

The AI dilemma – *invaluable!*

(A short story)

‘Grandpa, I’m confused.’

The old man lifts his focus from the book, slowly sliding the reading glasses down to the point of his nose as ... smiling at me, without speaking, his eyes just ask the question.

I say, ‘Your old-fashioned world was crazy ... and this English grammar is hurting my brain. We have these words that look like opposites but ... they mean the same. What’s that all about?’

*Grandpa and I now have this ritual quiet time when he reads his books and I do whatever school assignments I have. There is no television, no music, no pressure ... just time to think. The rest of the family are banished to the other end of house because ... **I am difficult** ... I have been a problem to my teachers at school ... I ask too many questions at inappropriate times apparently ... and part of the family solution is for me to sit with Grandpa in his reading nook and concentrate ... on completing my schoolwork. I’m only at school to catch up with mates, to get some qualifications – ‘academic’ and Voc Ed certificates – then I’ll be off to get my licences for cars, trucks, backhoes ... you name it ... and then go into the trades.*

‘What words?’ His voice is always soft ... as if he has all the time in world ... **for me**. His white hair is thin, his face ... old, wrinkled. I know he’s done lots of things in his life and he knows lots of stuff. But, what I like most is that I can ask him questions that seem to annoy teachers and he doesn’t take my asking in the wrong way.

‘Like *flammable* and *inflammable*,’ I say. ‘They both mean something can catch fire. Don’t they?’

‘They do.’ He chortles as he nods. ‘Quite confusing, eh? And you want to know why? Those types of words crop up often because, while they appear to be different, over time ... they end up meaning the same.’

‘You’ve lost me.’ I sigh ... but he just grins.

‘The prefix. The bit on the front ... comes from old Latin. *In* often means *not* but it can also mean *to cause to*. So *inflammable* when it was used in the 1600s meant *to cause to catch fire*. But in the 1800s, the shorter *flammable* became more popular to mean the same thing. Nowadays, if you want to say that something **won’t burn**, use *non* in front of *flammable*.’

I give my disgusted snort – the kind that usually upsets teachers. ‘Why do they make language so difficult?’

Grandpa is not fazed. ‘Because language is always evolving, adapting. It’s how we communicate ... over centuries ... and across countries – taking some parts from other languages but often using words differently.’

He grins at my exasperated look. ‘Feel sorry for me when I had to study Latin for years at school.’ He laughs. ‘You’ve tried Spanish. All languages are a challenge – so confusing when they are new to you.’

‘Do we have many other words like these?’

‘Yep. Many. Like *valuable*, meaning really expensive ... and *invaluable* meaning too hard to put a value on it. Over time, they both mean much the same. But that is just about words with similar meanings. Some similar-looking words can have much deeper significance. Use that AI gizmo on your phone to check the meanings of *illusion* and *delusion*.’

He waits while I check.

‘Got the difference, Grandpa. So, *illusion* means it’s a trick like a magician would use – manipulating cards, sawing someone in half. You know it can’t be ... but you just can’t see how it’s done. But *delusion* means that people actually believe things are true when they are definitely not true. Is that what you meant?’

‘Yes. That’s a pair of words that look kind of similar but they actually mean quite different things.’

‘I’m with you. With the conjurer, you know that it can’t be true. It’s just fun. What about this belief thing?’

‘Well, you know an *illusion* is a clever trick. But with a *delusion* – it means that when all the testable evidence shows that something is untrue, people still choose to accept it as a **totally fixed certainty** – not just a trick. And that is much more dangerous – like an illness ... a medical condition, when people actually see wrong as right.’

‘*Che! Qué?* – that’s Spanish – tell me more about this medical condition. Is it just about believing bullshit – like scams, con men, crazy on dope?’

‘*Crazy* is not a term that doctors use, although drugs might be involved. At the serious medical end, deluded people actually **can’t** tell the difference between tricks and the real world, between lies and truth, between right and wrong. They end up in a hospital mental ward – with one of many

conditions. You can look them up, later. Doctors are treating situations in the brain that are beyond their patients' conscious control – and there is usually medication to assist them.'

