

Gobbledygook

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship ~ www.buf.org

October 8, 2017

Rev. Paul Beckel

Words are name tags which save us the trouble of thinking about the objects or ideas which they represent. Here exactly lies their capacity for mischief.

—Judith Groch

The price of clarity, of course, is that the clearer the document the more obvious its substantive deficiencies. For the lazy or dull, this price may be too high.

—Reed Dickerson, Professor of Law, Indiana University

Gobbledygook may indicate a failure to think clearly, a contempt for one's clients, or more probably a mixture of both. A system that can't or won't communicate is not a safe basis for a democracy.

—Michael Shanks

The involvement of different stakeholders in the study resulted in functional multidisciplinary governance-related targeted policy implementation aimed at mitigating negative effects of globalization.

—from the online “Gobbledygook Generator”

Words, like glasses, obscure everything they do not make clear.

—Joseph Joubert

The biggest problem with communication is the illusion that it has been accomplished.

—George Bernard Shaw

References:

wordscount.info/index.html

www.plainenglish.co.uk

www.plainenglish.co.uk/free-guides.html

www.plainlanguage.gov

WELCOME

Today's sermon is going to be pretty long. I just didn't have time to write a short one.

Over the last few Sundays we've been talking about mindfulness: getting out of our heads, away from our worries, judgments, and even our brilliant ideas — at least for a few minutes when we can — in order to be more present in the immediate experience of here and now.

But today, some comic relief. Actually, no not all that comic, but the approach will be more comfortable for some — a bit more typically UU in the form of: hmmm, here's an interesting idea...let's consider it from this angle...and now, let's consider it from that angle.

Because, even as we explore mindfulness this year we will be taking into account the varieties of learning styles among us. So even tho we may ordinarily *overdo* the intellectual analysis of religion (and are attending to mindfulness as an antidote) we're not going to simply dismiss the good ol' Unitarian tradition of critical inquiry.

Still, our topic today will involve one of the elements on Buddhism's Eightfold Path: Virtuous Speech, which the Buddha described as speaking with loving kindness, honesty, and mindfulness.

Somewhere within those qualities is a key aspect of communication — coherence — speaking in a way that people can understand. We tend to talk a lot here about being good listeners, which is absolutely vital. Today tho I'll say why I believe — that when we speak and when we text or email — that making sense, getting to the point, *or at least having a point*, is just as big-hearted as good listening, and it's just as hard, *and* just as vital.

I'm really setting myself up for criticism today if I do not profoundly exemplify virtuous speech. So I'd like to begin by lighting the chalice, which will remind us of our covenant to be gentle and forgiving ... yes: Love is the spirit of this fellowship and service gives it life. Celebrating our diversity, and joined by a quest for truth, we work for peace, and honor all creation.

LIGHTING THE CHALICE/COVENANT

GATHERING SONG *Bring Many Names, #23*

CHILDREN'S FOCUS *Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious*

ERACISM MINUTE Lauralee Carbone

READING *Tao te Ching, #63*

MEDITATION / SILENCE (3:00)

REFLECTIONS, Part 1

About 25 years ago I saw the film adaptation of Norman McLean's memoir, *A River Runs through It*. I still have a vivid image in my mind of one scene. And I'm probably paraphrasing or embellishing, but here's how it goes in my faulty memory: The author is just a lad, struggling to write something assigned to him by his father, a preacher. Finally, he gets the courage to turn his paper over for inspection. His father scans it and hands it back saying, "Fewer words."

I imagine that that memory sticks with me because I am bedeviled by that counsel. I usually agree with such editorial guidance, especially when it comes to other people's writing or speaking. And yet, for me, it's tough advice to follow.

I think, by and large, Unitarian Universalists are people who love people. And we also *love* words. I once imagined, as a child, that there were only a certain number of words a person could say before running out. If this were true, many of us would be reduced to a trickle by now.

==

For some people, religious experience is associated with images or music, stories or places. For others, religious experience is associated with a familiar series of bodily movements: tai chi, dervish

whirling, the sign of the cross. Or it's evoked with a physical artifact: a flaming chalice or a statue of a dancing Shiva. In the same way, for some of us, religious experience is inextricably linked to words – the *meaning* of special words, like karma, covenant, or “the interdependent web of all creation,” and sometimes what's important is *just their sound*: om mani padme hum.

So there's a spiritual aspect to our use of words. There is an *ethical* aspect as well. Because communication is an ethical act. Hate speech, love letters, lullabies ... wedding vows, police reports, campaign promises.... There are significant consequences for our word *choices*, and our *tone*.

