

Watch Your Language

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Human speech is like a cracked kettle on which we tap crude rhythms for bears to dance to while we long to make music that will melt the stars.
— *Madame Bovary*

Language is important. How we understand the words we speak, how others hear the words we speak is very important.

In his essay, “The Speaking and Writing of Words,” Frederick Buechner recalls a vacation trip to Versailles — his first trip there — and how excited he was to see firsthand sights which he had only read about or seen in pictures. What eventually proved hard for him was having no one to share the experience with. Maybe a similar kind of thing has happened to you; I know it’s happened to me. I can think of times when I’ve been watching a movie, or television, or I’ve been to a place that is so unbelievable, and I wish there was someone there to share the event, to listen to my words of excitement or disappointment. I remember the first time I went to the Caribbean and went snorkeling, it was like being in a National Geographic Special. I kept shouting to those around me — whenever we’d return to the surface — “Can you believe this?” I couldn’t imagine doing it alone; it wouldn’t have been the same. Or the first time I went to the Philippines, it was incredible. And everybody around me didn’t speak English: I wanted so much to speak my words of excitement and astonishment. It was similar to what Buechner experienced; it was as though speaking the words to a companion was the only way to make the sights and events a reality; as though the words were performing a “midwifery function,” as he says, “by making what you see to be real.” The language we use, the words we choose to use, are so important. Sometimes we just take it for granted.

There are at least three ways to understand this relationship between our reality and the words we use to describe reality. One is mentioned by Ian Frazier in *On the Rez*. Frazier’s book is about a lot more than the relationship he develops with an American Indian. He also does an insightful job of discussing the plight of American Indians. At one point he describes his drive from New York City to the Northwest. As he crosses the Great Plains, he names location after location that use Indian words. He has no idea how the names translate, but he’s certain that the words refer to events, places, or something of significance to the tribes that once lived there. And though that language — the words — was once important to whoever lived there, now time has passed by

the language, and the words are no longer relevant. Related to this, Frazier tells the story of a missionary that once served the Lakota. One of the things Father Buechel did was to compile an 853-page dictionary, perhaps the first dictionary ever of the Lakota language and Frazier describes going through and marking some of the words. Here are his favorites:

tacaka, the roof of a buffalo's mouth (not an everyday word that we might use!)

cuiyohe, moccasins made of old hides that have served as tents

glinunway, to arrive at home by swimming

iyuso, when a man wades through water and gets wet in spite of lifting his legs

opaskan, to melt by lying on

tacanhahaka wapaha, a headdress made from the upper end of a buffalo's spinal column

woeconhla, to consider something hard work when it is not

Granted, the words don't quite keep their integrity when translated into English, yet time has passed them by and the only way we know about them is because of the very deliberate and intentional work of a Jesuit missionary who was serving the Lakota 150 years ago.

Another relationship between words and reality is one we may be more familiar with: When our experience exceeds our vocabulary. Usually this takes place in the sciences, for example, in genetics. Scientists reveal things for which there are no words, no name. Several weeks ago when I was talking about Darwin and evolution, it occurred to me that he ran into this problem all the time. Either he would discover things for which there were no words, or the word that Darwin really wanted was already being used by somebody else to describe something very different; there wasn't a vocabulary to describe what he had found. In science, it's often the case that researchers are far ahead of human experience and as a consequence the vocabulary doesn't exist to describe a new reality.

Then there is a third relationship between words and reality that I will mention. This one is described by Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin, a Manhattan rabbi, who had a member of his congregation come to him a couple of days after September 11, 2001: "Rabbi, I live on the Upper West side,' she said. 'My windows are covered with the grime that has drifted uptown since ... you know. I need to clean my windows, but I've got to believe that there are ashes of the dead in that dust. It doesn't seem right to just have the windows cleaned. What do I do?'" (*Olam*)

Sometimes the words and language that we use simply can't describe our experience; the words don't exist, our vocabulary fails us. Maybe the words are there, but they don't quite fit what we are experiencing. So we come up short; we come up feeling

hollow or shallow. It's in this last category — this third relationship between words and reality, when the words don't exactly work — where we find the language of faith, religious language.

Let me give you a shortened list of the kinds of words I'm talking about (I'll read them from the Table of Contents of my book *Heretics' Faith*). Words like *angels, Armageddon, authority, beloved community, the Bible, born again, death, demons, Easter, epiphany, evangelism, evil, faith, family values, idolatry, high holy days, grace, Jesus, Messiah, miracles, pagan, pantheism, polytheism, prayer, Sabbath, saints, sanctuary, sin, spirituality*. There are many more. What do those words mean? How do we come to grips with these words, these seemingly old words? What are the experiences these describe?

