

June 5 A Language Large Enough, Rev. Linda

Language is a subject that never ceases to fascinate me. So much of who we are, who we become and who we forget we can become, is fashioned by language. Some say, that is all there is but we know there is more: a look, a touch, a smile, a reaching out. Philosophers argue that without language we could not name the emotions that occur during these encounters. There is a debate amongst philosophers: Can a feeling be a felt if we cannot name it?

For instance, last week when I was helping my daughter move to Vermont and staying with her, she also had to work from home at her new job and sometimes she got tired of me and expressed it as only a daughter can do: wordlessly but absolutely clearly. I'd take the not so subtle clue and quiet down and do some work of my own. And then she would look up and see the sun shining and feel the warmth and navigating her way around boxes to find me would say, "Mama, I think it's time to go swimming. You in?"

And off we'd set to a river that runs strong with a little sandy river beach that you can get to after navigating over very slippery rocks, which I used to be so good at long ago. There were close calls and a few near tip overs and a few hushed expletives, my daughter coaching me from the other shore, but I made it. We dunked in the freezing Vermont water come down from the mountain and screamed and laughed.

Sunning in the river sand afterwards, I started to make a cairn. I stuck a stick in the sand that had been fashioned by the river rocks and water that rushes by from somewhere else. How different is the feel of wood hewn in a river bed than that from the sea.

The stick was deep brown and black and looked like it had a cobra head, which I of course had to comment on. And I said, Okay darling, you add something now. She rolled her eyes but smiled, the way only a daughter can do, and found a rock that fit right on the wooden cobra head like a cap.

A few days ago, she sent me a picture of our cobra cairn with this message: Our Stick is Still Here! Still here! A feeling of peace and well being flooded me looking at the pic and message. Our Stick is Still Here. Still here! I cannot give words to the emotion, but it still overcomes me.

So language. That unwieldy beast that we try to tame and shape to our wills, our feelings and thoughts. Without it there is no conversation. And without conversation, there could be no sense of us, at all. We name and blame and bring together and set asunder in many ways, but all of it starts with conversation, language, words.

In my undergraduate days, when I got a degree in economics and philosophy, I landed in the study of post-modernism, and it tipped my world upside down and made sense of it all at the same time.

Words did not point to what is real but point to the relationship that we fashioned and keep fashioning around what we call real. This is not an argument for spinning any truth one wants. It is an argument for understanding that truths have always been spun and the more people who spin them and the more power those spinners have, the truer they become. Sometimes this serves us. Our constitution and the words that we are all equal and deserving of freedom remain etched on our tongues and yet, how they are spun changes everything.

Like the second amendment, *A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.*

What does *well-regulated* mean and why do we not lift that up as often as the right to bear arms shall not be infringed?

Language. Conversation. Stories spun and respun.

Another example: I was always the hero in my family growing up. I took care of my brothers and sisters. I protected them as much as any child could. I made up stories and wrote plays that featured all of us. I kept us busy and on adventures so that the alcoholism that consumed my father and therefore mother did not swallow us up.

In the last decade, I have redefined what a hero is. Now I think of a hero as someone who can sit with the discomfort and not have to jump in to fix it; who can tolerate being named less than heroic, and still not jump in to fix it.

In other words, the word hero points to something but that something can only exist in relationship. Its role is to maintain the boundaries of relationship. Just like the words evil, wrong, failed, poor, black, white, good and bad work to do. They do not live as truths in an objective container. They shape truths.

Sometimes I wonder about the play of words and what they squeeze together to give us a sense of a reality we can hold onto and the unknowable, the unworded. How do these two spaces, so different, shape each other.

I think words work to shrink the unknowable. They want us to make it so small that it does not wake us. And this works, mostly, until the world becomes full of a virus we cannot control and there are wars everywhere and language is used to spin truths that choke the life out of the rights of the earth and so many others that we have fought to keep whole. And then, the chasm, that wordless chasm, opens in our imagination and dreams and habits and we have no idea how to manage this because words are just not available to put boundaries around these feelings. Not yet.

I think words and naming and defining and determining can build a wall between us and our existential loneliness. We just keep talking and writing and devising verbal containers

to fit one another in so that we know where everything and everyone is and then we can try to be those people we have decided are good enough. Trouble with this of course is that being good enough, no matter what your role, is harder and harder to name and therefore harder and harder to achieve these days.

David Whyte writes, "I began to realize that the only places where things were actually real was at this frontier between what you think is you and what you think is not you; that whatever you desire of the world will not come to pass exactly as you will like it, but the other mercy is that whatever the world desires of you will also not come to pass, and what actually occurs is this meeting, this frontier."

I love these words and have read them often. I think I met this frontier after my last lung surgery. At one point, lying in bed so full of pain that breathing had to be good enough, I wondered, who is this Linda here, the gossiping wind and the play of light and shadows dancing on my covers?

When there was no me left that I understood: no writer, no listener, no understander, no hero, no mother or daughter, no minister, no wife, no one who got it right or wrong, who was I then? The question frightened me in those weeks of recovery. It was a kind of howling that woke me up from those moments that beloved sleep would take me.

Today I think it was really a call to let silence arise unnamed, to allow silence to be the force that made the curtains quiver in the wind of the open window, for silence to be the answer to the light and shadow that the west wind calls with abandon.

I think maybe this helped show me the way to this place, show me the foot holds in the wall we build between what we can name and what names us without our permission: mortality, loss, mystery, change, and more change, and more loss.

These times my friend. These times. We have had so much change hoisted upon us. Changes that we did not believe would ever befall us as a nation and changes as people who are flesh and bones. Though even as I say that, I hear the people of color I know tell me that these changes: losses of civil rights, like voting access, redefinitions of our constitution that allow Roe v. Wade to be on the chopping block, the recarving of our nation to ensure one party wins and not another, covid and more covid and now looks like monkeypox is here too...my friends who are not white tell me, Linda, this may all be shocking to you, but we have never known democracy, we have always been marginalized and penalized, our children grow up afraid of being shot by a system that you believed in until recently.

And so I breathe. And so I breathe. Still here. We are still here.

And naming that, that we are still here, naming that HERE does not mean what it used to, naming all of it and knowing that there are other places too, while we vote and protest and show up and pray to we know not what, there are other words beside these, right beside them that can name light and shadow and breath and promise and love and stillness.

These other words hold no promises. They hold no more justice than other words.

But they make possible another place, a place that puts a foot on the ancient footholds between what we can name and what we cannot and even that much, even that much can give us the courage to go on, to do the next right thing, to breathe near what we cannot name or understand and not fall apart or become so despaired that even breathing hurts.

Go on my friends. Keep showing up. Keep loving what you love and speaking the words that keep us fashioned around a truth that matters, still. And seek the darkness from time to time and find new words, make new poetry, have new conversations, create new wonder.

We are still here and that matters. We are still here.

Amen.