

BRINGING AWARENESS TO LANGUAGE

Background and Context

We create the world with our words.
-D. Connelly

In schools, kids learn how to punctuate sentences, write essays, analyze novels, give speeches, compose “haiku,” and identify the parts of speech, but, tragically, little or no attention is devoted to helping them to use language skillfully to resolve personal conflicts, or to express their emotions free of judgment, or to make requests of others without manipulation, or to speak what is true for them in this very moment without analysis or justification, or to listen empathically. Too, they are not helped to see how their very thinking—their perceptions of reality and their beliefs—are all profoundly affected by the words they use. In sum, most of us were never helped in school or at home to develop a reverential stance regarding the power and importance of words. We weren’t taught to see the harm caused by careless speech, nor the benefits engendered when speech is truthful and compassionate. Lacking these most basic of skills, we bungle our ways through life, leaving a wake of misunderstanding, frustration and pain behind. This need not be.

Language is, fundamentally, a collection of symbols interposing itself between ourselves and the world. As such, language necessarily creates a **separation** between us and what is real. English, for example, is structured in such a way that we think and speak in terms of things (nouns) and actions (verbs). “This language structure. . . gives us a worldview, as soon as we begin speaking as children, in which we actually ‘see’ the world as made of **separate** things that stay still (nouns) or move or are moved in relation to one another (verbs)” Sahtouris (2000).

It is easy to lose sight of the fact that it is ‘us,’ we human ones, that create our world with words—with names. Someone calls something a ‘rock’ and someone else listens and agrees to this denomination and in that moment a phenomenon is rendered a thing, named, “rock”! But this name is utterly artificial. In and of itself it has no meaning until there is agreement among speakers.

Moreover, through the process of naming/nouning, we make the mistake of seeing processes as objects, further engendering separation. For example, if I attach the word “oak” to a particular “type” of tree in my front yard, I run the risk of not seeing it for what it is—of mistaking it for an object in a category. Rather than naming a tree as a noun, it would be more realistic to ‘name’ it using a verb for the simple reason that all so-called objects are in a state of constant flux—i.e., there really is no such thing as a thing, as we now know from modern physics—all objects are in reality dynamic processes. As Keepin (1994) observed:

...One could say that nouns do not really exist, only verbs exist. A noun is just a ‘slow’ verb; that is, it refers to a process that is progressing so slowly as to appear to have a stable existence, but we know that it is, at all times including this very moment, changing and evolving toward dust. Hence, paper would more accurately be called papering—to emphasize that it is always and inevitable a dynamic process undergoing perpetual change.

Check In

Dianne Connelly wrote, *We create the world with our words*. How do you interpret this quote?

Activity One: What's in a Word?

Close your eyes and bring your attention to your breath. Then, still with eyes closed...you will receive a natural object of some sort... it could be a leaf, a piece of bark, a stone.... And simply explore it with your senses. The idea isn't to guess what it is... this is not about putting a name to it... but instead an invitation to simply get to know it as if you are beholding it for the first time! After a time, we will continue our exploration, but this time with our eyes open.... Again suspending the temptation to simply name it and be done with it...

Without straining, relaxed but alert, give your complete attention to the object, every detail of it. If thoughts arise, don't get involved in them. It is not thoughts you are interested in, but the act of perception itself. Can you take the thinking out of perceiving? Can you look without the voice in your head commenting, drawing conclusions, comparing, or trying to figure something out? . . . When you look in this way, you may become aware of a subtle and at first perhaps hardly noticeable sense of calm. When consciousness is no longer totally absorbed by thinking, some of it remains in its formless, unconditioned, original state. . . Eckhart Tolle, (pg. 240, [A New Earth](#))

In effect, this is an invitation to see the world with the innocence of a child—i.e., with “beginners” eyes—free of concepts and labels. If we can do this, the world becomes deeper, more textured, and more filled with freshness.

Finally, close your eyes again and invent your own “sound(s)” for the object you are holding. That is, sound out a “word” that doesn't exist. Be patient with this and to be open to surprise.... With focused awareness you may, indeed, utter proto-words that literally evoke the beingness of that which you are observing... which is to say you may move away from representational/symbolic/abstract language toward the creation of sounds that are not separate from meaning—i.e., sounds that have a creative force to actualize that which is being “named” and in the process perhaps discover that **voice** communicates more than **speech**—sounds more than words.