Faith language is difficult for several reasons. One reason is because the words are tied to religious dogma, often Christian dogma. Because of the association we have with it — because we reject that creed or dogma — we have chosen not to use those words.

Something else that happens is that we associate these words of faith with a particular group, even an individual, and with this association comes a certain ownership by them. Or put another way, we don't own the language because we decided it's theirs: In making this choice, we have given away the language of faith, we've rejected the words and refuse to use them. In one sense then, we have been co-opted by orthodox dogma and those who have claimed the words as theirs: Faith language has been taken from us, or let's say we've decided to let others have it.

But this isn't the only reason why religious language is no longer used by many Unitarian Universalists. Sometimes there has been a difficult family, personal, even a cultural and historical association with religious words. For example, if you went to a parochial school, perhaps you were instilled with a sense of guilt, dread or bad feelings that are linked to certain words and circumstances. Perhaps the way you deal with this is simply to reject the use of the language, because you have chosen to deny or not address whatever happened back then, that history, that person, that family.

This is what can make the language of faith or religious language so difficult. It's like reading an old map. On some old maps you see that the geography is the same and many of the places still exist, but the names aren't quite right. The analogy to faith language is this: Sometimes the experience and feeling is still there but the language doesn't exist to describe it in the way you'd like. So what Unitarian Universalists are really good at is dipping into the dictionaries of other disciplines to describe these feelings and experiences. We dip into the language of science; we dip into the dictionary of psychology; sometimes we borrow words from politics, to describe what

ordinarily the language of faith would be describing, but we can't do that because we've rejected the use of those words. Unfortunately, what can happen is that we are left with nothing else **but** science, **but** psychology, **but** politics to describe the experience. This quote from *Madame Bovary* describes our predicament and condition: "*Human speech is like a cracked kettle on which we tap crude rhythms for bears to dance to while we long to make music that will melt the stars.*" We want to melt the stars. But what we have is a language that doesn't quite work because it's a cracked kettle which won't produce the sounds we desire.

The language of faith is so difficult. The challenge of faith language is one which Bill Sinkford speaks about in an email message dated January 15. Here is some of what he said:

"I understand that there has been considerable discussion and distress over what was published in a newspaper article recently. I am writing to share with you what happened, to address your concerns, and to assure you that I share many of the concerns you have expressed. Here is what happened. Sunday, January 12, I preached a sermon entitled 'The Language of Faith' at First Jefferson UU Church in Ft. Worth, TX. Following the service, I did an interview with a reporter from the local paper, an interview which covered a number of issues including the points about religious language I made in my sermon and magazine column."

"The reporter published a story that reported things I did not say, and drew conclusions that I did not reach. In particular, the reporter's first sentence read, 'A former atheist who is now president of the UUA will push to put the word *God* into a new statement of principles.'"

"Let me be very clear: I spoke of the need to periodically revisit – that is, to read and reflect upon – our foundational language. I did not call for the Principles to be rewritten. I spoke of the need for individuals to consider supplementing the language of the Principles with religious language in describing their own faith. I did not call for the inclusion of the word *God* in either the principles or in anyone's individual descriptions of their personal faith."

"I understand the alarm and genuine distress that many of you felt on reading the news story and accounts of it. I have learned from these events that I need to exercise greater care in addressing the broader world, including reporters, about Unitarian Universalism language and beliefs".

"That said, I still believe that it is time for us to have a conversation about our foundational language. This incident has the potential to lead us into a rich discussion of who we are and how we describe ourselves. I welcome that discussion."

A challenge we must face is what Sinkford calls “foundational language,” or what I have come to think of as the *lingua franca* of religion, the dictionary that we have been handed because we are a faith community, a religious community. What do we do with this dictionary, other than reject it and try to invent a language that very few understand?

A little perspective might help: Unitarian Universalists are about one-tenth of one percent of the population. Internationally, we are miniscule. We are already isolated because we are so small. But then when we use the language of science or psychology or politics to describe what traditionally has been faith and religious issues, people look at us like we’re from another world: What on earth are these UUs talking about? they want to know, because we don’t use the language of religion.

