

**A Few Words**  
**Rev. Jennifer Brooks<sup>1</sup>**  
**July 11, 2010**

Like Albus Dumbledore,<sup>2</sup> today I would like to share a few words with you. They are: *Hello*; *Metaphor*; and *God*.

Some here may wonder how it is possible to enter a sanctuary on Sunday morning and encounter a sermon about a words like *hello* or *metaphor*. I suppose the word “God” is less of a surprise, although I doubt what I have to say about that particular word will match any conventional assumptions. Suffice it to say that this is a sermon about language, which is how we communicate with each other—and how we communicate with ourselves. Maybe that’s the reason Walt Whitman said: “*All words are spiritual. Nothing is more spiritual than words.*”

I want to acknowledge the work of Stephen Fry<sup>3</sup> and Guy Deutscher<sup>4</sup> on language as the source of many creative ideas about words.

## **Hello**

Hello. Hello! Hello? HEH-looooo. Hel-LOW! The word hello is amazing in its flexibility. It can be a simple greeting: Hello, glad to meet you. It can be an attention-getting signal of presence: Hello! Anybody home? It can be a milder form of asking for attention, as in Hello? Are you listening? It can be an exclamation of surprise, as in: HEH-looooo...What’s this tadpole doing in my glass of water?

And with the marvelous and energetic flexibility of human language, which always is developing new tricks, *hello* can be a signal of contradiction, as when one person says, “I don’t need to look at a map!” and the other replies: Hel-LOW! We’re LOST! And for people who love British comedy, it’s the caricature introductory remark offered up by the bumbling village constable: Hello, hello, hello, what have we here?

The origins of the word *hello* go back to the beginning of the last millennium, the time of William the Conqueror in England in 1066. There was a hunting cry, “tyahillaut” (pronounced tee-ah hello)shouted during a deer-hunt, later “tally-ho.” There’s also a variant, “view hillaut”

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<sup>2</sup> Albus Dumbledore is headmaster of the Hogwart’s School of Witchcraft and Wizardry in the remarkable Harry Potter novels. In the first book, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* (in England, it is the *Philosopher’s Stone*), Dumbledore welcomes the students as follows: “Welcome! Welcome to a new year at Hogwarts! Before we begin our banquet, I would like to say a few words. And here they are: Nitwit! Blubber! Oddment! Tweak!” I hope one day to attend a banquet where the speaker says exactly that (and nothing more).

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Fry, *Fry’s English Delight*, Series 2, Episode 1, “Hello” (BBC Radio 4 2010), and everything else Stephen Fry has ever written.

<sup>4</sup> Guy Deutscher, *The Unfolding of Language: An Evolutionary Tour of Mankind’s Greatest Invention* (Metropolitan Books 2005; references herein are to the Holt Paperback Edition 2006).

when the quarry was sighted. In these context, the “hillaut” seems to be at least in part a reference to the sound of hunting dogs in full cry.

In Shakespeare’s plays we find “Hola, Ho, Ha” to get attention. It’s not a greeting, just an announcement of presence. Shakespeare uses the equivalent of “hillaut” in connection with hunting; in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Theseus boasts about the sound his beautiful dogs make, the “cry” of the hounds: “A cry more tunable was never hallooed.”

***From exclamation to greeting.*** The interesting aspect of the history of the word Hello is not its change from a hunting word to an attention-getting word; the move from “hillaut-ing” the dogs to the phrase “hello the house” isn’t that big a stretch. What’s fascinating about “hello” is that it went from an attention-getter to a greeting. [Go to someone and shake hands and say hello.]

Today when someone says “Hello,” we say “Hello” back, or “Good Morning,” or some other similar greeting. How did “Hello, pay attention,” change to “Hello, how are you?”

Linguistic historian Allen Konigsberg traces the use of “Hello” as a greeting in America back to 1833, in a book by Davy Crockett. There’s another usage in 1837 in the *New Hampshire Sentinel* newspaper.

In England the first recorded use of “Hello” as a greeting is in 1843, by Charles Dickens in *A Christmas Carol*—which Dickens wrote the year after his visit to America. Scrooge has had his long night of revelations and awakens to discover that he is alive and there is still time to save Tiny Tim. He first quite literally jumps with excitement, using *hello* in the exclamatory sense, shouting to himself, “Hallo! Whoop! Hallo here!” Once outside, he greets a street urchin with the words “Hallo, my fine fellow!” and the boy replies “Hello!” But as influential as Dickens was, “Hello” as a greeting did not come into wide use until the early 1900s.

***Alexander Graham Bell vs. Edison.*** Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone. Edison, invented the phonograph (and hundreds of other useful things), but was always a little annoyed that Bell came up with the telephone first. So there was rivalry between them. Edison won contracts to set up many of the telephone exchanges in US and Europe.

