

## **WHAT'S IN A WORD?**

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I suspect that there are a great many of us in this room who, like Margaret in our reading, have given up the language and practice of the religion of our youth. Unitarian Universalism is full of people like us, who in finding the freedom and promise of this faith, look beyond the traditional language they have known. But all too often, in the process we neglect to replace what has been discarded.

In a sermon entitled Language of Faith, Unitarian Universalist Association President, William Sinkford, notes that in examining our statement of Principles & Purposes, he discovered not one word of religious language. In words borrowed from former UUA president Eugene Pickett, he said [Our principles and Purposes] “describe a *process* for approaching the religious depths but they testify to no intimate acquaintance with the depths themselves.”

Sinkford challenges us to find and use religious language, “I would like to see us become better acquainted with the depths,” he writes, “both so that we are more grounded in our personal faith and so that we can effectively communicate that faith and what we believe it demands of us to others. For this I think we need to cultivate what UU minister David Bumbaugh calls a “vocabulary of reverence.” (A Language of Reverence p. 4)

He does not suggest that UUs return to traditional Christian language, but some other language to capture the possibility of reverence and name the holy.

Language is important to us. And a language of the sacred is necessary if we are to reach the depths of human experience. But what language can we use? What’s in a word, anyway? To get started for today, I googled that question and came up with

**168,000,000** entries for **What's in a word?** I guess alot of other people want to know as well.

*In an article from the “Monthly Magazine for Macmillan English Dictionary” entitled, what else? **What's in a word?*** by Michael Hoey, the author attempts to give us a clue. He says, “There are five questions that linguists (and learners) need to ask about any word. “These are:

1. What does the word mean?
2. What words does it associate with?
3. What meanings does it associate with?
4. What grammatical functions does it associate with?
5. What positions in the text does the word favor?

Very interesting questions, indeed. If we were to ask these questions of the word, God, for example, the biggest bugaboo for Unitarian Universalists, we might discover some things we hadn’t thought about before. That perhaps it is useful word after all.

First of all what *does* the word God mean? Theologian Paul Tillich says it means, that which is ultimate for us. Others will have different answers. Obviously a simple definition is not enough to know all that is contained in that one short word. We need to consider the word's associations, other meanings, and yes, grammatical functions.

*“What’s in a name?” Asks William Shakespeare. “A rose by any other name would smell as sweet.”*

For Shakespeare, the truth of a word is not in the word itself, but in that to which the word points. God is not God's name, says UU minister Forest Church. God by any other name would yet be the ultimate reality for Paul Tillich.

The author of our opening hymn points to the truth of Shakespeare's point of view. He points to the core of silence, the pause between the notes of music. “To Heart or soul or spirit it comes forth (the words we name them matter not)”

All of these different people from different times and places are telling us the same thing; that there is a truth, a meaning, beyond all words. We may name that truth, but the words we use are not that truth in and of themselves.

This is a hard lesson for us Unitarian Universalists to learn. Words are the center of what we do. On our Sunday Service survey, the most common reason for coming to church on Sunday was to hear the sermon, the words. We get very perturbed when people use language we do not understand or when people do not define their terms.

I wonder if perhaps we are too concerned with definitions of words and not enough concerned with that to which the words point.

Consider this. In 1841, A Unitarian transcendentalist minister, Theodore Parker, delivered a sermon entitled the Transient and Permanent in Christianity. In that sermon he asserted that the religion Jesus taught was permanent, a pure religion that would still be true even if Jesus had never lived.

He said in that sermon, “Almost every sect that has ever been, makes Christianity rest on the personal authority of Jesus ... Yet it seems difficult to conceive any reason why moral and religious truths should rest for their support on the personal authority of their revealer any more than the truths of science on that of him who makes them known first or most clearly. It is hard to see why the great truths of Christianity rest on the personal authority of Jesus more than the axioms of geometry rest on the personal authority of Euclid or Archimedes. The authority of Jesus, as of all teachers one would naturally think, must rest on the truth of his words and not their truth on his authority.”

When Parker wrote this sermon, I doubt that he was concerned with the definitions of Jesus' words. He was telling us that the truth of Jesus' ministry is in that to which his words point, the pure and permanent religion, whose name is not Christianity. Nor is its name Judaism or Islam or Buddhism or Hinduism or Paganism.

The pure religion to which Parker refers is the same thing as that core of silence in our hymn. It is the name unnamed of that which is ultimate for us. It is that which is written all over us after we have encountered it.

What I have been saying is that it doesn't matter what words you use, just use some. But alas, there is more to this dilemma. The limitation of our words is expressed rather poetically by Process philosopher Alfred North Whitehead. What he said was that a word can become the victim of misplaced concreteness. A word can become static. A word can die, lose its meaning or point to things to which it was never intended to point.

And he is correct. Words are slippery little devils. Words are meant to move. Words change. What a word meant last week means something completely different today. Some words do sometimes simply fall out of favor, lose their ability to point beyond themselves and disappear.

Some words take on new meanings entirely. And sometimes certain words become cast in stone, inflexible and rigid because one group of people claim to have the one and only meaning for the words, and other groups of people give away their right to associate those words as they may.

I believe this is what has happened to the traditional language of Western religion; the words many of us grew up with, and rejected, because we let someone else define them for us. But there is something we can do to reclaim that language without allowing our rejected associations rule the depths to which those words point.

UU minister Laurel Hallman in her 2003 Berry Street Essay address entitled Images for Our Lives, reminds us that religious language is metaphor, and that we do have some control over how we use language.

“(The traditional words of Western religion) had evoked too much for too many people over too long a time,” she said, “and I needed to stay connected to the human struggles and the human understandings they represented, if only to inform my own.

... The word God might have died. But I could not ignore all that it represented before it was rigidified into a state of rigor mortis.”

She suggests that Religious imagination, Poetry and Metaphor can help us reclaim religious language that is meaningful and which can help us reach the religious depths we long for.

It is with some great sadness that I realize how different my religious childhood would have been had I been introduced to the metaphors of a strong mother god, a young, eager, learning, growing god, the great mystery of nature, the glory of a mammoth burst of stardust. But you and I have opportunity to salvage what was lost. We can juxtapose old words with new ones, we can use the old words in different places in sentences, we can tell stories and read poems, and shock ourselves out of believing that the words are dead. We can bring them back to life again through our own imaginations.

David Bumbaugh, UU minister and professor of religion at Meadville Lombard, suggests our religious language lies in what Thomas Berry calls The Great Work, the metaphors surrounding story of evolution, “Our very existence is rooted in the fundamental processes of the universe itself.” He writes. How can we not stand in awe before the vast processes that created galaxies, suns, stars, and planets?”

How can we not indeed?

But, you know what? We don’t even have to look beyond what we already have. We do not have to start from scratch. All we need to do is look to our covenant and see that we have living, meaningful religious language, which sounds very traditional, but which points to something far deeper than the limited definitions others would have us believe.

I say Yes to traditional religious language, I say Yes to the Great Story of Evolution, I say Yes to metaphor. Most of all, I say Yes to tradition informed and enlivened by metaphor, word juxtaposition, surprises that conjure up images that point beyond words themselves to the depth of human experience. P. 29

I say yes to all of it.

To William Sinkford I say, “We do not need to *find* a language of reverence. We *have* a language of reverence. What we must do is learn to use it and reclaim it as our own.”

The quest for truth is our sacrament. Our connection with the Holy is in the search for what is true. The words we use are not the truth themselves. Truth is not in the words, but in what is evoked from the depths of our experience.