

Riding the Windhorse, Rev. Linda Simmons, Sunday May 1, 2022

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 and of course to one another inside of that 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 exist in relationship, light and dark, love and hate, work to give us a place within those landscapes.

Each time we speak, we expose a relationship we have to something else much more clearly than we expose that something else. We have learned that words that describe the earth, the planets, other cultures are born of the perspective of the observer, placing their own world within the one observed.

For instance, folks in some parts of the United States have taken up book burning. Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye is a popular choice for the flames. The defense of these actions are that they don't want children exposed to this kind of pain or the words used to describe it. If we lean in, we learn about relationships to race, fear and accountability.

All words are fraught with relationship.

With which words should we go on? Which words might we consider forfeiting? Can we learn to 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? Can we find the words that empower and make room for many relationships and begin to do away with the ones that make spaces smaller and smaller so that only we can fit into them?

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.

We have as many words as the Inuit people have for snow to describe the ways that others are not acceptable, worthy, whole. They are the big, horrible words that we do not speak, and the smaller ones that we speak all the time. What words have you used this week to

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

make another less worthy than yourself? Words exist in relationship. As we use them, we make ourselves more visible than the other we speak of.

As UU minister Rev. 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 soul? What words do you use to remind yourself and the world of this commitment? What words do you use that make a mockery of this commitment? I am committed to increasing the measure of love and justice in this world. With my whole soul. And when I use words that make another less, and I use them too often, I betray not them but myself. I betray my own soul.

The windhorse came to me this week and reminded me to take heart, to keep believing in a world that I can make better, to keep believing in a world that is more full of goodness than evil, to keep believing in myself as part of that goodness.

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. The Mongolian nomads 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. For them, the windhorse points to human goodness and to the justice and mercy that goodness can make. They call the soul "wind horse." For them, this is a ground of being, this human goodness, this belief in love. A place to return to when there seems no place to return to.

I was swimming with my daughter Gina in the high school pool the other day. We have been doing that for a few years at 7am when we can both manage, which is at least once a week. The sun was slicing through the water so that when our hands went through that iridescent door, the bubbles that collected on them glowed. And beside me, so graceful and strong and young and brave, my daughter's body as I turn to breathe and see her in my underwater view, looking like some other worldly angel, surrounded by the golden bubbles that her breath and movement made.

Gina and I stop at each end of the pool to chat. Not 'cause she needs to. She would swim as hard as she could without me. It's in her genes. But these Simmons women genes in my 62 year old body are not as mighty as they used to be and these last months have filled me with unspoken words, so we stop at each end and talk. Usually, this ends by me saying something goofy, or trying to show her a water ballet trick that my sister and I used to do when we were kids and getting a nose full of water. Swimming the next lap is hard cause we are laughing between breathes.

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

And I feel like there is nothing else then. No wars around the world that are stealing lives for no good reason other than greed and domination, and that really does count as no good reason, and the earth is still breathing green and glorious in all her indomitable strength, and people consider one another with love and empathy before they say one single word. I believe all of that under water swimming beside my daughter in the sun sliced pool.

And believing that, which I can only believe because I have given it these words, because to believe something you have to name it and have the capacity to live within the relationship you name, believing this, I feel so free that for hours afterwards that everyone I speak to gets the best of me, my whole heart, my care and empathy and I know I can make a difference that matters. Believing this, I can make the difference in the world I so long to make.

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 and their ability to keep themselves and others safer in 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 horse and they must know their horses intimately, each aspect, each quality, each nuance, in order to go on well, in order to love well.

Here is what I mean to offer you: decide with excruciating care which words you use out loud or silently, love the world, kneel and bless it, kiss the ground, give the earth a little of your breath. See the good in others and work to help them see it in themselves and maybe they too can then see it in others.

You made of star dust and the genes of warriors and worshippers and prophets. Don't forget.

Find your windhorse and ride it to courage and mercy and hope. She awaits you, bowing so climbing up is easy. Ready to carry you to your soul and back out into the world of words and actions and making a difference that only your life can make.

Amen.