

The Power of Language, the Language of Power  
Rev. Dr. Devorah Greenstein 2005

Awhile ago, when I was thinking about writing this sermon, my friend told me that his son had come home from school with a new put-down expression. “That is sooo gay.” My friend explained to his son that perhaps he didn’t want to say that – after all, he lived in a family with two daddies – “gay” as a put-down just didn’t seem the way to go. His son agreed. The next day he came home from school and said “That is sooo retarded.” When my friend told me this, he sighed and said he had started enumerating marginalized groups in his head – hmmm “That is sooo... fill in the blank with oppressed group...”

Language. It is a tool for good, and for not-so-good... it is a sharp tool... sharp in ways we aren’t even conscious of.

Language is, of course, words strung together. Academics who study language learn a lot about a culture from the way people use those words and the emotions that those words carry with them. The underlying meanings of words are called frames. George Lakoff, a professor of linguistics and cognitive science at the University of California in Berkeley teaches that we understand every word by its frame. As he has described them:

“Frames are mental structures that shape the way we see the world. As a result, they shape the goals we seek, the plans we make, the way we act, and what counts as a good or bad outcome... You can’t see or hear frames. They are part of what cognitive scientists call the “cognitive unconscious” – structures in our brains that we cannot consciously access.”

These frames, Lakoff tells us, are the basis of how we reason, about what counts as common sense. All words are defined relative to these conceptual frames. When we hear a word, its frame (or collection of frames) is actually physiologically activated in our brain. Lakoff’s recent book “*Don’t Think of an Elephant: Know your Values and Frame the Debate*” – is an important book, worth reading. <hold it up>

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I work for the UUA as the Accessibility Program Associate. My work is all about words. If I look at my job from a simplistic word-based perspective, I am the highly trained “disability expert” bringing information about ramps, large print orders of service, assistive listening systems, etc. to congregations, districts, and UUA staff. Trained as a rehabilitation counselor and developmental psychologist, my entire career has been in the area of disability and accessibility. I have done this work for decades, and I can offer a lot of information about accessibility.

But, as a Unitarian Universalist minister, my work must be reflective of the religious, existential, and spiritual dimension of disability -- it is my ministry. It is **our** ministry -- clergy and lay people together -- because I am certainly not alone in speaking out about oppression, about disability, about ableism. This is vastly important work, and this

afternoon we will welcome your own Laurie Thomas as an ordained Unitarian Universalist minister – ministering, as she puts it, among people with disabilities.

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Especially among those of us who are allies, it can be easy to focus on a theologically-unreflective approach to accessibility work – I can teach all day about how to construct the optimal ramp, how to do an accessibility audit in your church building. I know about using unscented beeswax candles and the brand names of unscented soap to use in your church restroom. And I do know how important this information is. It is what enables us to be welcoming to all people. At the same time, there is so much potential to limit ourselves to this level of accessibility work. We need always to be vigilant, always to remind ourselves, how easy it is to forget the foundation of our work in the world – as Reverend Laurel Hallman, a Unitarian Universalist minister in Dallas insists that we not forget about the religious existential dimension of life and the vital necessity for us to communicate -- person to person and generation to generation -- the kind of truth that is deeper than everyday speech. As Reverend Hallman points out, no matter how eloquent or clever our words are – unless we are speaking to the depth of human experience, we are not achieving our purpose.

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Our Unitarian Universalist words, are, after all, religious words that express our beliefs, our wonderment. There is conversation, these days, about a Unitarian Universalist language of reverence – our president, Reverend William Sinkford, tells us that it is time for Unitarian Universalism to claim its good news, that our work is needed to “help to heal our hurting world in these troubled and troubling times.” So as a UUA staff person, and sharing Reverend Sinkford’s belief that “We have good news for a world that badly needs it”, I want us to keep a language of reverence in the forefront of the disability work that we do – I want us to think about a language of reverence in our anti-oppression work – when we speak about disability, ableism, accessibility. We have inherited so much value-laden language and so many value-laden concepts about these words, it behooves us to be conscious about reframing these concepts in a way that lifts up and reflects our Unitarian Universalist theology of wholeness and justice.

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Professor Lakoff begins his book, Don’t think of an elephant, Lakoff by telling us, Carry out this instruction: “Don’t think of an elephant!” <pause>

It is, of course, a directive that can’t be carried out – and that’s the point. In order to purposefully not think of an elephant, you have to think of an elephant first.

Professor Lakoff tells us the four things to know about frames 1) Every word evokes a frame. The word elephant brings to mind a frame with an image of an elephant and

certain knowledge: an elephant is a large animal with floppy ears, a trunk that works both as a nose and a hand, etc.

2) Words within a frame bring to mind the entire frame. So the word trunk brings to mind the Elephant frame... and thus when we hear this sentence, "Sam picked up the peanut with his trunk," the Elephant frame comes to mind and we immediately understand that Sam is an elephant.

3) Negating a frame still brings the frame to mind. So even if I say "Jane is not an elephant." we still think first of what an elephant is and then make a mental comparison.

4) The more often we hear or speak a frame, the stronger it becomes in our minds. This is because every frame is an actual neural circuit in our brains and every time a neural circuit is activated, it is strengthened.

When Lakoff talks about words that have emotional ties, it gets more interesting. In an essay he wrote:

"Suppose I say the word "relief." Here's the frame for the word "relief": In order to give someone relief, there has to be an affliction and an afflicted party – somebody who's harmed by this affliction – and a reliever, someone who gives relief to the afflicted party or takes away the harm or pain. That reliever is a hero. And if someone tries to stop the person giving relief from doing so, they're a bad guy."