Bell thought that when people answered the telephone, they should say “Ahoy!” Edison had a different view. Answering the phone, he thought, was not like hailing a boat from shore. He thought that less of a shout was needed, no more than in speaking to someone less than ten feet away. So he suggested, “Hello!”

The success of Edison’s choice (helped along by his involvement with so many telephone systems) was demonstrated at the 1906 meeting of the Edison telephone operators. Each one of them wore a badge saying, “Hello! My name is...”

And then there’s the Dixieland tune performed by George Lewis in the early 20th century, “Dr. Jazz.” A key line: “Hello Central, give me Dr. Jazz.”

## **Metaphor**

The changes in usage that give *hello* its interesting history are minor indeed compared to what happens to the metaphors we use in human language. Metaphor is a Greek word meaning “carry across.” Greek moving vans today have written on their sides: *Metaphores*, which in English is equivalent to *Movers*. The Latin equivalent translates as transfer, which is a similar idea. Metaphors carry meaning across: they take a meaning from one context and move it to another context to help us understand the new context.

Human beings think in analogies. “Water is to ice as summer is to winter.” These analogies in our thinking become metaphors; instead of “I’m very cold,” we say “I’m freezing” or “I’m a block of ice.” Archimedes announced, “If I had a place to put my lever I could move the world.” The lever metaphor gives us words like *leverage*, used in banking to mean greater purchasing power through the use of borrowed funds, and in negotiation to mean a bargaining advantage.

The Chilean poet Pablo Neruda was trying to explain the idea of metaphor to Mario, the young man who delivered his mail. He read Mario a poem about the sea, and asked, “How does the poem make you feel?”

Mario replies, “Like I’m a boat tossing up and down on your words.”

“Ah,” the poet says. “You’ve invented a metaphor.”

Metaphors make our meaning more vivid. They add drama. Consider the vivid and clear metaphors around cooking and eating. We *chew the fat*. Resentment *simmers*. Anger *boils up*. Trouble may be *brewing*. We have *sweet dreams* and *sour grapes*. We *devour* a great book and *skim* a boring report. Some metaphors are so commonplace that we even forget they are metaphors...*food for thought*.

Metaphors don’t simply emphasize. They don’t merely enliven our speech. They actually help us move our understanding forward. They help us describe and understand abstract ideas. They are “an indispensable element of the thought-processes of every one of us.”<sup>5</sup>

A good metaphor has great explanatory power; a terrific metaphor changes the way we see the world. One metaphor in the context of a restaurant is being “seated” in a restaurant. It shows up on signs: “Please wait to be seated.” Black Americans sought to integrate whites-only restaurants by “sit-ins.” People sang “We shall not be moved,” which meant not only that they would not physically move from their newly claimed seat at the table or at the front of the bus, but also that they would not give up; they would persist and persevere in the principle of equal rights.

Language is like a coral reef. It develops through layers and layers, new building on old. The oldest metaphors don’t feel like metaphors because they are so ordinary. They may even be invisible. A good example is the word “decide,” which comes from the Latin word meaning, literally, “cut off.” In many languages, including languages that do not have as much Latin influence as English, the word for “decide” also has an origin meaning “cut off”:

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<sup>5</sup> Guy Deutscher, *The Unfolding of Language*, page 117. The Pablo Neruda story is in Deutscher at pages 115-116; there is a photo of a Greek moving van on page 117 (with “Metaphores” prominently displayed); the coral reef metaphor for metaphor is Deutscher’s; and the world languages examples of the origin of the word *decide* are Deutscher’s at page 126. I cannot sufficiently express my gratitude to Stephen Fry for mentioning Deutscher’s book, which is a marvelous work.

- German—the word for decide, *ent-scheiden* comes from *scheiden*, which means to separate.
- Ancient Greek—*diaireo* is used to mean decide but its literal meaning is “cut in two.”
- Indonesian—*memotuskan* derives from a root word meaning “severed.”
- Swahili—*kata shauri* means decide is literal meaning is “cut matter.”
- The word for “decide is the same as the word for “cut” in Kenya’s Nilo-Saharan language, in biblical Hebrew, and in Chinese.

And why not? Like King Solomon *deciding* who was the mother of the child (“*cut* the baby in half”), any decision cuts off discussion, concludes debate, shuts the door on deliberation. When we cut to the chase and end the endless filibuster, we vote and we *decide*.

What does it matter to us that metaphors are so foundational to human language and thought processes?

All of our abstract ideas—all of philosophy and theology—developed through this incredibly rich and textured process of the evolution of language. As a species, whatever language we speak, humans have taken a vocabulary of words for simple physical objects (words like *tree* or *dog*) and words for simple physical processes (words like *cut* and *go*) and have exported them into new contexts to express ideas that are not physical, and in many cases not simple at all.

