

“Vocabulary”

A Sermon by
Rev. Betty Kornitzer
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I open with the words of the Norwegian poet , Rolf Jacobsen:

*They’ re all children when they sleep.
There is no war in them.
They open their hands and breathe
in the slow rhythm given to human by heaven.*

*Whether soldiers, statesmen, servants or masters,
they purse their lips like small children
and they all half-open their hands.
Stars stand watch then, and the arch of the sky is hazed over
for a few hours when no one will harm another.*

*If only we could talk with each other then,
when hearts are like half-open flowers.
Words would push their way in
like golden bees.
- God, teach me sleep’s language.*

And from the writing o David Wagoner:

Lost

*Stand still. The trees ahead and the bushes beside you
Are not lost. Wherever you are is called Here,
And you must treat it as a powerful stranger,
Must ask permission to know it and be known.
The forest breathes. Listen. It answers:
I have made this place around you.
If you leave it, you may come back again, saying Here.
No two trees are the same to Raven.
No two branches are the same to Wren.
If what a tree or bush does is lost on you,
You are surely lost. Stand still. The forest knows
Where you are. You must let it find you.*



I went off to overnight camp in the wilds of Maine at a very tender age. I was seven.

Some of you know that I grew up in Manhattan, a place many might call a concrete jungle – but it was home to me. The Third Avenue L train roared outside my bedroom window. Punctuated by strains of screeching brakes and car horns, it was my urban lullaby. I was a city girl.

The woods of Maine terrified my little seven year old heart. One gray afternoon, I, somehow, wandered away from our group of little girls. I was probably chasing a butterfly or a chipmunk, novelties to these city eyes. Then, all of a sudden I was ambushed by a dread that squeezed my chest and would not let me breathe. I saw that I was alone in the forest, and I froze. In the afternoon gloom, the trees loomed high above me, casting ominous and menacing shadows. I could not find my bearings, I was lost and alone, and so afraid that my screams would not escape my throat. There, everything was a stranger to me. Obviously, here I am – I was found and embraced. But, to this day, I carry a body memory of that childhood terror – a tightness in my throat, the flutter of panic in my heart. To be lost and uncentered and far from home is a fearful place to be.

I want to speak with you this morning about the deep dark forest of theological language, and how, in our wanderings, we Unitarian Universalists sometimes find ourselves lost, uncentered and far from home.

The challenges of the Unitarian Universalist ministry are many – outnumbered only by its joys. But no challenge is more persistent than the challenge of *vocabulary*. Early on we learn to be mindful not to offend *anyone* with our language. Well, I'm quite sure that I've already failed that test right here in South County. And that's okay – not that I want to be offensive, oh perish the thought. No, it's okay because I believe that theological language is a great venue for us to stretch and grow as individuals and as a faith community.

We are UU Humanist, UU Pagans and UU Buddhists, UU Christians, UU Jews and UU Atheists and more – sometimes it can feel like being at the United Nations without an interpreter. When language is used in our Sunday

service or our literature that seems foreign to some among of you – and I know this sometimes happens – I ask you, please, try to translate. Try to open your heart to the *spirit* of what is being said, to look for our commonalities, and not our differences. Let us always search for understanding. When, in our hearts we defend against another’s language, we see the other as stranger. Thus, we may be leading *ourselves* deep within a darkened forest, where we find ourselves lost and alone – a stranger in our own land, perhaps, even a stranger in this very hall.

Friends, we can each illuminate that darkened forest with the light of understanding, the light of open minds, the light love. The shafts of light will filter through the darkness and the obscurity, reaching down through the shadowy forest like the long and radiant fingers of healing hands. Friends – if we focus on the spirit of the language and relinquish our attachment to a particular vocabulary, this here forest will be aglow with light. We will no longer be lost.

The 1991 movie “Black Robe,” depicts a young 17th century Jesuit missionary who is sent to convert the Huron tribe of northern Quebec. We see the dichotomy of two cultures, two languages if you will.

At one point in the film, the missionary becomes desperately lost in the forest. Disoriented and panicky, he is discovered by the tribe, a people who live engaged with the earth and are grounded in her ways. Bewildered, they inquire of the young priest: How can you become lost in the woods? For they knew:

No two trees are the same to Raven.

No two branches are the same to Wren.

If what a tree or bush does is lost on you,

You are surely lost. Stand still. The forest knows

Where you are. You must let it find you.