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You do have to admire the way the Conservatives connected the word "tax" to the word "relief" to frame "tax relief" so strongly that anyone who opposes their version of tax cuts is a bad guy.

And now, knowing a bit about frames, think of the word "disability" – dis – ability  
<pause> I think we can all agree that the word "disability" comes with a frame that has some emotional and value-laden ties.

What is the "disability" frame? Well, the three frames that come immediately to my mind are a biblical frame and a medical frame. And in the last several years, activists and allies have been working to strengthen a social justice/civil rights frame for disability.

Now, you may love the Bible, you may hate the Bible, you may think the Bible is the direct word of God or the accumulated folk writings of people who lived thousands of years ago. Whatever your feelings, there is no denying that a large part of our culture has a biblical frame.

Unfortunately, disability in the Bible is framed by sin, wickedness, helplessness, passivity... and it's about faith... the Bible tells us that it's your faith that heals you, and

if you have no faith, you won't be healed... and about sin... there's the famous Bible story about the fellow who's been lying on a mat, paralyzed, by the pool of Bethesda or Bathsheva for many years, remember him, in John 5. In the Bible story, Jesus came to him, and said (in my Harper Collins Study bible version) "Stand up, take your mat and walk. And at once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk." Cured, healed... a miracle... but then later in the temple, Jesus said to him "See, you have been made well! Do not sin any more, so that nothing worse happens to you."

You and I may reject this Biblical disability frame. But the frame connecting sin with people with disabilities (or their parents), the frame of people with disabilities needing to be healed, is still pervasive in our culture.

And we have transferred the miracles of Jesus healing people with disabilities to the miracles of doctors healing people with disabilities. During the last hundred years, disability has become pathological and the exclusive domain of doctors and hospitals. This medical frame is still dominant. If we think of disability, our unconscious cognitive frame, our "common sense" leads us immediately to an understanding that disability is a personal problem, curable and/or treatable by the medical establishment.

What words come to mind in this medical frame? Affliction, impairment, dysfunction, illness, cure, patient... Right? As the British disability theorist Michael Oliver put it (quoted in a book by Eli Clare):

"Doctors are centrally involved in the lives of disabled people from the determination of whether a foetus [sic] is handicapped or not... Some of these involvements are, of course, entirely appropriate as in... the stabilization of medical condition after trauma, and the provision of physical rehabilitation. But doctors are also involved in assessing driving ability, prescribing wheelchairs, determining the allocation of financial benefits, selecting educational provision and measuring work capabilities... in none of these cases is it immediately obvious that medical training... make doctors the... appropriate persons to be so involved." p 81

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A new frame for the word "disability" has been growing stronger in recent years, with activists and advocates reframing disability as a social movement. This is how Eli Clare, author of *Exile and Pride* – another book that everybody should read – this is how Clare names and frames the word. (p. 67)

"Disabled. The car stalled in the left lane of traffic is disabled. Or alternatively, the broad stairs curving into a public building disable the man in a wheelchair. That word used as a noun (the disabled or people with disabilities), an adjective (disabled people), a verb (the accident disabled her): in all its forms it means "unable," but where does our inability lie? Are our bodies like stalled cars? Or does disability live in the social and physical

environment, in the stairs that have no accompanying ramp? I think about language. I often call nondisabled people able-bodied, or when I'm feeling confrontational, temporarily able-bodied. But if I call myself disabled in order to describe how the ableist world treats me as a person with cerebral palsy, then shouldn't I call nondisabled people enabled? That word locates the condition of being nondisabled not in the nondisabled body, but in the world's reaction to that body. This is not a semantic game."

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Reframing the word disability. Professor Lakoff has written and spoken at great length about how new frames can be created. Because all words are frames, reframing is actually changing the way the public sees the world. Reframing is changing what counts as common sense. Reframing, Professor Lakoff said in an interview, "is telling the truth as we see it – telling it forcefully, straightforwardly, articulately, with moral conviction and without hesitation – over and over again", because remember that frames are actual neural circuits that are strengthened through repetition.

What does that mean for those of us who are called to a Unitarian Universalist life of faith, called to Unitarian Universalist ministry, called to create a language of reverence for the work we do? We reject the Biblical frame, and we turn from the medical frame to locate ourselves in the social movement model. This, after all, is where the reframing struggle is, where our activist friends and allies are pouring their life blood.

But we have to reach beyond even this struggle. We have to be mindful that our culture's contemporary religious frame around disability is still based on a theology of lack, passivity, and of sin, and that the work we are doing as Unitarian Universalists is creating a new religious frame around disability – a theology of wholeness. So, we need to create a language of reverence that transcends the social movement frame to reach even deeper into the most profound meanings of human experience.

Reverend Laurel Hallman reminds us that in this hurting world, it is our turn, as Unitarian Universalists, to keep a language of hope, of reconciliation, of forgiveness alive, hold it to our hearts, and speak to the depths of those who so desperately need our good word.

We Unitarian Universalists also need to remind ourselves that it is our turn -- to reframe disability in a theology of wholeness, and from our faith to speak to the depths of those who need to hear that truly, all people are whole.

And from this understanding, we need to know that until we, ourselves, can recognize wholeness in diversity, can know in our hearts that disability is a natural part of our human complexity, we ourselves cannot be whole.

May it be so.