==

Changing technology creates ever-new challenges as we attempt to adapt to email, texting, and videophone. It takes such virtues as patience, practice, and discipline to use new forms of communication — for which there are few established norms — to use these not only effectively, but respectfully.

In addition, there are always *new words* to learn, some which we may not want to use or even understand, because we feel the old words were perfectly fine. And what is the world coming to when the Oxford English Dictionary and Merriam-Webster are no longer the go-to sources of meaning? Can you believe it — that if we really want to communicate with kids these days, we have to go to urbandictionary.com to see various definitions of new words ... a website where users vote thumbs up or thumbs down to establish the legitimacy of each definition.

And yet, isn't this how meaning has always been established? Aren't words essentially an agreement regarding the meaning of a sound and a particular assemblage of letters ... what these will mean for both of us? Language goes deep. It can form a connection, even between people who don't see eye to eye. Language is profoundly relational, even covenantal ... within a larger group or society at large, it is a form of communion.

... Which is why, perhaps, it means so much to belong to a group who share their own lingo ... and why it can be so unnerving when the meaning of a word begins to change: because it's a relationship, really, that is being reconfigured. And, most profoundly, this may be why the MISuse of words, the ABuse of words to misdirect or undermine relationship ... is that why it's not just unnerving when people do this intentionally, but infuriating ... because it's not just about a stranger deceiving me ... it's a betrayal! The ripping apart of relationship that we might never be able to trust again. Literally. (This one is my pet peeve: 20 years ago the word literally was a distinctly meaningful, highly functional word. It is now nothing but gobbledygook.)

But back to *new* words. You may or may not agree that we need so many, but at the very least we should all know that “bomb ass” means cool, like a godly level of cool. And a “nothing burger” is an idea that turns out to be a dead end, or an event for which there were high expectations that turns out to be overhyped. And a “termite” is someone from your past who comes out of the woodwork when you suddenly acquire money or fame.

==

Is our language going to hell in a hand basket? Is the corruption of language by the next generation unsustainable? According to the President of Harvard, “Bad spelling, incorrectness as well as inelegance of expression in writing, ignorance of the simplest rules of punctuation, and almost entire

want of familiarity with English literature, are [all too common among those] otherwise well prepared for college.” That was in 1871.

Going back a little further, Noah Webster published the first edition of his dictionary in 1828, and was lambasted for including the word “lengthy.” A critic asked, “What’s next — strengthy?!”

One generation before this, John Whitherspoon, a signer of The Declaration of Independence, condemned the emerging tendency of even educated people to use words like “notify” when what they mean is “inform”. Whitherspoon was all for *political* independence, but he cherished our linguistic ties to the old country.

Ironically (since we have a stereotype of the Brits being all snooty and formal) ironically, it’s the British today who have the most progressive organization to promote the use of plain English. The Plain English Campaign, an independent group in England, works to persuade businesses and government to use plain language (instead of gobbledygook) when communicating with the public. This is not just the whim of one malcontent. For almost 40 years, and now with 25 employees, the Plain English Campaign assists people with grievances when they have been baffled by bureaucratic language, small print and legalese. The group also provides training in editing and clear communication. Their website has some really good (and concise) resources – tips for writing clearly and effectively.

They also have annual awards for the best and the worst written and spoken communications. In the first few years of the campaign, winners of the annual Golden Bull awards for prime gobbledygook received a pound of tripe in the post. Because of health regulations they now have to settle for a trophy (which was once awarded to George W. Bush for lifetime achievement).

We’ve all been affected by it: doublespeak, bloviation, gibberish, buzzwords, and legalese. The use of euphemism to soften something we don’t want to hear, like using the phrase “servicing a target” instead of “bombing.” Or any other language that disguises, distorts, or reverses the meaning of words.

This is not a joke. As BBC political editor Andrew Marr wrote: “Cloudy, slimy sentences are the first sign of bad government.”

In George Orwell’s *1984*, the official language, Newspeak, included the word, blackwhite. Blackwhite: a verb which means the ability to believe that black is white, to *know* that black is white, and to forget that one has ever believed the contrary. When this word is used in reference to an opponent of the ruling political party, it’s a bad thing. When it’s used to refer to a member of the party, it’s an indication of loyalty to be willing to say that black is white when Party discipline demands.

Orwell had a particular disdain for long words, which he said were well suited for defending the indefensible.

==

Happily, a movement has been growing in the United States as well to encourage and even to *legally mandate* that insurance, medicine, finance, law, and government communications be written in plain language.

