

THE TURN OF THE WHEEL

Sermon by Audette Fulbright
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All Souls Church, New York City

“In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God.” [John 1:1] Perhaps you’ve heard this before - the book of John, Chapter 1, verse 1. Scholars of language and concepts, those people who research and wonder about how we think, tend to agree with John. Their research largely embraces the idea that our language determines our thought and more than just our thought – language determines our *experience*, to some significant degree. Put differently, the words we have to express the concrete and abstract objects of our “reality” critically impact that which we can conceive, and also what we experience. The most familiar proponents of this research are Edward Sapir and his pupil, Benjamin Lee Whorf. Whorf said:

We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscope flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds – and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. The agreement is, of course, an implicit and unstated one, but its terms are **absolutely obligatory**; we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organization and classification of data which the agreement decrees. (“[The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis](#)”)

As Byron Shelley put it, “[God] gave [us] speech, and speech created thought, which is the measure of the universe.”

You have probably heard one of the classic iterations of this idea: the Inuit people have 32 different words for “snow.” As English speakers with a stateside experience, we would have a great deal of difficulty expressing or even *perceiving* the distinctions that the Inuit do in their experience of snow, unless we were carefully shown and taught.

A further pursuit of this would suggest that we humans have many thoughts that can arise but escape the bondage of language – but these are “unconscious” thoughts. Thoughts and ideas can only become “conscious” through expression, and expression requires language. Some artists are able to be expressive without specifically using language, but the “translatability” of their ideas is impossible to determine without language, putting us right back in the language box.

Here is what we know: the language we use and the way we use it is extremely relevant. It shapes our thoughts and it affects our perceptions of the world. We filter all our experiences and ideas through the skein of our particular language or languages, and therefore it certainly behooves us to be attentive to our use of language. Perhaps now more than ever, when it is clear that we are losing the richness and variety of our language. The decrease in the average working vocabulary of a 14-year-old over the last 50 years is 10,000 words. Fewer words means a more impoverished cache from which to uncover, discover, and express meaning and creative thought.

One thing, then, that becomes obvious in light of this is, language that eliminates half of the human experience – namely, the female half – is capable of damaging us. We’ve come a long way from the days in which it was expected that using exclusively masculine language, “mankind,” “Chairman,” “fireman,” etc and so on, when talking about the full flower of humankind, was reasonable and properly descriptive. As language shapes our understanding of the world we live in and the possibilities it contains, language that erases half or more of human experience can be seen as nothing less than powerfully destructive.

For many people, their concept of the divine, or God, is the Most Important Thing. There is nothing more important than God. Therefore, our understandings about God, whatever they may or may not be, carry weight. Indeed, it is often the case that the language used to express a concept of God is the specific mechanism which drives people away from the idea of God. The shape of our God can only be shared between human beings by means of language. So the words we use and the way we think on this subject really do make a profound difference.

A good deal of research has now been done, in an effort to trace back the history of the human experience and expression of the concept of the divine. Rosemary Radford Ruether is one of the world’s leading contemporary feminist theologians, and in her work she articulates a commonly held understanding: ***that the most ancient expressions of the divine were feminine.***

Over time, the female-only expressions of the divine were joined by the male image of the divine – however, for a long time, there was either a remaining emphasis on the feminine aspect of the divine, or the feminine and masculine expressions of the divine held an essentially equal position, both seen as necessary and relevant. Ruether points out that in our modern times, there are those who either re-embrace the idea of Goddess or repudiate it based on some basic dualistic assumptions; those assumptions being the tensions found in patriarchal societies between nature/civilization, sexuality/spirituality, nurturance/dominance, immanence/transcendence, etc. It is assumed by those who prefer the Goddess ideal or reject the Goddess ideal that the Goddess ideal existed, in fact, on the “feminine side” of these dualisms – i.e., the Goddess ideal would promote nature, sexuality, nurturance, immanence, and so forth. However, with careful research on the actual images and conceptions of Goddess between 2800 - 1200 BC, we see this dualistic understanding does not hold up. In Ruether’s words:

When we look at the images of the Goddess in her various forms in the ancient texts, (2800 - 1200 BC) we discover a world whose dialectics do not fall into such dualisms. Specifically, the concept of gender complementarity is absent from the ancient myths. ...Sexual potency and power are found in both the Goddess and the God. There are tensions that define ancient religions – especially between chaos and cosmos, death and life – but divine forces, male and female, are ranged on both sides of the dichotomies. ...It is precisely this aspect of the religions of the ancient Near East that provide the most striking alternative to the symbolic world generated by modern male monotheism. (*Sexism and God-Language*, p. 52)

This has powerful implications for not just those who identify as women, but those whose lives are expressed beyond binary understandings of gender.

