

I would rather walk with a friend in  
the dark, than alone in the light.

-Helen Keller



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## Learn: A Nautilus Shell



When I first stepped into literacy I wanted to choose an image from nature that reflected the learning process to represent the symbolic nature of learning. I had always believed, and science has since confirmed, we are wired for learning. In the same vein as 1960's linguist Noam Chomsky proposed, "We are all born with an innate knowledge of grammar that is the basis for all language acquisition."

Neuropsychology studies the structure and the function of the brain as it relates to specific psychological processes and behaviors. New science has found what they term neuroplasticity. Don't let the word scare you, its simple. The brain can always, if learning, no matter the age, develop new neural pathways. Here is the real issue. If one stops learning, the "plasticity" of the mind can affect the grey matter. Gray matter can actually shrink or thicken; neural connections can be forged and refined, or weakened and severed.

So, why choose a nautilus shell to depict the leaning process? First, in nature we often find a beautiful symmetry. This symmetry is quite important to learning. The nautilus shell spirals, beginning from the center; spiraling is one of the earliest etymologies of learning (see Dionysius the Aeropagite). As one proportionately spirals, at some point it opens to them worlds. Literacy is learning this symmetrical spiral. In literacy, we begin by defining proportionate learning goals until, not unlike the shell, a time comes that you get more comfortable with your learning language and open to the world. Before you step out the door of *Learn: A Project*, it is important to me that you reflect, "What is the most practical application of my learning language?"

This is where the abstraction of learning begins to take tangible form. Does this look like a H.S.E.? Does this look like college? If you are an older student, maybe retired, though still wishing to develop new neural pathways, does this look like studying for studying sake? Maybe book learning isn't your learning style. Does this look like getting a technical degree, or a certificate in welding, machining, soldering? There are so many options to apply your learning language in society, though often we haven't defined our learning language.

There is always something to learn. In the end there really is no such thing as a literate, done person; we are lifelong learners. Einstein once said and I consider his quote the metric for one who is learning, "He who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead; his eyes are closed."

# Etymology: An Evolution

First, let us begin with the word etymology. Synonyms include: word origin, word source, evolution over time. Why are etymologies important? Well, namely because language is important. Words are how we communicate with one another and often misunderstandings arise in the leaven of words. How often do we hear an argument over a subject where the understanding of the word is different between those arguing? It is common to have our own dictionary in our minds, socially accepted, though often without any etymological study. Here is where I would like to polemicize for study, against debate.

Let me use one of my favorite examples as a case study. A popular debate between Bill Nye the Science Guy and Ken Ham, famous Christian fundamentalist and *Answers from Genesis* CEO, on evolution. This is a very fascinating study in misunderstanding. The televised live debate was held February 4, 2014, at the Creation Museum in Petersburg, Kentucky. The Museum's 900 seat Legacy Hall was sold out and more than 750,000 computers were said to be live streaming. The since published YouTube debate has over 6 million views.

The debate unravels for two hours and forty five minutes. Bill Nye the Science Guy polemicizes that Ken Ham's theory of creation is rubbish. Ken Ham argues that there is no doubt that we were created because it says so in the Bible. The intention of this short study is not evolution, it is a study of the word evolution.

## Etymological Dictionary

Etymological dictionaries are quite expensive and often many are unaware they even exist. As a lover of words, it is where I begin every intellectual journey. The classical study of language in ancient times was the basis for education. In today's environment, seems their has been a humiliation of the word, even a forgetting.

For those interested in studying words and bringing context to your studies, I have found a quite invaluable resource: The Online Etymological Dictionary. This traces word origins from Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Scottish, Old English, Sanskrit, etc. as well as how the word has changed meaning over time.



Bill Nye, pictured left and Ken Ham, pictured right

I observed a modern oversight in the leaven of the debate. Prior to the debate, not once defined was the meaning of evolution, or any hermeneutic context delineated. This made the debate quite verbose and simply an either/or argument. It was as if each speaker held a mirror to themselves and set to debate... with themselves. Evolution has many shades, some agreed on by both Creationists and Scientists. The debate was paradoxical and out of context. Is evolution a scientific term or is evolution a religious term? It seemed more a biology vs. mythology argument. Each having faith in their own logic.

Almost an even more universal question is why evolution vs. creation even came to be, or vice versa. The former is scientific, the latter is religious. It would seem the real argument would be finding an antonym to evolution. If in an academic setting misunderstandings arise over etymological lethargy, how much more so in our minds? Next time an argument arises, maybe some etymological parameters should be defined?

Language is liquid. Plato, the famous Greek philosopher, developed the idea that words are used he said, "to reveal, or conceal." In the Eastern worldview, words are "fingers pointing to the moon,"- the words are tools used to develop ideas. Once the ideas are understood, or misunderstood, the words are simply dust.

In a world of mass communication, it seems that etymological studies have been thrown out but by a few academics like Noam Chomsky or other philosophic personalities. If I still haven't persuaded you, take some time and look up the etymologies of the words clue, robot, assassin, nimrod, or better yet whiskey.