

EQUANIMITY

I have always been enamored with English words derived from Latin roots. Their present definitions often bear only slight resemblance to their Latin ancestors. Tracing their lineage to the original Latin, however, enriches their meaning. Examining the permutations in usage through generations is a lesson in the evolution of the prevailing thinking of a culture, as well as a lesson in the evolution of language.

Equanimity is such a word. It has come to mean, in current usage, “the quality of having an even mind”. As an English word, it has most consistently been used in the context of fairness, or weighing things in the balance, as if it were synonymous with “equity”, a word often offered as a substitute for it. The word equity, however, has an altogether different Latin root, *aequitas*, meaning “reasonableness”.

Equanimity has a Latin counterpart as a root word, *aequanimitas*, which has its own roots in Latin: *aequus* meaning “even” and *animus*, meaning “soul, mind”. In Latin, soul and mind are one word with one and the same meaning. In Latin, *aequanimitas* refers to a state of the mind and soul, a balanced state of peace, clarity, health, wisdom and insight.

The definition of the Latin root word *aequanimitas* was brought to light to the contemporary world more than 100 years ago by William Osler, the father of modern medicine. Osler described a vision for those in the healing arts that was cherished for at least three generations thereafter. Osler’s book, *Aequanimitas*, was required reading for medical students well into this century, and only started disappearing from curricula during the 1940’s, as the rapid development of scientific and technical medical knowledge demanded that more philosophical readings be set aside.

I cannot speak for William Osler or render any judgment about what was on his mind, but both words, *equanimity* and *aequanimitas* were available to him in 1889, when he delivered an address called “*Aequanimitas*”, and he chose the Latin word for his title. I can only presume he understood the subtlety of that choice, as he so clearly understood the subtlety of healing and of human nature. In that address, Osler’s farewell to his colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania, he uses both words, and uses them slightly differently. When he says *aequanimitas*, one can recognize that he is talking about the connection between the soul of the healing practitioner and the soul of the patient, deeper than the physical realm in which symptoms present themselves and are discussed.

In English, the Latin root *animus* appears in many words having to do with spirit or liveliness, but the actual word “soul” is of Teutonic origin. The original Old English meaning of soul was “the principle of life in man and animals”. Later it came to mean “the principle of thought and action in man,” and referred to the invisible, formless, spiritual aspect of life, rather than to the physical. In English, unlike Latin, the words soul

and mind are not in any way linked. Their roots are unrelated and produce two different family trees. The English word “mind”, also of Teutonic origin, comes from a root word meaning “the faculty of memory”. Thus it is not surprising that “mind” and “brain”, the organ that is the repository of memory, are often used synonymously in English.

This is somewhat interesting and esoteric, you might say, but why does it matter? As a linguist by training, I am predisposed to think that language always matters. When one person says “equanimity,” and means fairness of mind, which given English usage would mean “balanced use of memory”, does another person think “*aequanimitas*,” which appears to have nothing to do with the use of memory, but everything to do with the state of the soul? If so, are those two people actually communicating?

Until I began to research this essay, I would use “equanimity” and “*aequanimitas*” interchangeably – in fact, I have done that for years because the Latin root has always echoed in my mind, as though centuries of English usage had never carried equanimity very far from its point of origin. I have been puzzled, sometimes, by the degree to which I felt misunderstood, or the degree to which it has seemed to me that others have trivialized the profound significance of what I thought of as equanimity.

Given common usage, people might generally conclude that one would study *equanimity* in ethics classes, or in jurisprudence, areas where an understanding of good judgment and a balanced use of one’s knowledge is an objective. But one would study *aequanimitas* in philosophy, in all of the healing arts, in psychology and psychiatry, areas where an understanding of the *a priori* state of the soul is an objective.

Yet, to truly understand the source and consistency of “equanimity,” one must consider “*aequanimitas*”. The Oxford English Dictionary expands the definition of equanimity with this statement: “the quality or condition of being undisturbed by elation, depression or agitating emotion.” That takes it closer to its Latin root, although farther away from the assumptions of current usage. The quality of equanimity does not in any way exclude the full range of human emotions – elation, depression, agitation. The quality of equanimity suggests that the person experiencing such emotions remains undisturbed and of an even mind – *i.e.*, able to weigh information and see it for what it is. This is the essence of *aequanimitas*: the mind and soul at peace no matter what.

Equanimity as it is used today describes a behavioral after-effect of a mind/soul at peace. Internal quietude, *aequanimitas* deeper than the thinking, feelings and behavior taking place, is wisdom at work in a different realm than the physical experience of thoughts-emotions, whether positive or negative. It points to the fundamental knowledge of the soul expressing a principle of life: we can create anything with our thinking and experience what we create, but the state of the mind/soul that energizes our thinking is unaffected by the thoughts we think. Those thoughts manifest in the physical realm; *aequanimitas* is in the formless, spiritual realm from which the physical is formed.

A person who has the quality of equanimity is one who understands that relationship between the thinker and the thoughts and is, therefore, undisturbed by any thoughts while free to experience all thoughts – to weigh content in the balance of fair judgment and remain of an even mind.

When we look at behaviors without considering the fundamental source of behaviors, it is difficult to see how a person desiring to change can find the wherewithal to do so. Where would a person lacking equanimity look to discover how to find it? That quandary is embodied in the etymological trip from the ancient *aequanimitas* to the modern *equanimity*, a journey from the spiritual to the physical. Along the way, the connection between the spiritual and the physical became increasingly tenuous, but not lost. Our understanding of equanimity illustrates how changes in usage of language reflect the focus of the culture shifting from reflection on the impalpable to measurement of the observable, that which can be seen, touched and described in the physical realm.

When the ideas *aequanimitas* and *equanimity* are seen as two sides of one coin, one side depicting the formless and the other depicting the form, of a treasured state of harmony, balance and wisdom, the quandary is resolved. Without both sides, the coin could not exist. When we are looking strictly at one side, we do not see the other, yet we know it must be there. When we turn the coin over, we lose sight of the other side, yet it remains.

To find equanimity is to know *aequanimitas*; to know *aequanimitas* is to find equanimity. It is an assumption of my work, an assumption of the work of The Sydney Banks Institute for Innate Health and of our many colleagues throughout the world, that all people want to find that balance, harmony, peace of mind and stability that equanimity describes, but not all people realize how to discover it and sustain it within themselves. Once they do realize it, it belongs to them and keeps them “undisturbed” through the vagaries of life.

And, as Osler suggested at the very dawn of modern medicine, that calm, balanced and compassionate underlying quality of the healing relationship originates in the mind and soul of the healer that resonates with the mind and soul of the person seeking to be healed. Until and unless the healer knows that state, only one side of the coin is visible.

All of the technology, all of the science, all of the brilliance we have to offer each other in a healing relationship is not only enhanced, but made more helpful, by *aequanimitas*, the understanding of the source of health and healing processes, and the wisdom to generate them most appropriately.

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