

“More than Words”

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Have you heard the joke about the sign that has been posted by the pearly gates in heaven? It has two arrows; one points to "heaven" the other to "a discussion about heaven." All the Unitarian Universalists are going to the discussion.

There must be something to that joke - a kernel of truth that we recognize.

We do like to talk and discuss and debate and argue. But does this highly thoughtful and literate group of people tend to trust words and language perhaps even over direct experience?

Language is what sets us apart from many of the worlds other creatures. We rely on spoken words to connect and relate to one another. We have amassed vast libraries of history and literature and poetry. Language carries our culture and our knowledge base.

But, like all other tools, words can only take us so far. Words are the symbols that point to the experience – not the experience itself. The map but not the territory. Some maps are truly lovely, detailed and beautiful in and of themselves. But they are not the real thing.

As UU minister Laurel Hallman says, "We live more deeply than we think."

Since I was about ten years old I have been drawn to babies. I am enthralled by their big, wide-open eyes. I am fascinated by the non-verbal way they communicate with the world around them. The way they try to catch your eye with their squeaks and squeals and then when

they've got your attention, give you a big, toothless, slobbery grin.

When I was a teenager I worked in our church's nursery. It was a real treat to me to be able to play with and hold babies every week.

I will always remember an experience I had one Sunday with a little toddler. She was just over a year old – and did not yet have much of a grasp of language. She and I were playing together, rolling on the floor, poking and tickling one another.

And then something that seemed really unusual happened. We looked at one another – really had eye contact – and I had a very strange feeling of deep connection to her –almost like a soul-to-soul connection. There was a zing of energy that ran through me. I don't know what it was. It is hard to describe in words.

It was strange to feel so intimately connected with a baby. But we held our eye contact for a moment – both of us became still. And then it was over and we returned to our laughing and rolling about.

I have told this story to various people over the years but still don't know what to make of it. A few parents have told me they have had that experience with their own kids.

I guess the best explanation I have is that before we learn spoken language we are already equipped with other, perhaps more direct and definitely more intimate, modes of communication. Maybe I somehow accessed this

preverbal form of communication with that baby. It is a mystery to me.

When we begin to learn spoken language our concepts of the world are shaped into the form that our language takes. Like hot molten wax poured into a mold. Languages create order.

Learning another language is one way to broaden one's experience of the world – it opens us up to a whole new set of concepts. How many of you who are fluent in more than one language have struggled to translate certain ideas that just don't have an equivalent in the other language?

There are actually complicated ideas that we may not even fully understand that are wrapped up in one word in another language.

Take for example the word "namaste" used in India as a greeting. It means roughly, "that which is sacred and dwells within me recognizes and affirms that which is sacred dwelling within you".

That's a whole mouthful in English – but the common-everyday greeting for "hello" and "goodbye " in India. Namaste.

Languages are alive and changing all the time. While thousands of languages must have already been created and have died out - isn't it amazing to think that there are currently over six thousand known languages in use on the planet?

The people who originated all the various languages did so from their own specific view of the world. Before the information age it was much easier to see how languages described the regional experiences of certain “tribes” of people.

People who lived where it snows most of the year may have hundreds of words in their language to illustrate all the varieties of snow and ways it may fall and what it is like when it hits the earth.

While some people indigenous to the tropics may not even have a word for snow.

Words are the ripples and waves on the surface of the lake – they are where we come in contact with the rich and complex body of experience that dwells beneath.

Some of the areas in which words fall short are: emotions, inner experiences and the realm of the spiritual.

We are challenged in our intimate relationships to bridge the valleys that separate us from one another. Feeling the limit of language’s ability to express deep emotions is like coming to the edge of a cliff. There is vastness beyond and it is deep and amazing. It takes our breath away. We feebly toss words in like stones.

“We live more deeply than we think.”

This is where I turn to poetry. A poet plays with words arranging them in a way that evokes images. Poetry can act as the bridge between the deeper experiences and words.

I think e.e. cummings is one of the best at juxtaposing words in surprising ways. He breaks down our expectations of language with his unusual grammatical twists. After reading a few of his poems in a row I feel like a crack has been opened up in my mind so light and fresh air can get in. I'd like to read one of his poems to you:

since feeling is first
since feeling is first
who pays any attention
to the syntax of things
will never wholly kiss you;

wholly to be a fool
while Spring is in the world

my blood approves,
and kisses are a better fate
than wisdom
lady i swear by all flowers. Don' t cry
- the best gesture of my brain is less than
your eyelids' flutter which says

we are for each other; then
laugh, leaning back in my arms
for life' s not a paragraph

And death i think is no parenthesis

Music, dance, and visual art, too, communicate some things that words alone fail to. They evoke feelings, memories and new ways of seeing things.

Spiritual teachers have used stories, parables and metaphors throughout the ages to try to convey spiritual experience or understandings .

It is a shame when we cease trying to express ourselves and allow our experiences to be collapsed into words and concepts that don't quite get it but are "close enough".

