Emoji Blindness

By Michael Gordon

I seem to have developed a neurological problem that has impaired my ability to communicate effectively. How I succumbed to this disorder I do not know. Maybe forever chemicals are at fault, or the stresses engendered by the stark political divide we are experiencing as a nation, or my rapidly advancing age or the late-emerging consequences of some youthful indiscretions. It could be any number of interacting factors that have left me diminished.

Because I don't believe my condition has a formal label, I will assume that taxonomic responsibility. Borrowing from the field of learning disabilities and riffing on the concept of "word blindness," my suggestion would be "emoji blindness."

That's right, I am profoundly unable to accurately interpret all but the most obvious of icons. I get that the smiley face emoji is unambiguously intended to communicate happiness. And the sad face emoji reflects unhappiness. The thumbs up icon is straightforward enough, as is the poop emoji my grandson includes in almost every single message he transmits.

But beyond those unmistakable expressions of stark emotions or poop, I'm lost. A picture may be worth a thousand words, but that's about how many I need to clarify what a particular emoji might be broadcasting.

Here's one I got the other day in a message a friend sent me about some recordings I had engineered for her: 🙏

I am unclear what she wanted to communicate with those hands pressed together (and, no, the mail server did not offer a clarifying mouseover). Was she telling me I should pray? That she's praying for me? That she was fervently beseeching me to send more recordings? That she wanted to thank me? That she was humbled before me? That she revered me? That she was joining a monastery? That she was high fiving me?

And why did she need a pictogram when, with a few simple words, she could have unambiguously expressed whatever she was intending to express?

I confronted this icon in a chat after I had meekly offered an opinion for my wife to consider: 😐

Is it clear to you how I was to interpret this response? Was she perplexed? Sad? Angry? Surprised? Confused? Disappointed? Frustrated? Experiencing some gastrointestinal distress?

She eventually clarified that it was (nearly) all the above. She is a woman of broad and variegated emotions.

I do believe it a blessing that our forefathers relied solely on inked text. Could you take the Torah seriously if you looked down at the scrolls and saw something like 💪, instead of "Be strong and courageous"? Or how about if the New Testament put ❤️ instead of "Love thy neighbor as thyself"? It just wouldn't be the same, right?

I was almost completely turned off to the use of emojis until I got a text message from a stranger named Desiree who, for some reason, wanted to know if I was up for a chat. The SMS included emojis that clued even me into the nature of the interactions she was soliciting. Suffice it to say that my view of eggplants and peaches will never be the same.

I feel about the overuse of emojis the way I do about exclamation points. They seem to have replaced periods as the preferred way to end almost every phrase or sentence. Yesterday I got this message: "We are going next week to visit my mother!!! I hope you and I can have lunch on Tuesday before we leave! It's supposed to rain so you won't be able to golf anyhow!!!"

My understanding of exclamation points is that they are intended to express excitement or surprise. I reserve them for truly exhilarating instances, like "I hit the ball from the fairway to within four feet of the hole, and I actually made the putt!" That's an event that deserves a punctuation mark celebrating the elation that envelops such a rare occurrence.

But my friend needed not one but three exclamation points to convey the idea that it might rain or that she was visiting her mother?

I can't accept that over-users of exclamation points are consistently thrilled about every thought that comes into their minds. Are all events, even the most mundane, electrifying to some degree? Are these people forever pumped or surprised? Do their personal volume knobs only turn from enthusiastic (!) to excited (!!) to thrilled (!!!) — all the way up maybe to a bona fide manic phase (!!!!!!!!!!!!)?

To my mind, if you're always that elated, you're either on some really good medication, taking full advantage of the new cannabis laws or you doth protest too much. Regardless, you are trivializing what makes that punctuation point special.

So how do I feel about the overuse of emojis and exclamation points?

😡!!!!