I think many of us hunger for ways of understanding the divine that not only speaks to our sense of self, but ways they reconnect us to a greater wholeness beyond selves. The transcendentalists sought God in nature; modern pagans seek it in new forms of Goddess worship, embedded in an

earth-based reverence and ritual. Hear it in the priestess Starhawk's great "Charge of the Goddess:"

I who am the beauty of the green earth
and the white moon among stars
and the mysteries of the waters,
I call upon your soul to arise
and come unto me.
For I am the soul of nature
that gives life to the universe.
From Me all things proceed
and unto Me they must return.
Let My worship be in the heart that rejoices,
for behold—
all acts of love and pleasure are My rituals.
Let there be beauty and strength,
power and compassion,
honor and humility,
mirth and reverence within you.
And you who seek to know Me,
know that your seeking and yearning
will avail you not,
unless you know the Mystery:
for if that which you seek,
you find not within yourself,
you will never find it without.
For behold,
I have been with you
from the beginning,
and I am that which is attained
at the end of desire.

Yet many of us do not feel called to an understanding of God or the divine or the ground of Being that is personal, embodied, gendered, or otherwise anthropomorphized. As the wheel continues to turn, and language grows alongside our science... as we feel alienated from the cycles and seasons of the Earth, we long for other ways of understanding.

Enter a new word: Panentheism. Panentheism is superficially explained by its Greek roots: *pan* meaning "everything," *en* meaning "in," and "theos" meaning "God." Thus the literal translation is "Everything is in God." As the religious scholar Marcus Borg put it:

God is more than everything (thus transcendent), and yet everything is in God (thus God is immanent). For panentheism, God is "right here," even as God is "more than right here." Panentheism is very different from pantheism, with which it is often confused. Pantheism lacks that extra syllable "en," which makes all the difference. Pantheism (without the "en") identifies the universe with God: God and the universe are coextensive (literally, "everything is God). ... But panentheism affirms both transcendence (God's otherness or moreness) and immanence (God's presence). God is not to be identified with the sum total of things. Rather, God is more...even as God is present...**For this concept, God is not a supernatural being separate from the universe; rather, God (the**

**sacred, Spirit) is a nonmaterial layer or level or dimension of reality
all around us. (*The God We Never Knew*, p. 32 & p. 12)**

To me, I expand when I experience the nearness of God – when I see God in the people I encounter (namaste), or in the full range of experience, both that which I call good and that which I call bad. I feel that God is near. But also conceiving of God as something much more than that which I can know or understand also seems to me necessary; I should add that it also seems to me inexpressibly comforting. There are those who believe that a religion that comforts is a sure sign of weakness. I disagree. I believe the point of making up religions – and yes, I believe that we humans make up our religions – is to comfort, encourage, and seek out a higher way of being than what we can do alone. I believe that in pursuit of our religious understandings, we are often able to connect with the transcendent “moreness” of God – perhaps we might call it the Holy Spirit -- and I also suffer with the knowledge that we frequently fall into the traps of our worst fear-based human traits. When I was gathering the research materials for this sermon, I saw a book title: *When Bad Christians Happen to Good People*. Yeah. The title could have as easily been *When Bad Ba’Hai or Yogis or Buddhists Happen to Good People*, of course. No religion has ever had a monopoly on human perfection. Still, we know that this business of religion brings out not just the best, but also occasionally the worst in us.

Which leads me round at last to the beginning. Given the potential for marvelous wonder and the utter transformation possible through religion, as well as the potential for pain and suffering and alienation, we really should pay attention to how we talk about the divine. To the degree that we anthropomorphize the divine, we should be attendant to the manner in which we do so. Indeed, we should be attendant to *all* the ways we use language. There is real power in words. There is real value in the variety of ways human beings can know things, express things, experience things. I will close with a few words from the Buddha, which I believe encapsulate this.

The thought manifests as the word;
the word manifests as the deed;
the deed develops into habit;
and habit hardens into character.
So watch the thought and its ways with care,
and let it spring from love,
born out of a compassion for all beings.

Amen, ashe, blessed be, namaste.