

Mr Morris lit the way for this tiny stakeholder

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Reuters.

I drove past a platinum mine the other day and remembered my colleague Ronnie Morris, who died three years ago. Ronnie ran the Cape Town satellite office comprising a handful of writers and sub-editors at Business Report.

Sometimes we'd start our mornings with coffee in St George's Mall, which always provided occasion to marvel at Ronnie's extensive contacts. He knew the court system in Cape Town backwards and quite possibly every person connected to it.

As a financial journalist, Ronnie wrote some beautiful pieces about the ongoing devastating effects of asbestos mining. He also gave platinum mining groups headaches over the depth of their engagements with "stakeholders". One day Ronnie drew my attention to a picture on his office wall of an enormous man holding a fork and sharp knife above an American-sized slab of meat. Its caption read: "Stakeholder?"

Spare a thought for us writers seeking synonyms for "stakeholder".

I can understand why the word is considered jargon, defined as it variously is as "all those who are involved in or affected by a course of action", or "those without whose support an organisation would cease to exist". To be precise, it refers to most of us most of the time.

One editor told me I had to define the word every time I used it, or find an alternative. I still haven't figured a fool-proof way to do either with any finesse. But that's the least of my problems. Try lump "stakeholder" together with other jargon words, like "engagement" and the definitions could lay the basis for a textbook on sustainability (another word requiring some attention). But perhaps journalistic jargon wasn't the only reason why Ronnie kept that image of a bloated belly on his wall.

I have tried to recall what Ronnie said of the picture, without success. Given his drive to provide a platform for voices rarely heard, alongside his awareness of slick corporate relations machinery, I like to imagine that it conveyed to him the injustice of financial stakeholders creaming profits off an enterprise at the expense of people occasionally consulted in a series of "stakeholder engagements", and then only because the law says so.

The caption might easily read: “Will the real stakeholder please stand up?”

Recently my family went hiking in my favourite mountain range. The trip was to be the kids’ induction to the Drakensberg on a challenging route. Conscious of the need to reach our destination timeously, I pushed my four-year-old hard.

Around mid-morning, I realised I’d lost my Canon camera. We raced to a point some kilometres back. We found nothing. So we set off back up the mountain again. Still nothing. By this time, the youngest in our party was exhausted and grumpy, and so was I. Crying into the mountains, I realised the camera was probably gone and our original destination dangerous. What to do? We ate lunch. The breeze brought calm. We slowly began to smile again. We set out for a rock pool we’d passed earlier in the day – slowly this time, the little one setting the pace and delighting in being path-finder. I found the camera, tucked behind long grass off the path, invisible to a fast walker.

A week later, driving past the platinum mine, I remembered Ronnie kindly coming to my rescue in an emotional moment as I wrestled with the wisdom of remaining in journalism after the birth of my child. He offered to babysit. It made me laugh, although he just as equally meant it.

I have just added a new decoration to my home office wall – a picture of my son, alongside a plastic knife and fork, with the fond words: “My stakeholder”. Ronnie might have chuckled. - Ingi Salgado

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