

Transforming Wounding Words
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Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Kamloops

Our theme this month is transformation– defined as: *to bring together separate parts; change that is radical and profound. As an active verb, to transform - the operation of changing one configuration into another;*

Today, I want to talk about transforming wounding words. Not because I am an expert, but perhaps like some of you, I sometimes struggle with communication, with words, and this whole thing about doing better as a human being. As a minister, I can at least bring some of the theological wisdom available to help with us this struggle.

I am not alone to arrive at our UU faith as a “come-outer”- the 75% of Unitarians amongst us who left the religious traditions we grew up with, particularly the Christian denominations. Many Unitarian Universalists are uncomfortable with religious words and their associations with disappointing, hurtful past experiences. As Unitarians, not Trinitarians, Jesus for us is an exemplar rather than a personal saviour because of his death for a fallen humanity. So, this being Easter, with the Christian focus on resurrection and eternal life, it’s no wonder we tend to tippy toe around this religious oversance with metaphors of *spring, growth, and renewal*.

We resist words that relate to large theological doctrines of belief: *God, Christ, Lord, Holy Spirit, Father, salvation, redemption, resurrection, atonement, sin, evil, mercy.*

Words that represent institutional church concepts- *sacrament, confession, penance, miracle, communion, creed, gospel, absolution, healing.*

And words that represent faithful practice: *holy, sacred, blessing, prayer, praise, worship*, even the word “*church*” itself in some UU societies.

When I began the long process of becoming a credentialed UU minister, it became obvious that I needed to treat my word phobia and all the underlying religious baggage that triggered it.

Growing up as a good little catholic girl in Quebec during the 1950’s and 60’s prior to -Vatican II reform of the Roman Catholic Church, I acquired a sensitivity to many of the words associated with Catholicism, Christianity, and religion in general. I could not grasp why unbaptized babies allegedly were sent to a cosmic holding zone called limbo when they died. I didn’t get how humans in the form of male priests get the power to mediate for god, especially around sin. Or how the body of CHRIST was IN THE stale wafer being placed in my mouth!

One incident in particular tilted me from ambivalence about Catholicism to outright lethal allergy.

I was 8 years old, attending St. Francis of Assisi Catholic elementary school. My entire grade 3 class marched in military precision over to the church next door, for our weekly confession. We sat in silence on the hard pews, waiting our turn in the line moving to the confessional booths. Like three closets, the middle one for the priest which had a little screened windows that he could open in turn for the confessant on the right, then the left, and back again until all we sinners were done naming our transgressions. An efficient means of human dispensation of pardon in the name of the divine.

I'm not sure what caused the situation to unfold as it did: The priest was hard of hearing, possibly also under the influence, and probably distracted by the boring monotonous litanies he had to listen to: *bless me father, for I have sinned. It's been one week since my last confession. Hear my confession.* What followed was the listing of one's sins...as a good kid, I had little to say. I even had to make stuff up sometimes, nothing terrible, just content for the priest to work with. That day, I confessed slapping my brother after he'd called me a name, and thinking a bad word when my mom sent me to bed early the previous night. That's it. Typical childhood stuff.

The usual practice is then for the priest to say, "Are you sorry for your sins" – "Yes, father, I am sorry for my sins". – The Act of Contrition is said. Then the priest says, "I absolve you of all your sins in the name of god. For your penance, say one Hail Mary and the Lord's Prayer." (or some similar missive) Except this time, the priest said clear as a bell, "as your penance, say five rosaries". Let me explain that a rosary represents a whole series of prayers... I was stunned silent as he whooshed closed the little panel so he could hear the confession of the penitent on the other side. I thought, "wait a minute! That can't be right! Five rosaries...that's the kind of penance you'd give a murderer!"

Too late. Done deal. The priest had spoken. So, I went to the marble kneeling rail at the front of the church and dug in. I could not ignore the penance, or skimp on it. Now, I did speed pray. Sister Mary eventually came up to see why I wasn't finished yet; all my classmates were done and ready to return to school. "He gave me a big penance", I explained. "Five rosaries." Sister Mary gasped and hissed accusingly, "What did you do?!"

Miserable, I resumed my manic prayer recitation. A half hour later, alone, I walked shamefully back to school and entered the classroom to the smirks, stares, and whispers of my classmates. I was a branded child in that moment, a moment of humiliation and pain at which my religion began to tip off its axis. I knew God loved me, that I was good, that this horrible experience was wholly the doing of humans manipulating power in the guise of religious authority...or a stupid misunderstanding.

My sensitivity to religiosity was compounded over time by other experiences, like trying to make sense of my mother's inadequacies as a nurturing parent...which I blamed on the abuse she endured at the hands of mean, care-giving clergy- the nuns and priests at the Catholic residential school where she had spent 8 years as a little child...and from which she never recovered.

My word sensitivity reached allergy-strength, and finally, what felt like a deathly intolerance.

