

“A Few Choice Words”

Rev. Tom Nalesnik – Sept. 20, 2020

A very long time ago, I had an English teacher in high school who made us memorize lines from famous poems. One of these, I recall, was from Emily Dickinson, who happened to be born in Amherst, Massachusetts. The poem went like this: “A word is dead when it is said, some say. I say, it just begins to live that day.”

For whatever reason, those words really stuck with me ... for over 50 years, in fact. Maybe it's because I make my living with words. Or maybe, there's another famous verse that also touches on a similar subject. In the Bible, in the first chapter of John, we hear “In the beginning was the Word, and the word was with God. And the word was God.”

Now, as it turns out, this particular passage was like a third version of Genesis. Most of us know the story about how God created the world in 6 days. And we also know the other creation story, the one featuring Adam and Eve. But the writer John chose to tell his own version of creation, which all began with The Word.

Now, I'm not going to delve deeply into the Biblical meaning of creation this morning. That's a sermon for another day. What I'm going to do is talk about words. A few choice words. I was very tempted to title this sermon, “A few choice four-letter words,” but I decided not to. I figured it might scare too many people away.

Actually, most of the words I'm going to focus on are a bit kinder and gentler. Except maybe for the first two.

So let's begin at the beginning. In the beginning, we had cavemen and cavewomen. Language was very primitive at first. After all, how many different ways can you say “Argh”?

Now, just to point out, Argh *is* a four letter word. Or at least, it is, according to the way Charlie Brown spells it. There could be others, like the Pirates of the Caribbean, who might add a few more letters to the word. To be honest, I've always liked how pirates' vocabularies often include a lot of arghs.

But anyway, in those early Neanderthal times, the word *argh* had to communicate a lot of different things. It wasn't until much later that the language expanded a bit to cover some other basic concepts, like ‘food,’ or ‘rock,’ or ‘cave,’ or “oops”.... Like when your next door neighbor gets eaten by a saber-toothed mastodon. Oops!

“Grog...gone. Poor Grog. Too bad we lose him. Grog was good man.”

Which brings us to the next four-letter word, “Loss”. Fast forward ahead a few million years or so, and civilization has now reached the point where we've developed all sorts of words, and languages, and even customs, traditions, and ceremonies to express our human experience.

Like when we lose a loved one, we now have funerals and memorial services to put our grief into words. Loss. Another four letter word. Because, when we lose someone, or something, it usually hurts. A lot.

Very recently, I came across an interesting interview on the web. Late night host Stephen Colbert got together with the famous newsman Anderson Cooper. The two of them got into the subject of loss. For me, this topic carries a lot of baggage. Actually, given the state of the world these days, all of us could probably relate.

Because of the pandemic, we've lost jobs, we've lost our health, we've lost loved ones, we've lost whole families, we've lost homes or apartments, we've lost the freedom to just pick up and go, and do whatever we want, like going to a movie or dining out at a restaurant.

We've also lost a sense of civility, respect, and decency. And some long-standing problems that have been around for a long time, like racism, bigotry, and hatred, are now out in the open. So we've lost our ability to get along with each other. Or to come together and solve some of these basic problems of discrimination, alienation, police brutality, and social injustice.

We've also lost acres and acres of wilderness, as the result of the wildfires on the west coast.

We're losing, big time, in our quest to save the environment, amidst melting glaciers and polar ice caps, hurricanes and tornadoes, rising sea levels, worsening air and water pollution, the extinction of animal species, and so much more.

Just this past week, we lost Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who died Friday.

And probably worst of all, a lot of us have lost faith in the leaders of our nation. We don't have very much confidence any more in their ability to get us out of this mess. It's a loss of our world as we knew it.

Maybe that's why we're hearing a lot more four-letter words these days, as people try desperately to cope with this new reality.

Well, to make a long story short, Stephen Colbert and Anderson Cooper shared some personal losses of their own in that interview. Stephen Colbert had lost his father and two brothers in a plane crash years ago. And Anderson Cooper had lost his mother, Gloria Vanderbilt, to stomach cancer about a year ago. Cooper also lost his father in the late 70s during open heart surgery. And he also lost a brother to suicide. So their conversation about loss and grief was rather eye-opening. These two very famous media personalities always seem so composed, collected, and in-control. Little did I know that beneath those calm exteriors lurked a very deep sense of pain, loss, and immense grief.

I know that in my own lifetime, I've experienced a few losses. Maybe not as tragic as those suffered by Colbert and Cooper. But I've lost friends, jobs, marriages ...a beloved college professor ... a favorite pastor ... my father, and many others. Each of these hurt in different ways.

In the case of both Stephen Colbert and Anderson Cooper, they found that as they shared their experiences with others, the grief they felt was somehow lessened a bit each time they told the story to someone else.

As Colbert said, "If you can share your story with them, then you're not alone." And then he added, "It's a gift to exist. I've learned to love the things I most wished had not happened."

So, what do you get from loss? He went on to explain, "You get an awareness of other peoples' loss. Which allows you to connect with that other person. So this allows you to love more deeply and to understand what it's like to be a human being. Knowing that all people suffer. Grateful that you have suffered, and can connect with other people."

Author Sheila Collins shared similar thoughts when she wrote, "We were never promised a lifetime free from fear and struggle. We were offered the hope that by committing ourselves to the struggle for a righteous society, in solidarity with the wretched of the earth, in that way we would discover the secret of life."

