

A Prodigious Word on a Short Fuse

By Dennis Payton Knight

Recently we in our circle of writers were challenged to pen our own obituaries, or for those of us inclined toward self-indulgence, our own eulogies. I chickened out because I wasn't thrilled about chronicling my own demise. But today's topic, *Cantankerous*, is another opportunity for me to do it, and in a single word.

It is an adjective that goes back to the seventeen-thirties, and its meaning hasn't changed a whit since. I counted some sixty-five synonyms for cantankerous and put them into alphabetical order, beginning with *argumentative*, and including but not limited to *bad-tempered*, *bilious*, *contrary*, *crotchety*, and *dyspeptic*. There's *grouchy*, *grumpy*, *ornery*, *prickly*, *perverse*, *shrewish*, *splenetic*, *testy*, and finally *waspish*. Of those not mentioned, *short-fused* is descriptive, and *curmudgeonly* is, in my cantankerous view, beautiful. My source also gives but two antonyms, *Good-natured* and *affable*. I relegate those to the can't-get-everything-right category. Even dictionary makers can be cantankerously contrary now and then.

Cantankerous seems self-defining in the way that words like *snap*, *crackle* and *pop* are. Most onomatopoeias, like *buzz*, *hiss*, *zoom* and *crash*, are short, but Cantankerous takes up twelve letters. It still qualifies as an onomatopoeia because, as the Oxford English Dictionary dryly puts it, it has an "oddly appropriate sound."

Etymologists don't know exactly how cantankerous came into our language, but it may be a smashup—there's another onomatopoeia—of an Old English word, *contack*, meaning contentious, and *rancorous*, meaning spiteful. They also connect it to the unpleasant *canker*, a noxious skin sore.

Cantankerous can be a good thing. Judge Murray I. Gurfein saw a free press with a different eye than did the cantankerous Richard Nixon, who appointed him to the U.S. District Court and later to the U.S. Court of Appeals. Gurfein wrote, "A cantankerous press, an obstinate press, a ubiquitous press, must be suffered by those in authority in order to preserve the right of the people to know."

Do you suppose our current cantankerous curmudgeon has a view of the news like President Nixon did? Is 'fake news' his own vocabulary-starved way to call the press cantankerous, obstinate and ubiquitous? Or am I just being cantankerous?

Vincent van Gogh, the Dutch master, was also adept at mixing words and he found being cantankerous to be motivating, saying "The more ugly, older, more cantankerous, more ill and poorer I become, the more I try to make amends by making my colors more vibrant, more balanced and beaming."

E. Michael Lunsford, in his book *Sometimes I Get My Shoes on Backwards*, exploited our word-of-the-day in *Cantankerous Sam the Garbage Man* who "emptied our garbage but stole the can." He didn't know anyone meaner. He kicked the dog and away he ran. But Stan himself was ultimately, happily, attacked by a garbage can, "...and we laughed so hard we could hardly stand next to mean old, grouchy old, cranky old, Cantankerous Stan the Garbage Man."

Well alright, then, my obituary has been written.