

Words are more than just words. They are tools we use to communicate—not the only tools of communication, because there are also smiles, eye contact, physical touch. But words are our primary form of communication. And they can be used to separate or used to connect.

I, me, yours, mine are words that separate—they make clear distinctions between you and me, self and other. I make no value judgment about these words, I'm just noting these words require us to make clear distinctions. We and us are words that do the opposite, they connect, they are words of inclusion. That's why phrases such as "them", "those people" or "their kind" can be so offensive to those who are set apart, often marginalized by the terms.

I'm talking about this this morning because I want us as a faith community to err on the side of inclusion, the side of connection, the side of supporting one another. I say, err on the side of, because we are all human, and by definition not perfect, we do and will make mistakes--we can't help it. So the best we can do is to be intentional in leaning in a particular direction---lean in the direction of inclusion. Because if we are not intentional we may well lean in the direction of separateness.

I want to focus on words that have a tendency to separate, to keep us apart. I think it was Abraham Lincoln who said a house divided can not long stand. Even if he was not literally right, meaning the house will fail or fall, he was fundamentally correct in that the house is necessarily weaker, less safe, less stable, less whole. We've just had a painful, and costly, example of that in our national house of governance.

Because our national house has been so very divided, the recent shutting down of the government has caused our economy to lose \$12-24 billion dollars, that's billion with a B—over 16 days. I recently read that the sequester cost the economy something like 150 Billion in lost output or productivity and some 900,000 jobs, I'm not sure of the exact numbers but they are huge. Those aren't just numbers, there are real people at the end of those numbers who are negatively impacted.

Psychologist can talk to us about the impact on family systems when there is significant discord within the family. Now let me be clear. I do not want to be heard as saying or even suggesting that we in this faith community suffer from significant discord or significant division in our ranks. I hold up these examples in an attempt to demonstrate that there are very real consequence to a house divided.

Since we are human, and we are not perfect there will be discord among us. There will be discord whenever two or more people come together. Sometimes we find ourselves in discord with ourselves! The issue then, is not to seek to avoid disagreement, and potential discord—but rather to learn how to manage it. Every couple has to deal with and learn to resolve differences if they are to remain together. The better they are at resolving differences the better their relationship is likely to be.

We in this community have differences. We have differences by design. We do not ask or require that we all believe the same thing. In fact we are explicit in our expectation that we not all believe the same things. We encourage each other to seek our own truth, with the expectation that it be done in the context of respect and acceptance. Truth is, that's easier said than done. For that reason I raise the issue of words that separate, this morning. I want us to get better, and better, and better at the doing part and not be sanguine about the words of our beliefs.

Let me zero in on the type of words that hold a significant risk of separating us, one from the other; words that hold a risk of leaning us in a direction of you vs. me, us vs. them.

Lets start with the word Fellowship. It is clear that we are a Fellowship, it's in our name, there's no denying the fact of it. The question is what meaning we place on the word? For some, it means we are explicitly not a church. For some it may mean we are not even a religion. Some think of this place as a church, a religious house worship. Others see no real distinction between church and Fellowship or have no real notion of just what a Fellowship is and simply think of it as a community of like-minded people.

What's clear to me is that we are here together, all of us, here together in this place, and we are here by choice. Except for possibly the errant partner that has been dragged here by their significant other. Inclusion asks us to focus on the fact that we have all chosen to be here, together, and not get hung up on the particular word that one may use as a label for what this place is; a Fellowship or a Church. That's the added work our faith requires of us. I have very intentionally chosen to use the words congregation and faith community to emphasize our togetherness, to lean in the direction of inclusion.

A colleague of mine has what I believe is a wonderful way of talking about these kinds of distinctions and differences. He also ministers to a Fellowship. In talking about our Sunday morning experience, which gets viewed from the different vantage points I just laid out, he says something like "if you are comfortable, someone else here is uncomfortable, and if you are uncomfortable then someone else here is getting exactly what they need." I think that wonderfully sums up life in Unitarian Universalist congregations.

What he says, boils down to, it's unreasonable, maybe even selfish to expect to always be comfortable in our Sunday morning worship experiences. Which brings me to another word we UUs sometimes have difficulty with, especially those who define themselves as humanists, atheists or agnostics. The word worship.

The word worship has traditionally been defined as the worship of God or gods. But that's not its only meaning. In a UU context, where we explicitly acknowledge that we do not all have the same belief system, it's unhelpful for us to use that word with a narrow meaning. And in my view, given that we are a faith community, the word worship seems wholly appropriate.