Well, that brings us to the next four-letter word... Hope. And, like I said earlier, this is one of those kinder and gentler four-letter words. It's a word that was probably passed down to me in my genes. As my mother tells the story, one of my grandfather's favorite expressions was "God will provide."

Translated to modern UU theology, we could go off in all sorts of new directions with that, either calling it the "Spirit of Life," or the Spirit of the Universe, or taking the logic a step further and saying since we're all interconnected, it's the coming together which creates the miracles.

When we all work together, united for justice, for equality, for compassion and tenderness, our hopes and dreams will transform into real, tangible, action-oriented accomplishments in the real world.

And thus, God... or the Spirit of Life, the Spirit of Interconnectedness, does provide, in so many amazing and mysterious ways.

Not so long ago, when my oldest daughter was born, we wanted to give her a name that would do a number of things. Like paying homage to my own eastern European background. And, expressing something about our faith. So we named her Nadia... which means Hope.

But the story doesn't end there. Several years later, when we had our second child, we adopted her from Guatemala. And, of course, we engaged in another name-hunt, as many parents do. Well, this little girl, all of two years old, already had a name, thanks to her birth mother. And when we heard what her name was,

Esperanza, we thought, “wait a minute, why are we trying to rename her, just to suit our own selfish needs? Our egotistical American belief that everything has to be “our way”? Does the world really need another Tiffany, or Madison, or Twyla?

The thing is, the name *Esperanza*, in Spanish, also means “Hope.” And, so we figured, you can always use a double dose of hope. So we kept her given name, *Esperanza*. And now we had two daughters whose names both translated to Hope. They were our hope sisters, or hope squared, in the language of math and science.

And it’s funny how this simple act of naming somehow connects with that other four-letter word, Loss. As the English writer Jonathan Swift once said, “Vision is the art of seeing things invisible. The gift belongs to those who can see the good hidden away in things like setbacks, suffering, and pain. It lives in those who never give up hope when others are ready to pack their bags and go home. And more than that, it mixes in the love of those who refuse to give in to cynicism, on either a private or a public level.

So, out of the many losses we all experienced.... On our part, losses of home, employment or health... and on *Esperanza*’s part, losing her birth mother when she was put up for adoption.... Out of those unfortunate circumstances, we still wound up with a gift, a blessing that would endure well beyond the losses. The hope and love that she brought into our lives, as Jonathan Swift observed, brought a new perspective, a sense of vision that helped sustain us through the difficult years ahead.

And now here we are, in the year 2020, and if we thought those previous years were difficult, we now realize that even more challenges await. The word “Difficult” doesn’t even begin to describe what may lie ahead on the next horizon.

But, fear not, friends... we still have one more four-letter word to go. And that word is ...“Love.” It’s a word that’s so amazing, so powerful, so life-giving, that many Unitarian Universalist churches have made it part of their identity. One UU church posted the words “Love is Everything” on its signboard out front; and of course, Norwich boldly proclaims, “Standing on the Side of Love” on its own website.

Now, I should point out that this doesn’t mean “Love, American Style” ... or “I Love Lucy” ... or “She Loves You, Yeah, Yeah, Yeah.” No, this is a much deeper, all-encompassing sort of love. In this definition, love is the glue that holds everything together. It’s the basic ingredient of the universe, which transcends any theory that logical, scientific minds can imagine.

One of my favorite hymn writers, Brian Wren, puts it this way:

“Love finds a way when laws are blind and freedom banned. Love breaks the walls of language, gender, class, and age. Love gives us wings to slip the bars of every cage. Love lifts the hopes that force and fear have beaten down. Love breaks the chains and gives us strength to stand our ground.”

So how can this kind of love help us through these crazy times?

Number one, even as tempting as it is to dismiss or get mad at those who hold different viewpoints than ours, the principle of unconditional love means that we shouldn’t just write them off or treat them like a child who doesn’t know any better. There are so many different reasons why they believe what they do, ranging from fear, to family history, to their choice of news programs, to a misguided desire for a knight in shining armor who will instantly and magically rescue us from all our troubles. Despite this, and despite the difficulty of having rational conversations with them, our best bet is not to argue or debate, but rather to listen, to try to understand their viewpoint, to empathize with their concerns ... and to love them, as hard as that may be.

Number two, as the weeks before election day get shorter and shorter, we all know things are going to get even more ugly, antagonistic, and insane. The process of change is extremely messy, no doubt about that. But the other part of this strange thing called love is something we often forget to do... and that is self-care. In other words, loving yourself. If you need a break from the verbal fireworks, take it. Don’t be a martyr. You need to keep your head clear, to firm up your resolve to take a different path, and to be there for those who really need you. You won’t be able to do that if you get tired and worn-out from the constant onslaught of bad news. So love yourself, and take care of yourself. That’s not being selfish. It’s being intelligent.

And, finally, number three, we can go back to those words of Emily Dickinson, that I mentioned at the start of this sermon. “A word is dead when it is said, some say. I say it just begins to live that day.” ...And a kind word goes a long, long way. In fact, like the awful, fear-producing, contagious nature of the coronavirus, words of love can be equally contagious. When you say something nice, or do a good deed for a stranger, that could make all the difference in their lives at that very moment. And there’s a very good chance that with this little bit of love, that they will go out and do likewise.

So let your good words live on, and multiply, and spread all over the world. That’s one great way to overpower all the hate, violence, and injustice that we’re all up against. Let us all stand on the side of love. Amen.