

Just Words

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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My Old Testament professor happened to be an ordained Anglican priest. Like most of my seminary professors, she was not a biblical literalist. She understood that much of the scripture, if divinely inspired, is full of legend, allegory, and mythical imagery. It uses literary devices and styles, like fable, simile, allusion, epic poetry, erotic poetry, lyrical poetry.

She emphasized that those who recorded the words of the ancient prophets, and who put down the words of the gospels did not have microphones and recording devices lying around. And neither desert wanderers nor disciples were walking around with video cameras, documenting each event with timestamps, nor notarizing affidavits. Scripture might give witness to some history, but it is not, generally speaking, a historical record.

She would nonetheless cringe if she heard any of the students say something like: “Oh, so this is ‘just’ a metaphor then?” or “That is ‘just’ a symbol?”

No – she would retort – it isn’t ‘just’ any of those things. It may be metaphor – yes. It may use simile – yes. It may make use of symbolism – yes. And they aren’t ‘just’ that. There are deep truths to be found in these, not despite, but often *through* these narrative devices.

Symbols can tell a whole story in a single image – we often light on Sunday mornings. Metaphors and similes can make a complex concept more accessible. Perhaps paradoxically, using some abstraction in language can make some ideas feel more concrete and palpable, by using relatable words and images, which make more intuitive sense. A plant germinating, for instance, is the story of spring and rebirth – it isn’t “just” a symbol... it is an entire container for the story of life.

These words can be powerful. They aren’t “just” words.

Thought they may, in fact, often be *just* words – that is to say, words for justice.

Indeed, a prevailing theme in the books named after prophets is justice. And naming this prophetic imperative is the foundation behind many of the great religious traditions of which we are a part.

Of course, it is easy to point out the *limitations* of words. One truth that is often spoken is that *actions* speak louder than words. It is perhaps fitting that this particular bit of wisdom is expressed, appropriately enough, through *words* by which to express the need for impactful action. Indeed, it is often through words that we can find the direction, the focus, the inspiration, to pursue the action.

There are times when we invoke some of these stories in our community. We particularly recount these words around Easter, Christmas, and a few other times throughout the year, as they can offer us space for contemplation and insight – an invitation to consider the world with new perspectives, or to remember aspects of our faith that bring us together, such as the invitation to recognize an incarnation of

divinity in humanity – to affirm and promote an inherent worth and dignity in every person; or to find the seed of resurrection and rebirth after times of despair or sorrow.

These words matter.

There are times when we wouldn't be faulted for using, only words as our action. At other times, actions without the accompanying words, might feel incomplete. On days like today, in which many of you recognize the work of nurturing parenthood that is often labeled *motherhood* – or in which your own identity as mothers might be celebrated – you may partake in both words and actions that recognize these family ties. Some of you may have a special brunch, or outing, or other family activity. And these actions might be incomplete without the appropriate words. These are often words of gratitude, words of affirmation, words of fondness – *thank you, well done, I love you*.

(Sometimes there is a need for more complicated words, as these relationships can have complex layers.)

And sometimes the accompanying actions aren't possible... yet, or anymore. And the words can still be there – a card, a call, a candle, a prayer.

These aren't "just" words. They are *just* words.

And they are also not the only words and actions. They are but a glimpse of a larger relationship over a year and a lifetime. There have been and there may be other times to share these words and to have done and maybe still do the actions that these words invite.

A bit over a month ago, at the end of March, several delegations from the Indigenous peoples that are represented in Canada, visited the Vatican City. These delegations included First Nations, Inuit, and Métis

peoples, including survivors, and descendants of survivors, from the Indian residential school system – the outcomes of which are coming into much wider awareness over the past year. They spent some time visiting with Pope Francis and sharing their experiences and the experiences of their families and people. Through their words, they bore witness to a shared truth of pain, of resilience, of anger, of healing, and of appeal to justice.

Mothers spoke about losing their children – sometimes for months, sometimes for years, and sometimes... forever. Grown children spoke about missing their mothers, and of missing out on much-needed nurturing love. These are powerful words that have been offered to us. These words were also given to the Pope, as the embodied representative of one of the major bodies that was complicit in that injustice.

On April 1st, Pope Francis offered some humble words – an apology. He recognized the hurt carried out by the institution that he leads, and the hurt felt by the peoples that he heard from. He named the injustice. He assumed responsibility. He asked for forgiveness. He pledged to do better.

These weren't "just" words, they were *just* words. Words heading in the direction of justice. And they were largely well received by the Indigenous delegations, among whom many had been waiting for just these words for decades.

To be sure, among many Indigenous peoples, there remains an expectation for *more* – for more words in that direction, for more words toward other concrete steps in a conciliatory practice, and... for other actions in the interest of justice. There is an appeal for steps beyond words.

And there is a recognition that these words were important, perhaps necessary, for the other steps to take place. Without those words spoken in April, it might have been difficult for other action to come about.

These words weren't "just" a symbol – they were *symbolic*. They marked a new stage in a long and complicated process.

My friends, in our community, we value the power of language – of words – alongside the power of action.

Our stories, my friends, are never "just" stories – they are witness. Our conversations are not "just" conversations, they are connection. Our presence with each other (however it may look) is not "just" showing up, it is support and celebration.

My friends, may we have good words with each other, that they may lead to good works.

So may it be,
And so may we say,
Amen

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Suggested Hymns:

Opening Hymn #357 Bright Morning Stars

Words: Anonymous

Music: American folk song, arr. by James A. Lucas,

© 1983 Plymouth Music, used by perm. of Walton Music Corp.

BRING MORNING STARS

Hymn #182 O, the Beauty in a Life

~)-| Words: Based on a text by Bishop Toribio Quimada

Music: Traditional Visayan (Filipino) folk tune

QUIMADA

Closing Hymn #187 It Sounds Along the Ages

~)-| Words: William Channing Gannett, 1840-1923

Music: Melody of the Bohemian Brethren, *Hemlandssånger*, Rock Island, Illinois, 1892, arr.

FAR OFF LANDS