

Finding the Right Word... Or Not

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Meditation

In these moments of quiet,
Let us learn to deepen the silence of our hearts...
that place before and beyond words
from which our best words come.

Let us learn to deepen the silence of our hearts...
in hope that the words we speak will grown from our hearts...
will help rather than hurt...
will heal rather than harm...

Let us learn to deepen the silence of our hearts...
that we might become better instruments of our hearts' love.

Let us deepen the silence of our hearts...

Reading

Our reading consists of a number of the world's proverbs, all on the theme of "words" remembering as the English proverb has it, "Good words are worth much and cost little":

An African proverb: A good word removes anger.

An Indian (Tamil) proverb: A harsh word is more painful than a blow.

A Chinese proverb: A single kind word keeps one warm for three winters.

An African proverb: A word that when spoken you would wish back, let it remain in your head.

A Danish proverb: Fine words without deeds go not far.

An Italian proverb: Words won't feed cats.

A Philippine proverb: Gentle words ease sorrow.

A Vietnamese proverb: Nice words penetrate into the bones.

A Yiddish proverb: One cross word brings on a quarrel.

An Italian proverb: One good word quenches more heat than a bucket of water.

A Maltese proverb: Better one word less than one word too many.

A Greek proverb: Words can turn the course of a river.

A Chinese proverb: Words are the voice of the heart.

A Hebrew proverb: Words that come from the heart enter the heart.

Sermon

One old proverb we all learned as children was “Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me.”

The thing is, we know, perhaps from painful experience, that this is a defensive proverb... since we know that while words cannot cause direct physical harm, words can hurt and sometimes hurt deeply. The Tamil Indian proverb has it right: “A harsh word is more painful than a blow.” The word doesn’t even have to be particularly harsh, at least not in appearance – careless, thoughtless can be enough to cause enduring hurt.

How many of us remember a harsh or careless or thoughtless word spoken to or about us... remember for years, feel for years the wound those words caused, still perhaps not fully healed.

And how many of us can remember a careless or thoughtless, perhaps even a harsh word that we spoke, perhaps spoke to someone we love, a word we wish we could have back, a word we know caused pain, and may cause pain still.

The good news is that just as words can hurt, and sometimes hurt deeply, words can also help and heal, words can lift the spirits. The Russians say that “A kind word is like a spring day,” or as we heard from the Chinese, “A single kind word keeps one warm for three winters.” (That would be useful!)

And though as the proverbs also remind us, words can indeed be empty without deeds (“Words won’t feed cats” as the Italians memorably put it), words are not always empty. Words can be a powerful force for good: they can soothe, inspire, strengthen, they can nourish love and build community.

Ah, but finding the right word – that’s the challenge.

Lincoln, about whom much more next week as his bicentennial approaches, had a gift as we well know for finding the right word – whether in a letter of condolence to a grieving mother or widow or in a debate or address. Not just the word that sounded best, that was the most poetic (though he surely could find that sort of right word too) but also the word that most directly expressed the thoughts of his mind and the feelings of his heart.

Here is one example. Doris Kearns Goodwin, in her book *Team of Rivals*, contrasts language that Lincoln’s Secretary of State William Seward had suggested for the conclusion of Lincoln’s first inaugural address with the exquisitely-crafted final version as Lincoln delivered it. Here is Seward’s draft:

I close. We are not we must not be aliens or enemies but fellow countrymen and brethren. Although passion has strained our bonds of affection too hardly they must not, I am sure they will not be broken.

Good words. But here is Lincoln:

I am loth to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection.

One reads or hears these words with awe, no matter how many times you have heard these or lines such as these from Lincoln. Talk about finding the right words!

Journalist Horace White attended the famous Lincoln-Douglas debates when he was a young man. Many years later he offered a vivid description of Lincoln’s speaking style. He

said, as Doris Kearns Goodwin recounts his remarks, that even at the time he had been aware that he was hearing “One of the worlds’ masterpieces of argumentative power and moral grandeur.” And as many of Lincoln’s contemporaries reported, his high-pitched voice carried well, even over a large and boisterous crowd.

But it wasn’t just beautiful turns of phrase or a piercing voice that made Lincoln such a uniquely extraordinary speaker. Nor was it his well-researched and carefully constructed arguments. It was all of this, but as White put it, it was something else as well (echoing another of the proverbs we heard earlier):

His speaking went to the heart because it came from the heart. I have heard celebrated orators who could start thunders of applause without changing any man’s opinion. Mr. Lincoln’s eloquence was of the higher type, which produced conviction in others because of the conviction of the speaker himself.

Lincoln also found the right word over and again in more personal matters. Here is a letter of condolence to a girl whose father had been killed in the war. It tugs at our heart these generations later. At one and the same time deeply personal and supremely universal, it says everything:

It is with deep grief that I learn of the death of your kind and brave Father; and especially that it is affecting your young heart beyond what is common in such cases. In this sad world of ours, sorrow comes to all; and, to the young it comes with bitterest agony, because it takes them unawares. The older have learned ever to expect it. I am anxious to afford some alleviation of your present distress. Perfect relief is not possible, except with time. You can not now realize that you will ever feel better. Is not this so? And yet it is a mistake. You are sure to be happy again. To know this, which is certainly true, will make you some less miserable now. I have had experience enough to know what I say; and you need only to believe it, to feel better at once. The memory of your dear Father instead of an agony, will be a sad, sweet feeling in your heart, of a purer, and holier sort than you have known before.