## God

Which brings us to God. Like “Hello!” the word God is often used as an exclamation, and has different meanings depending on context and inflection: Oh God. Oh my God! I swear to God. God bless you. But unlike the simple *hello*, the word God has real content. People often try to define what they mean when they say God. Yet this word is more than a word; it’s a symbol, it’s an abstraction, and so it is very difficult, if not impossible, to define in a way that takes in all of its possible meanings.

In many ways and many cultures, the idea of God is *not* considered an abstraction. Yet to my mind there may be no other concept more abstract—more remote from the physical—than any idea of God. This is so whether the mental image is of a specific being (for example an old white man with a long white beard), or of the most completely general and nonspecific influence (for example, “May the Force be with you”).

And—just as the “right” word to use when answering the telephone was heavily contested in the early 20th century, the “right” word to use for God (let alone the “right” meaning) has always been and continues to be a matter for dispute and disagreement.

There are some who say that all religions with a “One God” concept mean the same thing, the One God, the God of the Hebrews, the God of Abraham, from whose loins sprang all the peoples of the three “Abrahamic” religions that regard him as ancestor: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Yet there are others who will object that “Allah” is not “God.”

What's in a name? If the French say "Dieu," is their Dieu to be considered different from the "God" of the Archbishop of Canterbury? Does a deity by any other name smell as sweet? Apparently not to everyone.

But the point I really want to make about the word *God* is that, like *hello*, it has had centuries of development—even more, millennia of development. As a result, and far more than in the case of *hello*, humans understand what they mean when they say "God" by a series of metaphors so old and deep that we cannot trace the origins.

But it is possible to see that, in the earliest days of humanity, physical forces like the sun, the wind, storms, and earthquakes were themselves understood through the most basic of physical analogies: fire makes light and heat; the *sun is fire*. I can use the air in my lungs to blow on embers to make the fire spring up; something animates us; the *breath of life*. Wind pushes things around, makes them different, displaces them: the *winds of change*. Earthquakes shake the ground; sudden shifts and changes in life leave us *shaken*.

All these primeval forces are as powerful to us today as they were to primitive humans. Don't be misled by science and technology. We may know that the sun is a nuclear furnace; we may plot the path of prevailing winds over planet Earth; we may understand that shifting tectonic plates cause earthquakes—but we cannot halt the sun in its course, chain the winds, or still the quaking ground. We remain sunburned, windblown, shaken.

These metaphors lie at the deepest layer of the abstraction that we name God. Our thinking about the mystery of being is, in many ways, as primitive as the thinking of our ancestors of 160,000 years ago.

They said God is the Sun. God commands the storm. God shakes the ground. In the Hebrew bible, written mere 5,000 years ago, Job confronts God and demands an explanation for his suffering. God's reply is an echo of these metaphors (it's a magnificent passage, if entirely beside the point in response to Job's question, but I'll only quote a few lines). God says:

"Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? ... Have you ever given orders to the morning, or shown the dawn its place, that it might take the earth by the edges and shake the wicked out of it?" (Job 38:4-13)

In the bible we find not only these physical-force metaphors, but also more abstract metaphors that relate to human society. These metaphors extend the idea of God beyond the mere physical through metaphors based on human social and governmental structures. God as *King*, the *kingdom* of God, God *rules* the world, the moon, the stars.

The American Transcendentalists tried to stretch beyond these less-primitive but still simplistic metaphors with ideas like "the Oversoul" that is beyond all and in all. This idea seemed very odd to people at the time, even blasphemous, and many people today, sadly, would have the same reaction.

The point is not that the meaning of the word *God* is hard to pin down. Of course it is hard to pin down. The point is that regardless of whether we believe in God or not, our thinking about *God*

has been shaped by millennia of metaphor created by humans trying to understand primeval forces that power through their lives.

The task I offer up for us today is to re-consider all the assumptions we may have about that little three-letter word, *God* and ask ourselves about the underlying metaphors. The human mind is an amazing thing. We have gone from no language to many languages; from speech that merely identifies objects to poetry that expresses cathedrals of meaning. We use our minds and our words to question, explore, aspire, and explain.

Why do we do all this? Not simply for entertainment, or to fit in. The search for meaning and purpose is woven deeply into the fabric of our humanity. Humans are *meaning-makers*. The desire to understand is what turbo-charges the human gift for language: producing it, shaping it, changing it. And in return, language influences our understanding.

The most remarkable power of the human mind is our capacity to re-examine our words and our ideas. Although as children we inherit a set of assumptions, beliefs, and meanings, we learn to create new metaphors that lead us to a better understanding of our place and purpose. This task is not merely a pastime; it is our destiny.

I close with “a few words” from Victor Hugo: “The word, when one truly understands it, is a living being. The word is a verb, and the verb is God.”