It is also a shame when we give up on certain concepts because the words that are used to describe them feel inadequate or inaccurate.

Take the word 'God'. Many of us hear the word and then tune out. It is probably one of the most loaded and emotionally charged words in our society. It means many specific things to many different people. It congers up different images and reactions - I'm sure you each have your own.

But I hope we don't stop there.

If words are like maps – it would be like completely disregarding the state of Iowa because someone else's map didn't describe it the way you experience it.

Your experience of that which is Sacred may look so different to you that the word God doesn't work anymore either. But the territory, the spiritual depth of human experience, is still there!

In order to move beyond the dead words – to grow our language to include our experiences Rev. Laurel Hallman says,

“What we need to do, then, is to break open these concretized words, to juxtapose them with words that create cognitive dissonance. For it is in the spaces between the juxtapositions that new associations are created.”

This began to happen for me with the concept of God when I read the Sufi poet Hafiz. The Persian poets often refer to God as “The Friend” and use very sensual, romantic words describing our longing for union with the Divine.

Here is one of Hafiz’s poems that helped to break me open to new ways of thinking of the concept of God:

“Two fat people”

God and I are like two fat people in a boat.

We keep bumping into one another and laughing.”

This was totally outside my experience growing up in the United Methodist Church.

If God could be seen as a good-humored, fat person who tromps around in boats with humans – well, I was intrigued. I bought a book of Hafiz’s poetry and have read it several times.

This past year has been a challenging one for me theologically. One of my learning goals for this internship was to “better articulate my theology”. (Get better at describing the ineffable.) So I have been reading, discussing, and grappling with my ideas about God almost continually.

Our UU faith asks us to read all sorts of scripture, talk with people – but then to weigh everything against our own experience.

This is where words stop being able to help me and I had to get out and explore the territory for myself.

Because: “We live more deeply than we think”.

Last year at this time I would have unabashedly called myself a theist. I thought I believed in some form of a God.

After numerous discussions and many debates Chris got out the dictionary and read me the definition of ‘theist.’ I conceded that it didn’t really fit me.

I have to say, it was traumatic to let go of that word even though it didn’t fit anymore.

Chris playfully taunted me around our house by calling me an ‘atheist’ for a couple of weeks. But that word didn’t seem quite right either.

After doing more reading and meditating I have rediscovered and reclaimed the word ‘mystic’.

The mystics from all religions say roughly the same thing—pointing to the Oneness of all and the divine nature that dwells in all things.

In his book, *Infinity in your Hand* UU Minister, William Houff has a metaphor explaining our existence from a mystical point of view that resonates with me. He writes:

“Imagine a vast ocean – formless, infinite, eternal. Mighty surges of energy stir the depths and sweep the surface of this cosmic ocean, expelling myriad droplets of water – each unique, finite, transitory.

The ocean, being infinite, is all there is. That being the case it cannot be described as matter or mind, since the infinite includes them both. We call this ocean by many names –God, Allah, Tao, Brahman, Buddha, Cosmic Consciousness, Supreme Identity, Ground of Being, the Infinite.

Although distinct, those transitory droplets of water are also part of the infinite ocean. But separated as they are—finite and unique—we call them life, matter, stuff, existence.

To the degree that these droplets acknowledge one another’s being, they focus upon separateness and, except for a forlorn longing for relationship, they miss seeing the cosmic connections.

This means they also forget where they come from—who they really are. They may have intimations (religious experiences or mystical intuition) of who they are, but the “ego” keeps getting in the way by insisting that it is the primal ground of the individual.

As finite fragments of the infinite Whole, the droplets can never comprehend the Whole, except upon enlightenment. Still there is longing, intuition, and finally, returning.”

In both my meditation practice and standing in what I call the "Redwood Cathedral" of the California forests I have had the feeling of connection with all things.

I am fairly sure now that the word God does not fit into this experience.

Describing it in words is very difficult. The words that seem like the best fit are "Presence" or the "The Sacred".

It doesn't feel like communion with another entity. It is more like the profound interconnection with all of existence.

It isn't 'other worldly' - I feel more connected to this world than ever before.

I understand Jesus and Buddha to have been people who had mystical enlightenment experiences. From what I can tell they felt this Oneness with All and tried to teach others - using language - through metaphor and parable - that we all have direct access to the experience of the Infinite.

But the people heard what the mystics had to say through their own understanding of the world and interpreted it in their own ways. They made these men into super-humans - elevating them above the rest of humanity.

Then, just as would happen if we made copy after copy of any map - the messages of these sages have been unintelligibly distorted, misinterpreted as well as actively corrupted for political reasons.

Dr. Carl Jung suggested once that "one of the main functions of formalized religion is to protect people against a direct experience of God."

We Unitarian Universalists have every reason to distrust traditional religion and religious language. But I suggest the answer is not to give up completely on spirituality and religion.

When the maps no longer work – when certain words no longer fit – it is time to get out and go exploring - because the territory beckons.

Let us live more deeply than we think.

Namaste