Summing up: There is a tendency to think that by naming things we come to know them. However, while names help us organize our world, at the same time, they can create separation—they objectify. For example, common words like, “table,” “book,” “candle,” create categories which are useful but which also deny the uniqueness of each table, each book, each candle. My hope is that in doing this brief introductory activity, we will, perhaps for the first time ever, consider that our conditioned tendency to see the world as composed of objects in separate categories—i.e., nouns—leads to separation from the world; and, that this, in turn, might prompt us to begin to look around with “beginners eyes.”

Activity Two: We “Sentence” Ourselves With Our Words

Example 1—“Try”: Read these words—written on the chalk board—“Tomorrow, I will try to smile at strangers.” Erase the, “try,” so that the sentence now reads, “Tomorrow, I will smile at strangers.”

Observe what happens in your body when you say, “I will try to do such and such.” Do you feel powerful and purposeful? Not very likely for when we speak, “I’ll try,” we are surrendering our personal agency. In the end there is no ‘try’. Either we do or we don’t

Example Two—“Have To”: Imagine this scene. It is 7 AM and your alarm goes off and you think to yourself, “I have to get up to go to class.” With great effort you drag yourself out of bed and splash water on your face. Now, really allow yourself to imagine the scene... your tiredness, resignation, dullness, deadness. Will a volunteer or two enact it with their bodies?...i.e., enact: I have to get up to go to class.

Now, consider that you don’t, in truth, have to get up to go to class. No one is making you get up to go to class. Indeed, you have choice, if you elect to exercise it.

So, now return to the same scene... It is 7 AM and your alarm goes off... This time, though, you simply lie there, rubbing your eyes, remembering that you have a class and in that moment, instead of thinking and saying to yourself, “I have to go to class,” you make the choice to go to class, and doing so, your thought is “I choose to go to class.”

Allow your self to feel in your body the difference between “I have to go to class” and “I choose to go to class.” In one case you are a victim, utterly lacking in freedom. In the other you are an agent, creating your world. In either case, you create the world through your words. Note: By the same token, in cases where you choose not to go to class, sense the power (and freedom from guilt) when you proclaim “I choose not to go to class today.”

Now, take a moment to write the open sentence, “I have to _____ five times in your journal and then fill in this sentence with things you customarily think of as obligations. For example:

I have to call my Mom every weekend.

I have to exercise every day

I have to avoid fatty foods

I have to graduate from college

You get the idea... Indeed, often our lives are filled with “I have to....” Now change the “I have to....” with “I choose to” and note any difference in your body. This is an invitation to “truthspeaking” because the truth is you don’t have to do anything....

We lose personal agency, and avoid truth, when we deny responsibility for our life circumstances, attributing their cause to the dictates of authority, group pressure, etc. We can catch ourselves falling into this trap by being on the lookout for the words, “I have to.” In truth, we don’t **have** to do anything. “I have to” is the language of victimization. You are not a victim.

So, the next time you are preparing to end a conversation with a friend instead of saying “I have to go now....” consider saying “I choose to go now....” and note the difference when you speak in this more truthful way.

Example 3—Sentencing ourselves with “Labels”: Labels affixed to ourselves or to other people are boxes that confine and restrict perception. They lead us away from truth, not toward it, because they simplify, reduce and ignore the fullness and truth of the “other.” For

example, the moment I label “Tom” as a “fundamentalist,” I take a step away from knowing the whole of “Tom.” With this label—my judgment—in place, I will not ask if Tom is a good father to his children, if Tom is generous, if he is creative, if he extends compassion to those in need, if he fulfills his civic obligations, if he is a peacemaker...?

In this same vein, the labels we affix to ourselves can limit self understanding. For example, when I approach sixty, I (Chris Uhl) realize that from childhood I had been socialized to believe that when someone gets to be sixty they are really old and that “old” means “diminished,” “needy,” “faltering.” Recognizing that my definition of the aging process is likely to be a self-fulfilling prophecy, I ask myself: What if I were to shift my definition of “aging” from “decline”—a steady erosion of vigor and health—to “development”—a steady increase in awareness, sensitivity, compassion, and wisdom? In short, what if I were to subscribe to the idea that “older is in many ways better”—i.e., that aging could lead to saging!

Just as I have illustrated, I invite you to identify words that in some way limit your full expression of your self and then to experiment with redefining these words in ways that fill you with power and purpose.

Check Out

Imagine how it would be if you were born into a culture with a language which had absolutely no way of expressing “my” or “mine” or “yours”—i.e., in this language it was impossible to declare anything as “yours”—impossible to speak of private property or personal possessions—impossible to say “my house,” “my child,” “my car.” The closest you could come to expressing ownership would be to speak of “that which you were now with.” So, for example, “your” dwelling would be spoken of as “the place I am now with.” Your children: “the children I am now with.” When it came to your own life, there would be no way to say “my life.” Instead you would say, “the life I am now in the presence of” (N. Walsch, Conversations With God).

