

WORDS, THOUGHTS AND DEEDS

Language has been called the most powerful drug known to humanity. The words we hear and speak can have a distorting effect on our points of view. If we do not want others to take over our minds, we should watch words closely. And never mistake their rhetoric for our own ideas ...

We do not inherit words and the tales they tell. Many times as the story of Aladdin and his Wonderful Lamp has been told, it must be told again for every child as new generations come upon the stage.

When developing a vocabulary fit to express all our thoughts, hopes and emotions, we need to remember that words are symbols, standing for things. If we did not have words we should be condemned to carrying around large bundles of things instead, like the professors in Gulliver's satire "*Laputa*."

It is the ability to communicate with words that has made humans the dominant species on this planet. We have learned in science and technology the essentiality of being able to convey information fully and exactly to one another. We are only beginning to perceive the vital importance of communicating socially and politically.

As well the importance of the spoken word is often overlooked. People take their ability to say what they mean for granted. Making ones point is not as easy as it seems. Most of our exchanges of information and ideas in everyday life are oral, whether face to face, in meetings, over the telephone or by computer networks. In our rapidly advancing

technologies the spoken or written word is still the most neglected aspect of communications. "The difference between the almost right and the right word is really a very big matter - 'tis the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning," as Mark Twain put it.

Words are symbols for thoughts, so that when language is distorted, it distorts reason and reality. Sloppy language may lead to the habit of sloppy thinking. If the words that

form our thoughts are imprecise, then those thoughts are liable to be imprecise, too. An effective vocabulary has no room for meaningless words. But language, when it works, is the tool that makes it possible to invoke reality.

Yet no matter how extensive our knowledge of words, we should be aware that we can never exercise complete control over them. Words are active, changing, slippery things that do not lend themselves to machine-like precision. For example, the word "fellowship" so frequently used by social groups and religions as a possession of great value has come to mean what anyone wants it to mean.

The first rule of semantics is that words are nothing but the

(Language, continued)

symbols of things and ideas. Language is to reality what a map is to territory. As individuals we must be most careful to understand and protect our own minds.

Tools of Communication

Words are tools of communication. They are conveyed to others by means of voice, paper and electronic technology. Our technology is making available to vast numbers of people information, ideas, propaganda, declarations, commentaries and all sorts of conversation readily and quickly. Computer communications to date has tended to dwell more on the methods than the content. The technology makes transmissions easy, but it does not relieve people of the challenge of expressing themselves comprehensively. We must not allow the machinery to get in the way of communicating as well as we can.

Short of being absolutely false, much of the information relayed on computer systems is undeveloped, incomplete, trivial, or out of context. As computer journalist Howard Rheingold has remarked, the Internet incorporates "the most chaotic collection of information in history."

But, the continuing advance in communications technology has given humankind a powerful tool for the betterment of our condition. However, the benefits of this boon are unevenly spread around the world. We have the means to build the "global village." Will it be intelligent, helpful, peaceful, or divided against itself?

With this in mind I have translated the Old Testament teaching myth of the Tower of Babel, written by the earliest biblical writer, the woman known as "J", into present-day expression.

"Now all the earth had one language, one and the same words. And as the people link from the north, the south, the east and the west there came into being the Internet. 'We can bring ourselves together', they said. 'Come let us make even better chips, design them ingeniously'. And they had monitors to look at and keyboards to record.

Then they said, 'If we link ourselves together we can build one community with a communication system with its furthest reach in Utopia -to arrive at fame. Without a cipher we're restricted, scattered over the face of the earth'.

The Lord interfaced with the system to watch the method the children of humankind were bound to build, with their computers attached like leaves upon the tree. 'They are one people,' the Lord said, 'and they speak with one dialect. They conceive this between them, and it leads to where no boundary exists to what they will have an effect on. Come, let us interlace between them, baffle their tongues until each is a scatterbrain to their friend.'

From there the Lord scattered them over the whole face of the earth; the communication became unbound.

Therefore it is called trivia because their tongues were confused by the Lord. Scattered by the Lord from there they arrived at the ends of the earth."

The Human Mind Is Not Replaced

The great mistake of computer enthusiasts is to assume that because these machines have such amazing capabilities they are able to do anything. What they cannot do was pointed out by I.B. Scott, chairperson of CP Rail when he said computers do not have brainwaves.

