

September 9, 2018

A Language of Reverence, Rev. Linda Simmons

The Inuit people have 50 names for the word snow. Each word describes another aspect of snow: sticky, icy, wet, falling, heavy...each word tells the listener how to live their lives in relationship to that particular snow.

Words are fascinating. Each time we use them, we tell another not only who we are in position to something but where that thing is in position to us too. Words refer to a series of relationships.

Each time we speak, we expose a relationship we have to something else much more clearly than we expose that something else. Even in science, as we have learned, what is studied behaves differently when studied than when not under observation. Quantum physics now tells us that the observer affects what is studied to the extent that what is being observed changes its quality when under observation. For example, an electron will shift from a particle to a wave under observation, and the closer the observation the greater the shift, leaving some scientists to go as far as saying that there is no phenomenon until it is observed. The implications of the 'Observer Effect' are profound. It suggests there is no such thing as objectivity.

We have learned that perspectives about the earth, the planets, other cultures all have perspectives woven within the point of view which create other points of view. Nothing comes free of perspective. All words are fraught with relationship.

With which words should we go on? Which words might we consider forfeiting? If we conspire to use words with more care, to love each word as Barbara Elder says, might our lives also be reflective of more compassionate grace, more ease, more beauty? Can we use words that offer us ourselves in a new way, that give to us an ability to approach our lives and life itself with more reverence?

Anthropologists, philosophers and others have suggested that if we do not have a word for an experience, then we cannot experience it. For instance, In the early 1960s, Robert Levy, an anthropologist, spent two years in the Society Islands in Tahiti. In the Society Islands, when people lost loved ones and felt that loss, they described themselves as feeling "sick" or "strange" afterwards. They didn't seem to have words like "grief" and "sorrow."¹

Levy argued that without terms for grief and sorrow, people didn't have the language to create rituals to alleviate the pain of grief. Levy found that the islands had a high suicide rate, and believed that the lack of language and ritual around grief might have been a reason for it.

¹ <https://io9.gizmodo.com/can-you-feel-something-if-you-dont-have-a-word-for-it-1596854838>

I recently experienced this sense of having a new concept and what it offered me, at a talk Carroll Dunham gave this past week called, "Riding the Windhorse in Mongolia." Gary and I met Carroll Dunham in Kathmandu, Nepal when we were there. She is an anthropologist who graduated from Princeton and who works for National Geographic.

There are 3 million people in Mongolia, over 30% are nomads and there are 44 million livestock, (15 livestock for every 1 person) and over 3 million of those livestock are horses. Carroll told us that the Mongolian nomads, who do not name their horses but have over 500 words to describe their traits, and whose relationship with their horses is profound, personal and deeply part of who they are as a people, call the soul "wind horse." The nomads believe that this wind horse travels through the body, and can be well or sick, whole or fractured, strong or weak.

The other day when I was running, I imagined my soul as a wind horse, running through my body, riding on my breath. It gave me courage and strength. This image, this experience, was not possible without Carroll and her words about horses and plains and the nomads of Mongolia. Words create meaning. Which do you use in your daily life? How many times a day do words of beauty, compassion, and hope leave your lips? How many times does anger, despair, judgment, attack of another come from you?

Because we are Unitarian Universalists, we can choose our language of reverence. We can claim the sacred for ourselves. But we must claim it. Because we do not have words chosen for us does not mean that we do not need words that offer the sacred, that which might offer us the capacity for rest, renewal, hope, courage, and inclusion. We can all use words to make our lives more holy, more sacred, more worthy of us and our place in this world as interconnected members of one human race.

As David Bumbaugh says in his article, "Toward a Humanist Vocabulary of Reverence", "We must have a language of reverence; that is, we must have the ability to speak of our ultimate commitment...about what is so precious to us that we cannot betray it without losing our own souls."²

What is so precious to you that you cannot betray it without losing your own soul? When I wrote that question, I was not really sure of the answer for myself right away. And then I thought, compassion in and between human beings is what is so precious to me that I cannot betray it without losing a piece of my soul. That is my ground of all being. That is where my god lives, right there, right in between us, when we reach toward one another with empathy, especially when it's hard, especially when others are challenging our ability to remain in our compassion, right then: when we reach toward with empathy, I know a power, a force, a knowing that feels other, that grounds me in an experience of the holy. And to name this, to speak it out loud, gives me hope and the ability to go on.