Of course we are not all Lincolns. But we would do well to remember that Lincoln’s speaking and writing was not a matter of magic. He worked at finding the right word, whether a word of sympathy or a word chosen amid a paragraph, amid pages, of argument designed to draw partisans together, designed to unify rather than alienate, yet at the same time to remain true to principle. He worked at it. So can we.

And though few of us hold positions of public prominence or power anything like Lincoln’s, all of us use words every day, both in ordinary casual discourse, as well as in situations of extraordinary sensitivity. And we need not fancy ourselves a Lincoln in order to seek and more often find the right word.

What will we say to our friend who has lost a dear one?

What will we say in the midst of a quarrel with someone we love?

What will we say at that meeting we are dreading, when people of such different opinions will be gathered, when the issues are so challenging, so divisive?

Poignantly aware of the power of words for good or ill, what will we say, what will we write? And why do we all too often use our words so loosely – too often, paraphrasing the African proverb we heard earlier, not keeping words in our head that we know, deep down we know would be better kept in our head? Why do we all too often not take the time to find the right word... or to decide that sometimes silence might be the better way?

In short, how can we in the spirit of that Hebrew proverb, and like Lincoln, learn more often to speak from the heart so that our words go to the heart?

Buddhism, as many of you know, is clear on the importance of choosing the right words and speaking those words in the right way. “Right Speech” is in fact among the ethical precepts embedded in the Noble Eightfold Path that is meant to lead to enlightenment!

So, what does Buddhism have to say about finding the right word, about learning the skill of Right Speech?

Well, here’s what one well-known Buddhist says. Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, in his reflections on Right Speech (in his book *The Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching*), begins with standard precepts: Right speech must be truthful, one must not speak with forked tongue, saying one thing to one person and another thing to someone else, one must not speak cruelly or harshly, and one ought not exaggerate or embellish.

But it is one thing to state these honorable precepts. We still want to know: how do we *do it*?

Well, what struck me most when I read Thich Nhat Hanh’s reflections on Right Speech is that after succinctly naming these precepts of Right Speech, he focuses his – and our – attention mostly on *listening* rather than on *speaking*.

Because Right Speech, he affirms, is rooted in deep and compassionate *listening*. (This means, to begin with, pausing before speaking yourself – that pause which can be so important, that pause which helps us listen, that pause which allows words to stay in our head that probably should stay in our head. That pause we perhaps too often don’t take.)

So, yes, of course: How can one know what the appropriate word will be unless one first listens, really listens? After all, only through listening, attentively, carefully, with compassion, can one begin to understand another, understand enough so that the “right” word comes to you. And perhaps not as many words as you might have spoken just off the cuff, without much thought – as we also heard among the proverbs, “Better one word less than one word too many.”

Yes, right speech, finding the right word begins with listening, and, I would add, not just listening with our ears, but listening with our whole selves, attentive to all the subtle ways in which we can read another person when we are truly attentive – for then we notice a tone of voice, a hesitation, a nervousness, a tear, a downcast bearing...

And so... sympathy? You begin by just listening. Then the right words come, or you may realize that few or no words are needed, just presence.

A conflict? You begin by really listening. Really listening. Then your perspective might shift. The other person, having been listened to, having been respected, might shift. Positions soften, love even might intervene. Or at least more understanding. The right words might then come. Or at least words less likely to escalate the conflict on both sides.

Even in the Middle East for example? Well, it is not incidental or accidental that George Mitchell went to the Middle East first to listen. And not surprising that at least among some in the Middle East this is seen as huge progress. So simple. Yet so huge! For listening means respecting. Listening means honoring the humanity and the wholeness of another human being – whether that other is a friend sipping tea with you or an adversary across the table or even the leader of an opposing nation.

Listening... respecting... honoring... then more likely will come... the right word.

Of course most often in our daily lives we do not find ourselves in situations of extreme conflict or deep sorrow, situations which call on all our skill and compassion as we seek the right word to help and heal, or to move a project forward.

But finding the right word applies to every word. Not as a burden. Rather, as an opportunity. Ever present opportunity.

It can be so simple, it hardly seems worth a sermon to say it.

But I know I can use the reminder – perhaps you can too.

It is as simple as this. A kind word (just to name one sort of good word) spreads kindness! A kind word is contagious whether spoken to a check-out clerk or a co-worker, to an old friend or a stranger passing on the street. Contagious in the most creative of ways, creating more kindness, more understanding, even more happiness.

Do you remember how the Bible begins? The Genesis account tells us that God creates through words, through speech. Whatever else this Old Testament story might be about, it remind us that words can be that powerful. With words we can create... or destroy.

So let us – of course – choose to create, to build up, to help. We have that choice every day with every word we speak – to create more caring community, to deepen loving relationship, to help others in so many ways, simply to spread kindness. Let us, of course, choose with our words to create.

I am led, then, to this invitation, think of it as prayer or as a hope: That whatever particular words we speak, may another word, one word, be the word that holds all the rest, whether spoken or unspoken. As the poet invited to speak at President Obama's inauguration, Elizabeth Alexander, expressed it:

Some live by love thy neighbor as thyself,
others by first do no harm or take no more
Than you need. What if the mightiest word is love?

Love beyond marital, filial, national,
love that casts a widening pool of light,
love with no need to pre-empt grievance...

What *if* the mightiest word *is* love? It probably is.

And so may that mightiest word be the seed which grows all our other words.

Now I close – no... “I am loth to close...” But I do. I close with this thought:

If you remember nothing else about this sermon, may you think of it as an invitation to be more mindful in our speech - whether face to face, mouth to cell phone, pen to paper, fingers to keyboard – to be more careful in choosing our words, to listen more attentively that we might speak more kindly, with more love.

You want to change the world? We can begin by changing our words.

So may it be.