I will tell you this: Many of you know that since September 11, 2001 I have been making an effort to do interfaith work. On a regular basis I meet with an imam, a rabbi, and a Christian minister, and I have been working hard at using the language of faith, because that is the language they use. If I didn’t use the language of faith, I would have a difficult time bridging some of the gaps, the chasms that exist between our faith communities. I didn’t come to that realization easily. In fact, even today there are some words that I choke on, some of those words that I have written about but don’t speak. But I will try.

Some of you may have heard me tell this story: When I first started my doctoral work at Wesley Theological Seminary (a Methodist Christian seminary), I was required to take a class in homiletics (preparing and delivering sermons). My professor was a nationally renowned Methodist preacher. The first class he lectured. The second class he gave us the liturgical calendar for the Christian church and said, “I want you to pick two Sundays, including a holiday, that you have never preached about, and you will be required to design an entire worship service around that theme.” Well I looked through it and thought, oh Lord – I can’t do it! The language was unfamiliar to me; there were Sunday observances I had never heard of before. In desperation, I called my professor and explained who I was, that I was a Unitarian Universalist minister, and here’s the way we do things, and we don’t acknowledge or celebrate these events, and I went on and on. I concluded by saying to him that in looking at this liturgical calendar, I felt like a visitor in a foreign country, and I didn’t know the language. So what did he think, I asked; could he give me a break and cut me some slack? There was silence from his end of the phone. Then all he said was, “Mr. Muir, learn to speak the language.” And that was that.

I was really angry when he said that. I didn’t want to learn to speak that language. Yet, that’s why I was there. I was there with all those Christians as the only Unitarian Universalist. Not only was I going to learn to speak the language, but I would learn

how to be a functioning part of that one-tenth of one percent in a sea of orthodoxy. I learned to speak the language and eventually wrote a book about why it's important. It's important that we learn to translate, that we can use the word *idolatry* and understand that it can mean *addictions*. We can speak the word *sin* without gasping for air after saying it, and know it means *brokenness* and *alienation*. We can speak of *salvation* and understand that the word means *transformation*. We can speak about the *Kingdom of God* and know it means the *Beloved Community*. When you can separate the words from creed and dogma, the language can have new meaning for us, and we can still use the language of faith.

This is not going to be easy to do. Not only will it be hard, but those who listen to us might also find it hard, and they will ask us questions just as the friends of Unitarian Universalist Philip Simmons asked him when he was writing *Learning to Fall*. They wondered why he used the language of faith. And he said, as we might: "Because it is with religious language that human beings have most consistently, rigorously, and powerfully explored the harrowing business of rescuing joy from heartbreak." (xiv)

It's religious language that has been used to talk about the human condition in depth. Only now, it's time that religious liberals and freethinkers deepen this language by liberating the language of faith from the tyranny of orthodoxy and fundamentalism. And isn't this what Unitarian Universalists have been doing for centuries? We have gone about our business by examining the way that Trinitarians reduce the Holy (the Godhead); but Unitarians speak a language not of reductionism and incompleteness, but of unity and harmony, of putting things together and not separating – as in the interdependent web of all life. Universalists speak not of separations between people, but of the love and inclusiveness of God and how no one is denied transformation (except the word *salvation* was used). As UUs we have tried to separate language from the restrictions of orthodoxy. We need to continue doing this. We need to renew our efforts to speak the language of faith.

One thing I have noticed about our church life is that most of the people who have been coming in the last five years (as we have been growing at around 10 percent per year) — and many of these have been 35 and younger — have no difficulty with faith language, as long as it is not tied to creed or dogma. It's people of my generation and older, the people who came of age in the 1950s, 60s, 70s, and 80s – or who perhaps grew up in a Unitarian Universalist church and experienced the humanist-theistic debate that eventually gave away the language of faith – we're often the ones who are stuck and can't get rid of the baggage of the language barrier. The baggage is so heavy it's stopped us in our tracks.

We have to move on. We have to engage each other and the community with religious language, and come to terms with what those words mean when they are not attached

to creed and dogma. There is power in the language of faith, and we need to talk with each other and we need to talk with other faith communities.

If we expect to grow beyond one-tenth of one percent, if we expect to become a meaningful, viable part of the wider religious world, we must embrace the language of faith. I challenge you to begin doing this, meeting the challenge of faith language; pushing aside the creed and dogma that has so long been attached to religious words. Then begin sharing the language of faith as you describe our gospel of good news, the gospel of Unitarian Universalism.