² Dean Grodzins ed, A Language of Reverence (Chicago: Meadville Lombard, 2004), 18.

Is naming snow 50 times like this? How about having 250 names for the traits of horses? I imagine it to be. To go on in life well, the Inuit people need to know exactly what kind of snow is present so that their relationship with the snow will be possible with the greatest of ease and success. The same for horses. The Mongolian nomads, spend most of their days riding on or in relationship to their horses, must know their horses intimately, each aspect, each quality, each nuance, in order to go on well.

How much of our days do we spend in relationship to another human being? What if we used 50 different words for empathy? What might happen to our ability to achieve it? What if we had 50 words for the word empathy? We can all name a few but how many do we all use regularly? If we could expand our vocabulary of empathy, might the beautiful within us grow larger, more whole, more accessible?

As I reflect on a vocabulary of empathy and connection, I consider what creates empathy and connection? It is of course more than words. It is also community, a sense of belonging, a knowing that one's life exists within a pattern of meaning that feels important and real.

There was recently an article published in Clinical Psychology Science that said that people who are depressed used some words much more often than others.³ One word in particular stood out. Do you know what it is? It is the word *I*. It is only when we live in a we, in a sense of empathetic community that we both feel empathy for and from, that we can feel whole. Even without depression, do we have enough sense of our interconnectedness to feel whole enough to live into a capacity for the language of empathy and connection?

I have mentioned here that the people of India and Nepal feel divinely loved and the interconnectedness this offers them with one another, knowing that they are not alone and have never been nor will ever be, that there have been other iterations of them throughout time and will be other iterations of them again and that to live now with integrity and courage is the goal, not to live now with the most intense version of oneself possible and to therefore make an individual mark, but to live well as a part of all that is, to live well as one of the interconnected web held together by a divine love that one knows extends to them- this offers courage, hope and a community that cares for one another.

If we do not have such a language of being divinely loved and therefore cannot experience it, what is the pool into which we can skinny dip when we are so weary of holding up courage and hope and be refreshed, restored, made resilient?

David Bumbaugh from his article again "Toward a Humanist Vocabulary of Reverence" offers us something when he writes: (When we declare that we are part of nature this gives us) a doctrine of incarnation that suggests...that the universe itself is continually

³ https://tonic.vice.com/en_us/article/xw58ea/depressed-people-use-these-words-more-often

incarnating in microbes and maples, hummingbirds and human beings, constantly inviting us to tease out the revelation contained in the stars and atoms and every living thing...to understand ourselves as the incarnation of those same forces and substances and circumstances that produced galaxies and stars and planets is to enlarge our sense of responsibility and our definition of moral living.”⁴

For Bumbaugh, in light of this knowledge and language of our incarnation as part of the universal evolution and life, the ethics of exclusion, greed, individual need as the highest good, all become unethical, and wrong because they are outside of our relationship as children of the universe. Perhaps we cannot find divine love, but can we find evolutionary love, love of planet and time and universe?

In his book, The Spell of the Sensuous, Dr. Abram, an ecologist and philosopher, writes about how we are changed by being in the world, how we are part of the fabric of the world around us, how we are an organ of this world, flesh of this world, one with all that is around us. Abram’s writes, "We can perceive things at all only because we ourselves are entirely a part of the sensible world that we perceive! We might as well say that we are organs of this world, flesh of its flesh, and that the world is perceiving itself through us, the world is perceiving itself through us."

When sensed this way, when these words become available to us, we can imagine ourselves as the lungs of the universe, as essential beings brought to life to serve a purpose, with a role to play that we cannot yet imagine the extent of.

We are not alone, not in this universe, not here on this island, not here in this congregation. We can risk developing a vocabulary of empathy, hope, courage and action that leads us toward one another, and toward ourselves with more integrity so that if people wonder what it is we believe as Unitarians, they need only watch how we live our daily lives, address our partners and loved ones, spend our money, choose and prepare our food, allow our relationship to privilege to change us- to intuitively hear our 7 principles.

The courage to achieve greatness comes largely from words spoken and received. Before you leave this space today, let someone know you see and hear and love them in one way or another, with some words that you find from your own knowing that you are seen and heard and loved.

And no matter how many words there are for snow and how magnificent they are, I can wait another while before I have to test out who well they work!

Be well my friends. Regard yourselves highly. May your wind horse ride on, whole and strong and able to take you where you dream of going.

Amen.

⁴ Grodzins, 14.

