

“Bring Many Names: Language and Religious Identity”

By Rev. Lori Staubitz 2/8/09 UCC

We are people of the word.

The 16th century Protestant Reformation was foundational to the formation and rise of the early congregational churches in New England-many which would later become Unitarian or Universalist congregations.

The right to hear religious ideas and scripture in language that is understood and the right to reason and interpret religious ideas for one's own life became central to our worship tradition.

The elevation of the word over ritual is evident in most of our worship services today in the readings, sermons, words to hymns and songs and opportunities for sharing, dialog and discussion.

Fortunately, we have reclaimed the significance and power of of music, art, dance, ritual and ceremony to enhance our worship today...however, the power of the word continues to shape and form us as a progressive religious people.

In the 1940's, the connection between language, identity and development was explored by Premiere 20th c. Liberal Educator and Unitarian Dr. John Dewey. As a religious humanist, his theories significantly altered teaching practices and the ways we approach our own Religious Education programs today. No longer was the human child just an empty vessel into which ideas and meaning were poured.

He wrote in “Experience and Nature”:

“If we had not talked with others and they with us, we should never talk to and with ourselves. Because of language and the social give and take of various organic attitudes, individuals assemble and confer with one another, exchanging distinctive experiences, listening to one another, over-hearing unwelcome remarks, accusing and excusing. Through speech a person dramatically identifies with potential acts and deeds, plays many roles.... Thus mind emerges.”

If identity is linked to language, the effect our choice of words has upon us and our development as religious people is a point that deserves our attention.

We need to pay close attention to who and what we say we are.

It is amazing to track the effect the shift in language use has had upon our religious understanding.

It has been within my lifetime and yours that

racist and sexist language has diminished in religious circles. However, we continue to grapple with the challenges of the more hidden forms of institutionalized oppression in our congregations and within our community.

Yet our language IS changing and with it we ourselves are emerging as a newly defined people. Inclusive language...language that serves to include rather than exclude has made an impact upon our collective identity as religious people.

One example is how Feminism challenged us to expand religious language to be gender inclusive. As a result, when we moved to expand the ways we talked about the holy, we expanded our sense of justice and equality.

Now, half of our ordained clergy are female. But equal, fair compensation for women is still as much of a challenge within the realms of UUism as it is in the secular world.

It is also more common these days to hear gender sensitivity expressed among progressive heterosexual couples as they introduce one another as "life partners" rather than "husband and wife".... changing the language we use to speak about intimate love and marriage to be more inclusive of same sex couples.

However progressive we might hope to be, many liberals continue to grapple with the use of religious language.

Primarily because **we do understand the power of the word and know the effects unexamined religious rhetoric** can have upon religious identity and the whole of society. As a result, we are careful and cautious.

For some, the word God invokes negative images of ignorance, abuse and mis-use of power. For indeed, much has been and continues to be destroyed in the name of God, Yahweh, Jehovah and Allahah.

However, recent discoveries in linguistics reveal some astounding new insights into language usage and faith development.

A few years back I attended a minister's conference with Theologian "Paul Razor: I want to share some of what Paul shared with us. Here are a few ideas expressed in his paper: "The Self in Contemporary Liberal Religion: A Constructive Critique"

that I think are important in our own ongoing development as a people of faith.

"One of the most enduring legacies of the (Age of) Enlightenment is its highly individualistic view of the human self. Yet today the (scientific community) generally agrees that our liberal understanding of ourselves as autonomous individuals is an illusion. We don't first exist as individuals who then form social groups. Instead, the group always comes first, and the individual is formed by and always exists in relation to a larger social context. We are social beings through and through. Yet despite widespread contemporary agreement that the human self is fundamentally intersubjective or social in nature, a strong and potentially destructive emphasis on individualism continues to dominate the self-understanding of many religious liberals".

Paul Razor goes on to introduce a new revelation referred to as the Linguistic turn: "The linguistic turn denies that humans have any sort of direct access to the phenomena of consciousness, whether in the form of self-reflection or direct experience.

In other words, the subject's relation to itself and to the world is now understood as mediated by language." "This means that there can be no private language, that is, no language whose use is limited to the subject's own experiences. Language always has public meaning."

In short: the language of specific culture has a direct impact upon individual experience of reality and personal development. We can only experience aspects of the world that are first given to us in symbol- word images.

Investigation into the variety of religious experiences reveal that Irish catholic girls consistently have an experience of the holy or divine in the image of Mary. Native American religious experience is described in earth centered language."

Razor's point is brought home in an article by A.J. Hostetler entitled "Language and the Brain" 10/21/04 Richmond Times Dispatch. It starts out : "This is your brain. This is your Brain on Chinese. Scientist who study how we think and talk say your mother tongue, or even a second language may affect your brain. Armed with advance imaging techniques, cognitive scientists are upending the long held assumption that brain functions the same way whether a person navigated language in Chinese or Spanish."

"Increasing evidence suggests the brain changes with (cultural) experience" "Not all languages are alike. For example, in English, word order signals "who did what to whom" while in Hungarian, inflection alerts the listener to meaning."

The average Chinese person knows about 4,000 characters compared to just 26 letters in the Roman alphabet.

Chinese doesn't just look different, its speakers use portions of their brain that native English speakers don't even have to worry about."

"There are sounds native to Chinese that do not have their counterpart in other languages. "These kinds of differences affect the way we comprehend" Language and cultural differences affect the way we experience the world and have a profound affect upon how we interpret meaning."

A few years ago, a friend who served on the Ordination Board for the United Methodists ask me to consider serving one of their congregations. I grew up United Methodist and knew the culture and language, but to my surprise, I couldn't imagine myself a Methodist minister. Not because I reject the Christian story....I could find my way to articulate a liberal UU message in Christian Symbol and dialog. But I could not imagine giving up the freedom I have to draw from the wide range of symbols that emerge from diverse people, history, culture and language.