The power of this exercise is that it helps us see how language—specifically me-language—creates the illusion of a separate self as well as the illusion that the “more we own, the more we are.” Foregoing the use of these words, our perceptions of self change, our boundaries soften... and as this happens we might gain a glimmer of how it would feel to know that we belong to the world... that we didn’t come into this world but out of it...

For today’s check-out, speak about the take home messages from today’s lab while eschewing the use of “me,” “mine,” and “yours” (and note what happens).

OUT-OF-CLASS FIELD STUDY: LANGUAGE

1 – Experiment with substituting abstract language for enflashed language

Imagine that you are teaching a class on Ecology and talking to your students about population growth. Your students, though they are listening to you, appear bored. Why might this be? Perhaps because the word “population” is abstract. You can’t see a population, touch a population, smell a population. However, when the word “people” is used instead of “population” the effect is different. Why? Because “people” have names; they live in places; they belong to families; they have specific cultural traditions.

Tamarack Song points out that: “We can use abstract words and create an abstract dead world or enflashed words and create a particular, alive world.” To illustrate the difference, consider these examples:

- "I am cold," versus, "My ears are tingling and brittle with cold."
- "The Earth is dying," versus, "The spruce trees on Broad Top mountain are withering and dying."
- "I want affection, " versus, "I want you to kiss me on the neck and run my hands through your hair."

The differences are obvious. When we use enflashed language, we are speaking with our entire being, not just intellects; we are speaking the language of life—speaking as if life matters.

One starting place for experimenting with the power of enflashed language is with the letters and cards we send to loved ones. Ideally, in these letters and cards our intention is to speak in the most direct and heartfelt way possible, avoiding abstractions and cliché. Yet, we often miss this opportunity, opting, out of convenience or laziness, to send a Hallmark card.

In this Field Study, you will go to a store and make note of the phrase(s) or statement(s) on three different "Hallmark" cards (though, of course, the brand does not matter). Your task is to rewrite these THREE cards using enflashed, visceral language. Truthspeak. You will know your “experiment” is successful when you read what you have written and feel a fullness and truthfulness throughout your whole body.

2 – "I Have a Word for That"

Whose life is this? This is **your** life. Use **your** language. If I told you that I was going to the, "Renaissance Room," and that I would be back in 15 minutes, would this tell you more than the simple fact that I was off to take a shower? More importantly, having come upon this word/phrase on my own, would it *continue* to tell **me** more than that simple fact?

Shakespeare used 31,534 unique words in his collected works. By any count, that is *a lot*. Yet, when we speak or write, how often do we search for the *right* word? Here is your chance to do more than just that. Here is your chance to *make* the right word or phrase. Your task is to create THREE new words or phrases (like, “renaissance room”) to replace the stock or typical words that you expect to use in the next three days. These new words or phrases are to speak the truth to what you live. For the next three days, use these words or phrases.

After these three days, ruminate over your experience—from start through finish. Compose a response piece centered around your experience with using these THREE new words.

(<http://www-math.cudenver.edu/~wbriggs/qr/shakespeare.html>)

3 – They Have a Word for That

In his book, *The Rediscovery of North America*, Barry Lopez wrote:

In Spanish, la querencia refers to a place on the ground where one feels secure, a place from which one's strength of character is drawn. It comes from the verb querer, to desire, but this verb also carries the sense of accepting a challenge, as in a game.

In Spain, querencia is most often used to describe the spot in a bullring where a wounded bull goes to gather himself, the place he returns to after his painful encounters with the picadors and the bandilleros. It is unfortunate that the word is compromised in this way, for the idea itself is quite beautiful—a place in which we know exactly who we are. The place from which we speak our deepest beliefs. Querencia conveys more than "hearth." And it carries this sense of being challenged—in the case of a bullfight, by something lethal, which one may want no part of.

I would like to take this word querencia beyond its ordinary meaning and suggest that it applies to our challenge in the modern world, that our search for a querencia is both a response to threat and a desire to find out who we are. And the discovery of querencia, I believe, hinges on the perfection of a sense of place.

Theodore Roszak coined a term which requires much less explanation: "green guilt." It relates to Aldo Leopold's seminal observation that, "one of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds."

Your task is to compose a short response piece to the juxtaposition of this word and this phrase: *la querencia* and "green guilt."

4. Forego speaking for one day.

Forego speaking for one day—preferably a day when you do not have class, or you do have understanding professors. Carry a note card which explains this commitment to silence and from which the questioning can receive an answer. Compose a response piece to this experience.