Years later, finding myself in a Christian seminary, I realized I had much to reconcile about religion, faith, and belief. As the sole Unitarian on campus, I was uncomfortable, resentful even; the Christian religious context was no longer my own. I had to find ways to articulate why I did not believe what my Christian peers believed, rather than collectively vilify them for my generational spiritual trauma. In academia, you use the existing work of scholars to argue your ideas intelligibly.

One important source I discovered was Gordon D. Kaufman, a 20th century American theologian and esteemed Harvard academic.

Kaufman wrote many books which re-considered God language and religious naturalism, reimagined "God" as creativity. Kaufman's work helped boost my confidence and comfort for intelligent discourse with people whose religious/theological identity is quite different from mine.

In 1993 Kaufman wrote, *In the Face of Mystery: A constructive theology*.

For Kaufman, the only "available referent" for the word "God" is the construct we hold in our minds, a construct that has developed over the centuries.

There may be a "real referent," but even if there is, it remains "a transcendent unknown."

Thus, Kaufman thinks of God as "ultimate mystery."

As a theologian, he viewed his work as dealing with "profound, ultimately unfathomable, mystery."

Hence, the resultant is a "theology within the limits of reason alone," holding with the philosophy of Kant and the imaginative construction of basic concepts of religious ideas. No supernatural magic. I love this stuff.

Kaufman developed a "generic theology" for post-Modern Christians of "an utterly transcendent God." The "ultimate mystery" called "God" serves as a living symbol in our culture. For many people, it functions as the primary point for "orientation and devotion."

Being oriented on the "ultimate mystery in things" is an awareness of one's "bafflement of mind" over the mystery "that there is something and not nothing." When the mystery is thought of as God, it evokes not only bafflement but trust and confidence.

Kaufman talks about theology being *the human imaginative task*.

The language we learn is always culturally and historically specific, shaped by our education, and also how we identify around race, class, and gender.

Language creates differences between people. Other determinants of difference are our historical, cultural, and social contexts, and the associated attitudes, interests, expressions, roles, and social patterns of interaction. Every society is a complex of patterns of interaction among the groups and persons which constitute it, each with different parts to play.

What seems important in life, -- indeed what is important to each of us, is a function of the culture, and subculture in which we live, and the roles we are called to play.

Kaufman describes that conceptions of what is a “good” human life is, develop historically in each group according to their felt social and cultural needs, and every person in the cultural matrix they are part of, will think and act according to their emerging cultural ideals.

The virtues we stress, and the vices we avoid are culturally defined and relative. Meaning the things we consider beautiful, worth cherishing, cultivating, what we hold right, wrong, true and false...and how we humans treat one another, and order our lives and activities, over the course of history has leaned increasingly to greater awareness of our own needs, including inner needs.

Imagination is the key in the evolution of humans. We now communicate with imaginative stories, poetry, art, songs, pictures, and ideas reflecting what it means to be human.

From our modern vantage point, we can look back and see how all diverse cultural and religious traditions that appeared through human existence, are *the product of human imaginative creativity in the face of the great mysteries of life*. We are all travelers in a transient, impermanent, contextual existence.

Each of us is shaped in a cultural and social context; contexts in which we inherit how others around us have understood and valued life, and this influences our roles, relationships, and place in the world.

Some language buffs estimate as many as a million words in the English language. That’s generous-most of us would never encounter most of the technical and scientific words in niche disciplines.

The Oxford English Dictionary, the authority on English words contains about 172,000 entries of words in current usage, and a bunch of obsolete words. Most adults know on average, 20 to 40, 000 words.

Language at best is imprecise, inadequate, and risky. Not only do we sometimes speak words that the hearer may not understand in the way we intend, but the context of our speaking can result in a variety of consequences.

Add elements like vocal tone and volume, facial expression, and body language, and we add layers of meaning to communication.

We only know the words we know, and use those words we can recall at any given moment. Our memory and physical state colour how we speak to others...being tired, hot, in pain, experiencing hormonal flux, shift one’s receptivity, attention, patience, and concentration. And because of the way humans process experience, we attach sticky emotions to words based on our experience of them in time.

Thus, language, our words, are utterly fragile, inadequate, and confoundingly incomplete as adequate symbols with which we express and communicate needs. With all these variables, it is no wonder we struggle to communicate with other humans...that words potentially harm, wound individuals, and serve to control and oppress individuals and groups of people.

I believe there are really only nine words, when arranged in five phrases, that are essential to compassionate communication.

I am convinced that if these were the only phrases we ever spoke, we would have the power to transform our lives and the world. What are they?

Thank you

I am sorry

I forgive you

Help me

I love you

Everything else we say is superfluous. When we are able to express unconditional gratitude, regret, forgiveness, our vulnerability, and love...we have attained enlightenment. Our ride through existence on this earth is complete.

