Words to Describe People I

"A lways remember that you are unique. Just like everyone else." Like all genuine humor, this waggish remark carries a grain of truth. There are six billion of us on Earth, and we are all very different—in our demeanor, diction, and dreams; in our fingerprints, retinal patterns, and DNA sequences.

Yet no matter which hand we write with, what language we speak, or what we eat, there is something that binds us together, whether it is our preference for a life free from fear, our efforts to make this world better for ourselves and for others, or our appreciation of the beauty of the soul and our longing for love.

With so many people, so many shared traits, and so many differences, it's no wonder we have so many words to describe people. Let's take a look at some of them.

opsimath (OP–si–math)
noun   One who begins learning late in life.
From Greek *opsi-* (late) + *math* (learning).

● "Maybe they just cannot bring themselves to break the news to our presidential opsimath—after all, a politician can learn only

so much in four years, even one who has had as much to learn as our Jimmy Carter."

—Washington Post

agelast (AJ-uh-last)

noun   Someone who never laughs.

From Greek *agelastos* (not laughing), ultimately from *gelaein* (to laugh).

● "Anyway, [Sandi Toksvig] has to go off now. To do an hour of stand-up which the audience absolutely loves. I don't spot a single agelast."

—Independent *(London)*

Laughter Is the Best Medicine

We were in a terrible car accident a few years ago. Our son went through four surgeries in six days to save his arm. His arm was saved but his laugh was completely gone. One evening, months later, we were watching the season premiere of *Friends* and he laughed. It was the most amazing sound, which came back to us then and blesses us still. Laughter is a gift.

—*Jodi Meyers, Parker, Colorado*

---

losel (LO-zuhl, LOO-zuhl)

noun   A worthless person.

From Middle English *losen* (one who is lost), past participle of *lesen* (to lose).

● "My choice be a wretch,
  Mere losel in body and soul."

—*Robert Browning,* Asolando

• • •

I feel we are all islands—in a common sea.
—Anne Morrow Lindbergh, author (1906–2001)

Hoping They'll Last Ages

Insurance companies define "age" in two different ways when they figure out how old you are and therefore how much to charge you. Some companies use your actual age, while others round up. The latter method is called "age nearest," while the first is called "age last." Life insurance agents need to know which method a company uses. Since it is easy enough to develop equivalent tables, I've never understood from a marketing standpoint why they would want to tell someone who's thirty-nine years and nine months old that she's "really" forty. "Agelast" is the smart way to go. There may be some connection—there's little laughter in the life insurance field.

—*Richard Vodra, McLean, Virginia*

nebbish (NEB-ish)
noun   A timid or ineffectual person.
From Yiddish *nebekh* (poor, unfortunate).

● "Jeanette turned out to be attractive—a stark contrast to the nebbish, socially awkward stereotypes that once characterized cyberdating."

—Essence

cruciverbalist (kroo-ci-VUHR-buh-list)
noun   A crossword designer or enthusiast.
From Latin *cruci-*, stem of *crux* (cross), + *verbalist* (one skilled in use of words), from *verbum* (word).

● "In a suburban town in Connecticut, Cora Felton has some small measure of notoriety as the Puzzle Lady, reputed constructor of syndicated crosswords. The much married and

· · ·
God has no religion.
—MOHANDAS KARAMCHAND GANDHI,
nationalist and reformer (1869–1948)

generally alcoholic Cora, though, is a front for her niece Sherry, the real cruciverbalist."

—Booklist

Puzzled

One of the cleverest crossword puzzles of all time was published in the *New York Times* on election day in 1996. A key clue was "Lead story in tomorrow's newspaper." Most solvers thought the answer was CLINTON ELECTED. But the interlocking clues were ambiguous, designed to yield alternative answers. For instance, "Black Halloween animal" could have been either BAT or CAT, resulting in the first letter of the key word's being either C for CLINTON or B for BOB DOLE (which would have made the correct result BOB DOLE ELECTED).

"It was the most amazing crossword I've ever seen," *New York Times* crossword editor Will Shortz later recalled. "As soon as it appeared, my telephone started ringing. Most people said, 'How dare you presume that Clinton will win!' And the people who filled in BOB DOLE thought we'd made a whopper of a mistake!"

—*Eric Shackle, Sydney, Australia*

• • •

Nature does nothing uselessly.
—ARISTOTLE, philosopher (384–322 B.C.E.)