Plainlanguage.gov is a U.S. federal government website that advises governmental agencies *why* plain language matters and *how* to use it. You may find it surprising to hear the words “government” and “clear communication” in the same sentence, but that’s precisely why this matters. Al Gore put bluntly: “Clear writing from your government is a civil right.”

And this view is borne out in a federal appeals court ruling which found “that certain government forms were so difficult to read that they violated due process requirements that people be given ‘notice’ of possible legal actions against them....” This precedent was set in a lawsuit against the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service in 1998. We can only hope that it hasn’t been subject, since then, to the natural decay, or intentional subversion of meaning. [Maria Walters and others v. United States Immigration and Naturalization Service. No. 96-36304. United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit. 1998]

This is not just an exasperated rant. It’s a call to eternal vigilance. What if we begin to accept it when salespeople, politicians, or the press *change the meaning of words* such that *we stop noticing* the vile objective?

In yesterday’s Bellingham Herald, there were two headlines that used words, the meaning of which I thought I understood. But they were used to mean something completely different. These words were used without quotation marks, and without the modifier “so-called,” but just accepted mindlessly.

The Page 1 headline read: “[blank] signed an executive order to expand religious liberty. Expand religious liberty?! By allowing so-called moral objections to enable people to deny people equal protection of the law?”

The page 2 headline read: “Protection Sought for Religious Foes of LGBT Rights.” Protection! Protection?! Protection??!! Some unfortunate people need to be protected from the extension of civil rights to lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender people?

This is irresponsible journalism — but only in being lazy and cowardly. The origins of this deliberate decoy are rooted in malevolent manipulation of prejudice.

Let’s take a breather.

MUSICAL MEDITATION

REFLECTIONS, Part 2

If we’re in the mood for it, we can see the humor in the gobbledygook of newspaper headlines like:

- Something Went Wrong in Jet Crash, Expert Says
- Police Begin Campaign to Run Down Jaywalkers
- Kids Make Nutritious Snacks
- British Left Waffles on Falkland Islands

And now I have almost used up all of my words. But in the Unitarian spirit of nuance ... and cautiously concluding, “on the other hand...” I want to take just a minute to offer a counterpoint *against* being too clear, and too succinct. And this balance is important, because you have to decide, thousands of times every day — you decide how clear to be, how clear you expect and even demand that others will be, and how much trouble it’s all worth.

And sometimes, it's not worth much at all. One of my favorite essays on Unitarian Universalism is called "in praise of ambiguity." Because, you know, some things just can't be pinned down. Like what is God? In my opinion, it's blasphemy to imagine we'll ever have clarity in that realm.

And some ideas, situations, and plans are complicated. And it may be tempting to look at a complicated document with feigned ignorance. It may feel righteous to demand simplicity when there are inescapable complications and paradoxes.

The solution to confusion is not always to choose rhetorical minimalism. I have no regrets that I spent weeks and weeks digging through the thousands of pages in the Harry Potter books (which revealed, by the way, that Gobbledygook is the language of Goblins).

Words are often facile or trite, empty, or misleading. And we are flooded with words: facts and propaganda, rumors and hints. The task of picking out the ones that mean something — that task is huge. Preserving the meaning of words is both honorable and a losing game. Passing to the next generation those words that are most meaningful — in a coherent manner — is a contribution of no small import.

And making an effort to grasp new words and new usage of words is often a first step toward promoting social justice. For example, with the emergence of some new words in recent decades we've become better able to understand and to work against some very old realities like hate crime, sexual harassment, and date rape.

More recently we've been coming to understand an old phrase, "White Supremacy," in a new way, new at least for white liberals. Because that phrase is now being applied to our own institutions which, on many levels, perpetuate systems of racial injustice — systems we've sometimes obscured beneath a rhetoric of goodwill.

My purpose today is not to promote the criticism of others for *their* misuse of words. Rather, we who love words and wish to honor their meaning, and their relational significance — we can pay attention — be mindful of how we use our words. In this way we will see the falsehood in our own use of stereotypes, and the waste in our own verbal elusiveness ... the slovenliness in our irrationality, and in the vanity of our jargon.

I don't mean to hold up elegance of speech or proper English as the highest aspiration. On the contrary, George Eliot has said, "Correct English is the slang of prigs." But I do believe that coherence in our speaking and our writing — just like integrity between our words and our actions — coherence, balanced with poetry, can bring out the better angels of our nature.

SHARING OUR GIFTS

SENDING SONG

Wake Now My Senses #298

BENEDICTION

A benediction, as we extinguish the chalice. "Benediction" means: "speaking well." So go, now, to speak well. Use your words, with both clarity, and beauty.