And I know whereof I speak. I went to Andover Newton Theological School, a Christian seminary, as did your interims Martha Niebanck, Tricia Hart and Catherine Cullen. That might have been a shadowy theological forest in which to plot a course. How did we do it? I can only speak for myself. I did a whole lot of simultaneous translation. I was required to write lengthy papers on such topics as Christology, the Trinity and Salvation and Sin. I became extremely facile at translation, and I could do that

because I was grounded in my liberal faith, and was not threatened or confused by the beliefs of others, they threw no shadows on my path

Being clear about your faith is an important first step in surviving the theological forest. It is interesting that a grounding and clarity of belief does not tend to make one strident and oppositional. Au contraire, grounding opens the mind and the heart and is the stuff that understanding is made of.

You know, my in laws are Hungarian, and they never really learned to speak English very well. And, all through school, my daughter Miriam's best friends were twin girls name Shane and Cory. My mother in law, Anyuka, always called the twins "Shame and Glory." And it didn't affect them in the least, they knew who they were. Shane knew she wasn't Shame, and even though she was a cutie pie, Cory knew she wasn't Glory. Much of it is a matter of attitude.

My colleague, Forrest Gilmore relates the following story, though he cannot recall the source:

"A conference was held with Catholic and Buddhist clergy. The Catholic priests and Buddhist priests got together and the Catholic and Buddhist monks also spent time together. The priests (i.e. the theologians) had a terrible time. They argued and fought about theology and ritual. They couldn't understand one another. But the monks (i.e. the mystics) got along fabulously with one another. They each saw in the other an experience of the holy and recognized that relationship despite a difference in the way that they described it."

And. My friends, is not that what we are here for – to find in each other an experience of the holy, to discover one another's essential beauty – their inherent dignity and worth?

Gilmore goes on to suggest that:

"Theology is like describing the chemistry of a banana or the physics of riding a bike. It has some value, but what is essential is eating the banana and riding the bike.

Spirituality to me is fundamentally not a definition. It is an experience, a relationship.

Religions have gotten themselves in trouble forever by getting attached to the words that they use to attempt to describe that experience. And to be honest, I don't think a lot of the people....(in our congregations) except for the religiously fearful, care a whole lot about theological particularity. It doesn't make much of a difference in their lives. But (we) are dying for that spiritual experience. It's like water in the desert to (us). (our problem as Unitarian Universalisms) is that we spend so much time discussing the words and what theological category we're in and far too little time discussing the processes we can use to (invite) that fundamentally profound and transformative experience. We have the potential to be THE religious alternative for people who have had enough of both conservatism and secularism if we only can come to act on this knowledge.”

Unitarian Universalist President, William Sinkford, has called for us to “develop a language of reverence.” I think this is a good thing. Some disagree, worried that such a language might not embody their particular theological vocabulary.

It seems to me that people are coming to our congregations today with an inquisitiveness about religion akin to that of the traditionally unchurched. They come here, for instance, because they’re wondering about the Holy, and values, about identity and meaning. And so, my friends, we’ve got to talk about this stuff. And with our heart, we can find a way.

Have you ever traveled in a foreign country where you do not speak the language? Something very interesting happens, doesn't it? We converse without words, somehow we figure it out. At one time I carpooled with a woman who drove a VW with German signage. I loved it – by the headlights was a sign that read “De Glimmer Blinken,” and by the windshield wipers, one that read “De Drizzle Flippen.” I got it! If we shine the light of an open heart on religious language, perhaps we can converse and hear the language of the other without distrust or defense.

Perhaps, in that moody forest, together we can be trusting and become un-lost. Perhaps, there, together we can encounter the Holy – perhaps something like this is worth trying as a language of reverence:

A Theology Adequate for the Night by Nancy Shaffer

*Not God as unmoved mover:
One who set the earth in motion
and withdrew. Not the One to thank
when those cherished do not die-
for providence includes equally
power to harm. Not a God of exactings,
as if love could be earned or subtracted.*

*But- this may work in the night:
Something that breathes with us, as others
sleep; something that breathes also
those sleeping, so no one is alone.
Something that is the beginning of love,
and also each part of how love is completed.
Something so large, wherever we are,
we are not separate, which teaches again
the way to start over.*

*Night is the test, when grief lies uncovered,
And longing shows clear, when nothing we do
Can hasten earth's turning or delay it.*

*This may be adequate for the night
this holding: something that steadfastly breathes us,
which we also are learning to breathe.*

*(Note: The closing sentence is a reference to a reading for the children "In
the Beginning by Rev. Nancy Shaffer*

Remember my friends- we are cousins and together we are breathing
dinosaur air.