

Hello. I'm Daniel Brint. Welcome to the Upper Street TODAY language talk, a weekly podcast about English language, expressions, idioms and any other topics of interest inspired by TODAY's subject. Last week I talked about the Greenwich meridian. This week's topic is not entirely unrelated, as it also touches on the theme of navigation, or rather, it's absence.

Monday, the 6th of November is marooned without a compass day. Now, that's really a double whammy, I mean first of all you're marooned - you're stranded somewhere where you have little or no possibility of escape - and secondly you don't have a compass to find your way around. Think of Robinson Crusoe or the Tom Hanks character in castaway. Being marooned usually means stranded on an island whether that island is literal or metaphorical. Life's journey is suddenly interrupted and we don't know which way to turn.

The word itself – marooned – also illustrates how language makes strange and unpredictable journeys, and words end up somewhere very far from where their journey began. In older Spanish, cimarra meant a thicket – a wild, uninhabited place of trees and plants, related to the word 'cima', meaning the summit or top – the kind of place you might well escape to if you were a prisoner, or slave, or even a domesticated animal. The Spanish word cimarron – meaning 'wild, untamed, unruly, fugitive,' was borrowed by French in the 17th century, ending up in English as 'marooned' – signifying to be lost in the wild (from the 1690's), and later 'to be put ashore on a desolate island or coast' by way of punishment, from 1724. England governments embraced this definition with penal colonies in Australasia. It would be nice to think we live in more enlightened times, but the current British home secretary – commonly referred to as Cruella -wants to do the same with asylum seekers, only this time their destination is Ruanda.

Another way of saying marooned is *up the creek without a paddle*, creek being a kind of river. It's curious how many nautical images are associated with this idea of being lost (there it is again, the word that evokes the innovative series – Lost – in which a group of people are marooned.) Radiohead fans will be familiar with the expression 'high and dry,' which refers to boats stranded on the land. Not a good place to be, thus 'don't leave me high, don't leave me dry.' The compass is a source of expressions – to find true north is a good thing, but when things 'go south' it's always bad. Home, on the other hand, can be a state of mind, rather than a direction, so 'east or west, home's best,' as the typica cross-stich sampler will tell you.

But Marooned without a compass day is about more than directions. It also foregrounds the genre and marketing of self-help books and the way that when we find ourselves at a moment of crisis, self-doubt, frustration or stagnation, one kind of compass we can buy and use to help us redefine our journey, takes the form of a self-help guide. We probably assume this a very modern phenomenon, however the first known self-help manual dates from around BCE 2000 and was an Egyptian text from the 'Sebayat' literary tradition. OK, so these were not titles like 'How to Get ahead in Papyrus' or 'You too can build a pyramid scheme' They were more moral and social advice on being a good subject. "Mirror-of-Princes", was a type of self-help book series about emulating the manners of the royal family popular in the middle ages and renaissance and published by Gutenberg. Today, the self-help industry is worth 13 billion dollars a year. A fierce critic of the genre, writing in 1911, was the English author GK Chesterton. In his essay ___ he remarks that

There has appeared in our time a particular class of books and articles which I sincerely and solemnly think may be called the silliest ever known among men. They are much more wild than the wildest romances of chivalry and much more dull than the dullest religious tract. Moreover, the romances of chivalry were at least about chivalry; the religious tracts are about religion. But these things are about nothing; they are about what is called Success.

Chesterton develops his thesis by considering success

To begin with, of course, there is no such thing as Success. Or, if you like to put it so, there is nothing that is not successful. That a thing is successful merely means that it is; a millionaire is successful in being a millionaire and a donkey in being a donkey. Any live man has succeeded in living; any dead man may have succeeded in committing suicide.

But what Chesterton really objects to is that they are empty and teach the reader nothing:

I really think that the people who buy these books (if any people do buy them) have a moral, if not a legal, right to ask for their money back. Nobody would dare to publish a book about electricity which literally told one nothing about electricity; no one would dare to publish an article on botany which showed that the writer did not know which end of a plant grew in the earth. Yet our modern world is full of books about Success and successful people which literally contain no kind of idea, and scarcely any kind of verbal sense.

So, in the absence of a compass, and having excluded the usefulness of self-help, what can we do? If you have an answer to that question, you could write on a piece of paper, put it in a bottle and throw it in the sea. You might be doing someone a big favour.

I hope you have enjoyed today's and will join me again next week.

Thank you for listening.