One of the most important distinctions we share as a religious people is our openness to the wisdom conveyed through symbol, story, myth and scripture from all the world's religious traditions.

However, developing a broad framework for religious dialog certainly is not easy as conveyed in the following story....Take it from Bill: Bill Van Ollefen is a wine enthusiast. In a Washington post article entitled "Get a "Grip" on Winespeak" he offered an insightful and humorous perspective on language and shared experience.

"Winespeak can be a terrible thing. Complex and Layered.

Perfectly clear to me, but on a recent trip to the West Coast, it seemed to have less meaning to some young but very knowledgeable wine aficionados. They thought I was being obscure and dodging the issue of just what I was tasting. Things got worse when someone else said the wine had tremendous grip. I asked just what it has a grip on and if this was a gibe at my complex comment.

Assured that it was not, I asked again just what the wine was gripping and how does one tell if it has great grip or if it was a fairly loose grip.

One thing was clear. We did not have common ground in how we described wine.

They all seemed to speak the same language but my vocabulary was alien to them. I looked around in an effort to understand when something jumped out at me. Everyone, save myself was from the West Coast and a product of the University of California, Davis-the place to go if you want to get into the wine business. They had all developed their own language."

We can see, taste, smell and touch wine. How much more challenging it is for us to communicate and relate religious experiences with common understanding.

Do you know the Inuit people have multiple names for snow? I have just one.

If I had more words for snow what a stories I could tell, If you think fish stories get bigger with the telling.....what a story I could tell about the eight days and eight feet of snow we had when we were home in for the big snow in Western New York –Dec 2001!

How much richer, fuller and varied our stories about god can be when we use more words to describe the indescribable.

Perhaps our liberal heritage can help rather than hinder our efforts to embrace a larger language of reverence. Rather than confine ourselves to one definition or react against a single concept for god, If we are going expand our language of reverence, we must first be willing to examine god from many vantage points.

"One of the ways I read the prophets is to go back and look at the kinds of questions they were trying to answer, to understand the context to which they were preaching. If you look at the kind of issues and questions that prompted some of Micah's remarks, you'll see that Micah is paraphrasing what the people were asking. What they were asking was, "How many rams do I have to sacrifice before the Lord? How many prayers do I have to say? Do I need to bring my firstborn child and sacrifice him to the Lord?" In the language of their day, they were wondering, "How do I make sense out of my life? What do I have to do in order to lead a good life? What do I need to do in order to get right with my God?"

"What do I need to do in order to find unconditional acceptance in the world?" What is striking is how, when removed from the specific context of 7 BCE, these people were asking many of the questions I hear people asking today: "What do I have to do to get right with life? What is the meaning of life? And how do I know?" So Micah answers them in 6:8, "What does the Lord require of you? Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God" - Rev. Fred Muir-senior minister Annapolis:

How we answer this question and respond is of extreme importance to our lives and the continued life we share, and our children will share with all others.

We are in need of a language that allows us to communicate theological ideas to one another and to those within our greater interfaith community.

We have a life saving message to share....but often lack the words.

Robert Kegan Harvard Professor and Lisa Laskow Lahey CO-authors of "How we talk can change the way we work: Seven languages for Transformation":

"The forms of speaking we have available to us regulate the forms of thinking, feeling, and meaning making to which we have access, which in turn constrain how we see the world and act in it. (Groups or organizations) are language communities.

We have no choice about whether we will effect one another by our words....But we do have choice about what kind of language leaders we will be by the ways we decide to engage in dialog."

Have you ever thought of yourself as a language leader? The evidence is overwhelming that indeed, whether we know it or not, our choice of language is giving shape to us, our children, our neighborhoods and our communities.

Given this, what and how are we expressing ourselves as religious people? Is our language expansive and inclusive? Do we try to understand as much as we hope to be understood? Who do we say we are?

Many times we have heard of Unitarian Universalist's start off by saying ...well, we don't believe ...

We don't believe... that the bible is the direct and literal word of god,

We don't believe... in hell,

When we get really frustrated...we start to make some pretty outrages and contradictory statements like.....

Oh, Us, We are not like them...We are all about unity!

Religious Liberals have mastered the language of negation. Some take great pride in framing religious identity with a litany of denouncements of other religious views.

When we assume a position of defense, we are also assuming we have an enemy and we launch our attack. But there is nothing in what we say that will give the listener a clear sense of our common vision or hope.

How much more effective we can be when we speak the language of affirmation.

Here is one affirmation that I use to articulate our shared faith.....

"We believe in the all embracing power of love which reconciles all people to one another as one human family. We believe that all life is sacred and connected in one life giving process and power....

I call this power god."

I close with the Genesis myth from The Maya-Qiche

(This is one of the most important surviving works of Mayan literature.)

"All was poised, there was not a rustle, not a sound. There were only the quiet waters of the sea, solitary within its bounds for as yet nothing existed.

There was only immobility and silence in the darkness and in the night. Alone was the Creator, the Maker and the plumed serpent:

the ones who give being. They were alone upon the waters.

It is then that the word came to them in the shadows and in the night and spoke. Then they spoke to each other, consulted, and meditated. They joined their words and their counsels. As they spoke light came into being, it grew as they talked together; and at the moment of dawn humanity was born."

At the heart of all language is creativity.

Truly, the ancients knew this to be true.....

The power of life continues to unfold. Let us remain faithful participants as we open ourselves to this faithful force of creativity in our capacity to learn and understand the many languages for love and for life.

Let us be mindful of our words, for what we say we are, we are becoming.....even now as we speak.

So may it be, Ashante, Shalom and Amen.