

# Dear Shit Fer Brains

Dear Shit Fer Brains,

What does the word capacity mean? If I google it or goddess forbid look it up in the actual dictionary, it says that it means “how many sticks of chewing gum can fit inside a box” or “how many people can fit in an elevator without falling to their deaths”. But at a recent collective meeting, I noticed that everyone used the word capacity to mean something else, and they used it a lot! So much that I began to keep a tally (I was supposed to be the note taker but you can’t always do what you’re supposed to do). Scientifically speaking, people used the word capacity almost twice as often as they used the word action. In fact, the only word they used more was the word snacks. I am not sure what was meant by this word “capacity”, but I did notice that it had the air of unapproachability and reverence. When people used it, everyone nodded gravely like that person was brave for saying it. At one point someone accidentally used the words time, energy, desire, skill, and interest and everyone looked at them like they were scum. Bad vibes! The thing is, I think that if I were a box or an elevator I would not be able to withstand even one more such meeting. I don’t like meetings anyway! I’d rather be blockading shit or eating snacks!

Signed,  
Stuck In An Elevator

Dearest Stuck,

Capacity” has indeed taken on a tone of Gunfuckwithability, and when used in our common organizing spaces, it’s as if no one can talk about or challenge the idea of one’s “capacity” when it’s uttered as an incantation against having to do a particular piece of work. However, I don’t believe that our shared community’s current use of the word meets the actual needs of the work of tearing down the walls of capitalism, or is even true to what the term means in the first place. The term “capacity” is one of those words that comes to us from two distinct areas. It tries to meet a real need, but it comes with a lot of baggage. Let’s explore.

Firstly, in its work as a magical utterance, “capacity” is an almost undefinable term brought to us from the land of the capitalistic wellness industry. Along with its cousin term, “self-care”, the basic tenet of this philosophy is that we should divide the pleasurable

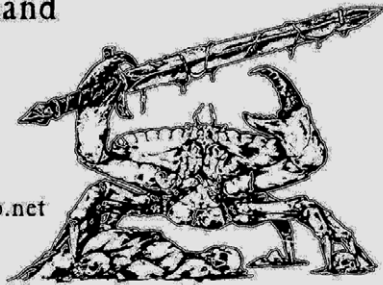
## 2024 Earth First! Organizers Conference

so-called “Maryland”

April 10-14

More info soon.

ChesapeakeEF@riseup.net



We’re excited to host this year’s Organizers Conference in the beautiful mid-Atlantic!

There is everything here from ocean beaches to the second-largest estuary in the world to the northernmost cypress swamp on the continent to a patch of the oldest mountains on the planet. In addition to the blue crabs, oysters, ospreys, eagles, black bears, tiny black ants and more who hold our ecosystems together, we’re increasingly being visited by manatees, gators and probably even a sea monster! As you can see, this area is pretty special. So, we think it’ll make a great setting for hashing out the ins and outs of what Earth First! looks like right now and where we collectively want to take it! If that sounds like something you want to be a part of, mark whatever it is you mark to be here from April 10-14. More info will be revealed in the lead-up to then, so keep your eyes peeled to the regular places.

And if you have any thoughts or questions, write chesapeakeef@riseup.net anytime.

things that rejuvenate us from the not pleasurable things that take away our energy (turns out working for the rev is hard and draining!). Unsurprisingly, in this industry driven approach, the way to personal health can be bought for the price of a yoga class, a cleanse, a retreat, a bubble bath, or, in a related field, a productivity program that helps us orient back into the world of the capitalist workplace. When one reaches one's "capacity", one has to do some "self care".

Secondly, and maybe more optimistically, the term "capacity" joins Earth First!'s beloved morning circles as an attempt to articulate the real need to make decisions about how we are going to move through the day. There is in fact only so much time and so much energy. "Do I have time to go to the meeting and also make breakfast for my kids?" or "I only have two hands and, according to the DAM, this pole requires seven people to move it." These are real life scenarios where the question of capacity (interpreted as the physical ability of a person or an object to do a certain task) makes sense.

Sadly, the physical sense of "capacity" meets the magical/capitalistic sense of "capacity" when we replace the phrase "I don't WANT to do that" with "I don't HAVE THE CAPACITY to do that." This switch, which at first blush seems inconsequential - maybe even a softer, kinder rejection - has pretty deep implications. At best, it's an unclear dismissal. At worst, it's intentionally conflict avoidant and purposefully confusing. When it happens in the midst of collective processes it can truly damage our ability to assess what the real opinions of the members of the group are. Do you really not have the "capacity", or do you just not want to? And if you don't want to, why don't you want to? What are the implications for the group of you not wanting to? Would we do the thing anyway if we knew your more specifically articulated feelings?

When we remove the term "capacity" from its real, direct, hands-in-the-dirt meaning and only deal with it in the capitalistic realm, we enforce the capitalistic separation of our shared work as community (fighting for liberation), from our personal, individual health as defined by the self-care industry.

In truth, "capacity", even in the capitalistic self care sense, is fluid and flexible. You can find more of this magical "capacity" if you really believe that the work you are engaged in is worth it. The reality of our political and liberatory struggles is that they are circular, while the premise of "capacity" is linear. The work we are engaged in will come with moments when we really do need to burn ourselves to the ground, fight hard, get tired, get through a moment or a fight or a meeting, come out the other side with some scars and hopefully some learning, and THEN take important time to rest and rejuvenate before we engage again. The process is iterative, and ongoing.

On the other hand, the way "capacity" shows up in our shared spaces is all too often linear and based on the premise that the long haul work should never come with moments of pain or conflict or hardship or exhaustion, or that if it does, this must be dealt with immediately by the individual in the moment, group needs be damned. This is useful when in the context of a capitalistic workplace (fuck your boss), but less useful in the context of collective liberatory struggle.

The tired result of this is that when we are engaged in the work of the rev with each other and someone doesn't have the magical "capacity" to do something, it puts the burden on others to make that thing happen. The individualized nature of the capitalistic "capacity" leads to the health of one over the wellness of the group. It may not mean that the meeting gets canceled or the action postponed, but it will certainly mean that these things happen while one person is in the bubble bath and the rest of the group is grumpy.

Now, before you turn around and tell me that I'm a harsh, fascistic tyrant, let me offer another complicated term and re-negotiation of an idea. First, let's allow "capacity" to return to its place as a real articulation of physical constraints. Once we've done that, let's start thinking about how boundaries (yikes, there's that complicated term we all love!) might support individual health when we think of them not in the immediate individual sense, but in the long term sense of the kind of world we want to live in. By this I mean what if (what if?!) we think of boundaries as collective pursuits of mutual struggle. Instead of saying, "I'm tired, thus I'm not going to do the work, leaving it to my friends to pick up the slack," we could say, "I'm tired. I'm tired because I'm part of a project that is in a moment of high intensity. That is a reality of my situation and I understand this cycle. How can I reorient my time and make proposals to my group to make sure the work doesn't get dropped in the short term, but in the long term we create a different pattern of work and struggle?"

The other reality of the work of group boundaries is that we will likely be able to anticipate the needs of individuals when we work together a lot. We can make a collective decision to do a piece of work knowing that one of our members can't participate because they don't have time right now. Instead of dealing the magical currency of one individual's "capacity" announced in the moment, we can orient our collective work and time within a strategy regarding how and when to use our collective power. We can then make realistic assessments about the work we collectively do because we are now being honest and clear with each other, and can trust that when the going gets hard, the burden will be shared.