

## On decency and the HK protests

October 5, 2014 by Daniel J. Bauer

Last week I pushed the envelop here a bit by insisting that native speakers of English may use the verbs “study” and “learn” in different ways. There are also subtle differences in usage between “courtesy” and “decency.” As a reality in life and not merely a word, “decency” is the tougher to define. One dictionary says decent behavior is “honest, follows accepted moral standards, and shows respect for others.”

That same book reminds us it is possible to use the term “decencies” with, believe it or not, “the” before it. “The decencies” means “standards in society that people think are acceptable.”

I wrote the above last Thursday morning, and went on to draft 400 more words before lunch, pointing out how English uses “decent” idiomatically to describe a restaurant or a movie, and so on, blah, blah, blah.

It was four o’clock before I got back to work on this column. I immediately erased the 400 words I had drafted earlier. You might say I opened the window and threw them to the wind. Why?

Well, between beginning this column and continuing it later in the day, I met with a group of students from my university for the first of several discussions that will follow over lunch hours on Thursdays in the coming school year. These sessions are not part of an academic course. There will be no grades, no written homework, and no examinations. The discussions are voluntary, and attendance need not be rock-hard. Students may come and go each week as they wish. We will talk about social issues and current news events.

The group three days ago was composed of 17 students, about half of whom were from the English Department. I was delighted to see 4 students from the Chemistry Department, and representatives from the Departments of Computer Science and Information Engineering, Religious Studies, and German, too. We’ve got 9 women and 8 men. Hurray!

The students introduced themselves at the start. Some offered reasons for joining the activity. “I am from Hong Kong,” said one, “and a current event is going on there. I am very interested in it.”

Her words are the reason I scotched the original plan, and am with you now on a more relevant topic than English vocabulary.

What is unfolding only kilometers away in Hong Kong is, of course, all very volatile. No one can predict what will happen even in the 36 hours that separate my writing of these words and their appearance today. Friday’s news is that Hong Kong’s Beijing-appointed administrator has agreed to speak with the demonstrators. This may or may not be a waste of time.

Will the people of Hong Kong continue to pour onto the streets to show their rejection of “fake democracy”? Can the students and their supporters keep the protest non-violent on their side? Police last Sunday shot 87 canisters of tear gas in 9 locations at demonstrators, by many accounts enraging the wider populace. Will Beijing observe from a stone’s throw away, or storm the border to assert its will?

Not long ago, much closer than Hong Kong (how far do you live from Taipei?), a student-led protest made a decisive and largely positive impression upon millions of people abroad and surely the majority of people in Taiwan. Those students argued that our major political parties had become inept in the face of pressing social concerns. During that protest, and since it as well, some politicians belittled those youth. If measles falls upon children, runs its course, and disappears to leave skin healthy again, said a few, the same is or will be true of the Sunflower Movement. I don’t buy that argument.

Only fools disconnect what happened here last spring in a struggle for a truer democracy with what is happening in our neighbor’s yard today. Young people increasingly passionate about basic freedoms and, yes, “the decencies,” are not toying with whims or fads. This column began with the term “decency,” and spoke of students concerned about current events.

As of this writing, the protestors in that current event in Hong Kong have acted with decency. Sometimes the police have not. As the story proceeds, we can hope that authorities there will rely on cool heads and reason to resolve the crisis, not pepper spray and truncheons. (Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.)

### **Talking points :**

1. This column focuses on the democracy protest now going on in Hong Kong. Do you feel the Hong Kong situation is important for Taiwan and its future? Why / why not?
2. The writer suggests that the Sunflower Movement in Taiwan last spring has influenced young people, especially students, in Hong Kong. Do you agree or disagree?
3. News reports in all the media, including YouTube, show that at one point early in the demonstrations, police in Hong Kong used pepper spray upon the demonstrators. This column says such behavior is "not decent." Are you clear about how native speakers of English use the word "decent"? How can the students and other protestors also be decent in their behavior?

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