The word worship comes to us from Old English, meaning honor shown to an object – and yes that object is typically God, but not exclusively so. The etymology of the word means “worthiness or worth-ship—to give worth to something. So worship is an intentional focus on that which we deem worthy. You’ve heard the phrase “I worship the ground she/he walks on”. I’d like to think that what we do together on Sunday mornings has worthiness, has worth-ship, and I acknowledge I have a bias.

Evelyn Underhill—a well known early twentieth century writer on religion and spiritual practice defines worship as “The absolute acknowledgment of all that lies beyond us—the glory that fills heaven and earth”. Buddhist worship can take many forms built on the doctrine of “skillful means”, such as mandala, thanka, yantra yoga, even the fighting discipline of the Shaolin, or the serene and beautiful tea ceremony.

A sanctuary is where we hold Sunday services. Now I know many people think of crucifixes, stained glass windows and ornate alters when they hear the word sanctuary. But that too I think is a limited interpretation of the term, especially in a UU context. Sanctuary comes from the Latin word sanitarium, meaning a container in which we hold things, especially holy things, including people.

The United Nations recognizes what’s termed “legal sanctuary”, where a nation can provide political asylum or refuge from arrest by another country. Many of us enjoy hiking and birding in a nature preserve or wildlife sanctuary, especially at this time of year. A sanctuary is a safe place where people or animals can find refuge. I believe our congregations are places where people can find refuge from everyday life and the ills of the world. Our faith community should be a sanctuary, a safe haven, where we can rekindle our spirits and are called to focus on what is truly important in life.

Ministry is another word we burden with heavy baggage. Ministry is a profession and the duties and services one in that profession provides. But it’s also a governmental function, as in the Minister of a department or area of government, designed to provide service to, to care for. That’s the most appropriate meaning of the word in our faith community.

We collectively must minister to the financial needs of the Fellowship, and to its building and maintenance needs. We minister to each other when we provide care and concern and simply listen to each other. That’s why so many people so value Joys and Concerns and our congregational reflection. That’s why the Small Group Ministry program can be so beneficial to a faith community. It’s an important way of caring for one another.

Now we come to God, the 100 pound gorilla in the room. I’m really quite taken at how hard it is for so many people to let go of the image of an old man with a long beard sitting up on high judging us---almost always negatively. I don’t know that I know anyone who believes in God that holds that view.

You've probably heard me say, I have no interest in debating whether or not God exists and if so, what does he/she/it look like. If God is anything like what we've been taught about God, omni-this and omni that, we mere humans have absolutely no ability to fully grasp the meaning of God. Like infinity, we can grasp the idea of it, the concept of it, but we have no ability to identify where it begins and where it ends. We can not grasp the totality of infinity...at least not yet.

I'm not going to tell you, you should believe in God. I will remind you however, that every culture since written history has had a concept of God or gods. So the concept of god must fill a basic human need. I believe we too should retain some notion of god.

I'm not going to try to define the term or concept of God this morning. But here are some synonyms I and others have used: Life force, the unknowable, The ultimate, Nature, Love, Energy, Mysterious Power, Source of Life, Eternal Being, Spirit of Life, Creative Force, Spirit of eternal presence, Source of love.

And here are some definitions of God given by young UUs, ages 5-13: God is like a small seed of creation; God is within us. It is a spirit buried inside of our bodies; God is a feeling, an emotion inside of you. God is what some call your conscience; I don't really know. It's kind of a secret that only God knows. Basically, God is everything. It's inside us, it's around us. It's everything; I think that God is up in the clouds. I think that he has a long beard; Maybe God looks like a tree. God would like us to stop polluting the water. I think God is all the things around us like the sky, the moon, the grass, the trees and the sun and, of course, you always call that nature; God is an idea made to solve the unknown. Therefore, think what you want about it.

I want to bring you back to the Diamond model I presented a couple weeks ago. Specifically, to second base, the "I Perceive". We perceive through sight and hearing, gathering data. While we often think of that data as "truth"—because we "saw it with our own eyes" or "that's what you said", the fact is, our perceptions are only data. We are the ones who place meaning on those perceptions.

We can get ourselves into trouble when we assume data equals truth. We can get into greater danger when we assume that the meaning *we* place on particular data is the same as others place on that same data...or should place on it. By doing so, we inflict our "truth" onto someone else.

Within a UU context where we affirm everyone's right to seek their own truth, we do a disservice to our faith community by imposing our truth onto others. Let there be air around words. Listen for the music, not just the words. This can be spirit development work.

Let each of us take responsibility for seeking to understand the other; seek to understand how it is that we are here together. Seek to comfort. Seek to be inclusive, welcoming, and supportive of the sacred we that we are.

May we get better and better at doing so.

Amen