I let these ideas float around in my head. 'I'm with you, Grandpa, I think. So, there's also a less serious non-medical condition? Is that what you are telling me?'

'Yes. There are other people who have **been influenced** to think in a way that defies all the evidence – they've been tricked into accepting things that are obviously false.'

This world can really be crazy at times.

'Isn't that just scamming people for money?'

'It can be. But it's not quite so simple. You now have your AI tool on your phone. You can ask it anything. It even says that. So, do you believe everything it is telling you?'

'Most times. It can give you the meaning of words okay. Just did it.'

'It's a useful tool. I give you that. What if you ask it to write an essay for you ... or to provide a solution to a maths problem? Is that alright?'

'Yes. If it gives the right answer ... but not in an assessment. Is that what you're getting at?'

'Certainly. You can't pass AI work off as if it was your own. That's just cheating and lying. But I'm more concerned about fakes ... and how you can tell the difference.'

'Most of them would be pretty obvious.'

'What if I asked AI to compose music? Or to write lyrics in a particular style such as by the latest chart topper? Could you tell the difference?'

'We'd know pretty quickly from the artists that it was faked. They'd sue. It would be breaching their copyright, wouldn't it? The imposters would end up in court.'

'What if the artist had died ... and couldn't complain ... like Beethoven or Prince or Elvis?'

'It'd still be illegal ... like counterfeiting money or art and then pretending they're real. Anyway, AI could help check for fraud by checking records? That's what it does ... from anywhere on the Internet. And fast too!'

'Indeed, this new technology will probably change the way schools and universities **examine students' own knowledge** ... rather than their AI research.'

'Okay, so where's this heading, Grandpa?'

‘You are getting in trouble at school by pestering teachers with questions when they are too busy to be giving you an answer that you could be checking at home using AI. My question is *how do you know the AI answer is right?* Isn’t it the same question that those who blindly accept the influencers’ opinion **should be able** to answer? How can they tell if they are being conned? What is the process for checking right or wrong?’

He continues, ‘When people have been conned or brainwashed into accepting opinions, it’s often because they feel no-one is listening to them ... so they take a leap of faith that this new influencer might make them feel better ... and they can be part of a group who thinks like them. Their opinions are not being brushed aside. The future looks rosy ... and it is fun to belong.’

Grandpa is still calm, smiling, speaking gently.

I scratch my head. ‘So, what’s wrong with that?’ I ask.

‘What’s wrong is that **there’s no critical thinking**, no checking of testable evidence – they’re living in an *echo chamber* that reinforces information that’s wrong – just an influencer’s bright or mischievous idea that’s reported confidently as if it’s true ... when it’s really using disenchantment to carry the ‘believers’ along on the wave of excitement.’

I stare at Grandpa. ‘*Believers?* That’s the language of religion.’

‘And also cults ... that trap people into following the herd ... like cattle or sheep. Fine, if you have checked and tested the evidence for truth ... or even *bullshit*, as **you** put it. Not so fine if you don’t understand the consequences of blindly following. Because that is *delusion*.’

I sit, pondering. ‘The meaning of words!’

‘It doesn’t have to be craziness,’ he says. ‘Does it? We can all use AI, calculators, computers ... whatever ... as tools to check, to test the truth of evidence ... but, in the end, it is your logical human brain that must join the dots to establish a safe way forward. That’s the most important skill you need to develop ... to evaluate problems, to solve them successfully.’

‘If you want to be a good tradesman, by all means ask the questions ... but base your solutions on evidence and experience that can be checked. Learn to distinguish the illusions of the trickster so that you won’t become a **deluded** casualty.’

I have no words. I wonder how many useless gullies Grandpa followed to find the one that wasn’t a dead end. Now, he’s a gentle old man of lived experience – *invaluable!*