is lots of Old English that we do not use anymore and who knows just how accurate these internet artificial intelligence dictionaries really are. According to my reading, however, there is even such a thing as “over-love.”

Oddly, and consistent with the complex history of the English language, the word “over” frequently means “less” or “little.” The word *overlitel* is from the mid-14th Century “too small.”

I prefer the concept that “over” means something like “over the top.” But “over” could be a minimalization, rather than a, “hey that’s too much.”

So, the next time you feel “overwhelmed,” think about the fact that perhaps it is not that bad. It may be that you just feel “whelmed” or perhaps you should *ufarmunnon*, forget.

After all, what is wrong with not being overwhelmed but rather looking at an opponent, a friend, your parents, or your kid and simply describing the reality rather than complaining about the unfairness of life and how it has “overwhelmed” you.

It is time to stop reading the dictionary and get back to the overwhelming amount of work that I have let build up while I have pursued this most innocuous dalliance.

*Clifford A. Rieders, Esquire
Rieders, Travis, Dohrmann, Mowrey
Humphrey & Waters
161 West Third Street
Williamsport, PA 17701
(570) 323-8711 (telephone)
(570) 323-4192 (facsimile)*

Cliff Rieders is a Board-Certified Trial Advocate in Williamsport, is Past President of the Pennsylvania Trial Lawyers Association and a past member of the Pennsylvania Patient Safety Authority. None of the opinions expressed necessarily represent the views of these organizations.