(Human Mind, continued)

"They never sit up nights wondering 'how come?' or 'what if?' They never have hunches. Despite some progress in our search for artificial intelligence, only the human mind has the power to prove or disprove rules by trying to break them. And only the human mind has the instinct to try."

Though our power to communicate is frequently abused, it can nonetheless be mobilized in the cause of promoting understanding across borders, oceans, and the psychological barriers of differing religions and ideologies. The global village needs its citizens to use their language and communication tools to their best advantage. The object must be to make it a peaceful and successful place, not a world of confusion, trivia and division.

SACRED WORDS

Sacred words are those that a culture or a society regards as conveyors of its fundamental truths and values. They embody that which lies in and under and behind a constantly changing world. They are distillations of world views, incarnations of spiritual wisdom sometimes attained over countless aeons of human experience, and sometimes, incredibly, in a moment of insight or inspiration. They are found in nearly every oral and literary form known - poetry, proverbs, moral and law codes, parables and riddles, stories, and many others, all of which find their way into scriptures.

Of course, verbal formulations that we regard as sacred are composed mostly of ordinary words, drawn from normal human discourse. Their potential to become extraordinary, to bring vistas of eternity into the commonplace, to bring within reach that

which is infinite, is what makes them "sacred."

K'aliyee

This time of the year our aboriginal brothers and sisters call K'aliyee, the season of the north winds when the prevailing weather comes off the glaciers and ice caps.

Aboriginal people see themselves in continuity with the natural world, and the timing of their religious celebrations reflects their attunement to a wider spectrum of the rhythms of nature than simply those of the sun and moon.

They think in terms of seasons. There is a season for doing each of the important and necessary things of life, and the seasons are known by the special activities that take place at the time. In British Columbia, for example, these include berry-picking, fishing, hunting, and trapping, all important for sustenance. At the close of each season, when food gathering and preserving are completed, the community gathers to celebrate through dance, song and the telling of legends, mythical stories and clan histories. At these times important community events occur, such as recognition and discharge of obligations (e.g., for care given at times of suffering and grief, for adoption or material assistance).

Every season is considered a special season, a time of thanksgiving to the Creator, the Supreme Spirit and Provider. Each season is part of the continuing circle of creation, in which all beings share, and therefore, is a sacred time.

THE GOLDEN PRINCIPLE

Every religion teaches both ethical standards and moral values of behaviour. These standards and values form a central pillar of spiritual identity for the individual and the community. One of these teachings is known as the GOLDEN RULE, or the GOLDEN PRINCIPLE, which describes the wisdom of reciprocity.

Reciprocity is composed of varying degrees of giving and taking. The first degree has been called the IRON PRINCIPLE which speaks of revenge - "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth."

The second is the TINSEL PRINCIPLE which speaks of a cautious regard - "treat others as they deserve."

The third is the SILVER PRINCIPLE which speaks of a negative responsibility - "do not do to others what you would not like them to do to you."

The fourth is the GOLDEN PRINCIPLE which speaks of a positive mutual respect - "I will do to you what I would like you to do to me."

Beyond reciprocity, the LOVE PRINCIPLE teaches "the giving of oneself to another with no thought of exchange." The unconditional giving of compassion has no expectation whatsoever of return of any kind.

THE BEWILDERING MIXTURE

As the farmer was gratefully gathering in a bumper crop of cherries and canning them for the winter ahead, they were discovered to have a resident maggot. To remove all these undesired inhabitants before the canning process would have been time consuming.

So all the cherries were prepared just as they were, with the cheerful comment that since the maggots had been feeding exclusively on cherry, they were little more than cherry themselves.

A realistic spirit of gratitude always has to include the maggots along with the cherries. However many of them there may be, a great deal of thankfulness is still important.

This larger view of the whole is redeemed and uplifted by the genuine outpouring of gratitude for being part of this paradoxical life of ours.

* The realm of God involves all of life. It is inclusive, not exclusive.

There is an Aboriginal belief that everyone is a house of four rooms: a physical, a mental, an emotional and a spiritual. Most of us tend to live in one room most of the time, but unless we go into every room every day, even if only to keep it aired, we are not complete.

Two of the most basic functions that Canadian religious groups have performed historically pertain to values and spirituality. Involvement meant that large numbers of children and adults were at least introduced to the importance of traits such as honesty, compassion, and generosity. Now with church attendance dropping we have not come up with an alternative to develop civility and spirituality.

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