However, we are human. Beautiful, complex, imperfect. Instead of sticking with **Thank you, I am sorry, I forgive you, Help me, I love you....** We add layer upon layer of conditions, judgement, and ambiguous verbiage that reflects our pain, confusion, fear, and our feelings of being unheard, unappreciated, unloved.

Have you ever been hurt by another person's words? I expect we all have. And I bet you can recall a time when you realised that your words had wounded someone?

Some of us have quick minds synced with equally quick mouths; we process thinkers chatter aloud through our reasoning... sometimes, allowing words to escape unfiltered and spontaneously. At times, this seems like a skill that reflects cleverness, wit, creativity, intelligence and honesty...

And other times, when the things we blurt out, or when we use sarcasm, another tool of the clever wordsmith, or utter aloud thoughts that are better left unspoken...someone is sure to be wounded.

And then it's too late. The relationship changes, instantly. No amount of reformulating—"that's not what I meant" "you don't understand" can unspeak the hurtful words.

It is unlikely that we will all aspire to use only the five phrases I mentioned earlier... (Thank you, I am sorry, I forgive you, help me, I love you), so how do we improve communication?

We are increasingly being drawn into public conversations and controversy about woundedness in our culture. Truth, reconciliation, apology, healing are big themes in our times.

Mere decades ago, it was generally acceptable or of little consequence, to use words such as “retarded” “gook” “spic” “little woman” “half breed” and possibly the hottest word in modernity, the n word...a six letter powerhouse that may be the nucleus motivating the civil rights and the Black Lives Matter movements.

How do we know when is a word offensive? How does a previously benign word become one that is offensive?

Collectively, cultures organically arrive at norms around usage of certain words, based on the symbol the word represents at that particular time, and will begin to change usage of words as its meaning changes, and when there is an outcry, pushback by persons negatively impacted.

The evolution of “negro” and its derogatory companion, “nigger” changed over time. To coloured, Black, African American, Person of Colour.

If there is one term we ought to reconstruct, it is “political correctness” – PC is a term that has come to negatively suggest resentment and resistance to changing known hurtful practices or use of certain words as the “right” response to becoming aware of the impact and harm created by those practices and words.

I think some people struggle with the pressure to change how they speak or act, because this forces them to reconcile who they were all the time they used those words or practices.

No one enjoys being told they have hurt others, maybe doing so for years... especially that we may have learned those words and practices from role models, parents, and peers. People we love and trust. We can't always blame pop culture and the media.

Certainly, technology now allows us unprecedented instant and global communication. Everyone is a potential commentator, reporter, and propagator of news and opinion. There is no hiding from what people are doing and saying.

Truth, accountability, and witness to all manner of poor comportment and situations, have increased. Love the cell phone camera that captures a rogue cop shooting a black kid, though we also see a surge in blame, shaming, and divisive hate speech.

It's hard to sit with the reality that we have wounded others. It may be easier to roll our eyes and dismiss the call to change how we or the people of our cultural location, use certain words, or practices. Doing nothing, or getting angry about the expectation that we must change what we say or do, is not life giving; we have to question who we are, time and again.

Can we get better at differentiating our vulnerabilities about our goodness, lovability with the vulnerability of those who call us to task? How can we mitigate, change the impact of words that wound, transform them to reflect instead thoughtful, intentional compassion?

Some suggestions toward become better communicators, and transforming wounding words:

- First, accept when someone says they are wounded. No denial, minimization, blaming, victimizing, pathologizing, infantilizing, dehumanising. Sit with it. Work with it. Open to the potential; to understanding, to transforming not only the words, but also ourselves as spiritual beings.
- Action- learning with humility about power, oppression, micro aggressions, privilege – we can learn about colonization, white supremacy, white fragility, ableism, ageism, racism. We can listen to the voices from the margins who are the experts on wounding words.
- Moderate, hold back. Use space, silence as a safe ground, the neutral zone for attaining peace rather than a battlefield for conflict.
- Learn communication models. non-violent communication – to communicate with our observations, feelings, needs, and requests, not conveying criticism, defensiveness, judgement, blame, innuendo. Marshall Rosenberg: NVC
- Reflect and explore the words that carry wounds for you, especially around faith and religion. There are resources, your minister, small groups, peers, programs to help integrate and heal old spiritual woundedness so that Unitarian Universalism is a faith you can engage with whole heartedness. How else can we do pluralism if we can't stand the words, symbols of religions like Christianity...how can we claim to welcome people of diverse beliefs, when we are capable of cavalierly dismissing them, joking about their faith?
- Finally, practicing presence and deep listening. Empathising with others, rather than trying to fix them, rationalize their pain, telling them our opinions, or advise them of how we'd do it instead.

In our human imperfections, ignorance, and vulnerabilities, lie the seeds of transformation, enlightenment, and unspeakable joy.

We are *the product of human imaginative creativity in the face of the great mysteries of life*. Let us be kinder, gentler travelers, open to each other's pain and delight.

May it be so, and Amen.