John T. Harding: Reflections

Common Copout

*"I'm not a lawyer, but ... "*

That's a common phrase often used by talk show commentators, and it implies that only lawyers understand the meanings of words.

Lawyers argue over which meaning of a word applies to the issue they're arguing about. Perhaps if they really understood the meanings of words, they would not argue.

But their goal is to win the argument, so many lawyers manipulate the meanings, connotations, interpretations, subtleties, shadings, differences, sub-meanings, synonyms and many other angles to cover a wide variety of changes that would best serve the interest of their client.

Argue, argue, argue.

Truth matters less than winning the debate. Or, as Humpty Dumpty famously said, "When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean. Neither more nor less."

When Alice questioned him on "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master -- that's all."

Lawyers try to master the art of communication so they can win arguments.

In contrast, linguists understand that words have many meanings, and the choice of which one to use depends on many factors. This is what lawyers argue about, so linguists (and journalists) leave it to lawyers to argue over which meaning applies.

Linguists and communication experts will note that all the various meanings can apply, depending on circumstance and context.

So the real issue that lawyers argue about is not always fact or reality, but rather about which word to use in order to minimize or eliminate any responsibility on the part of the accused.