

## **ARE YOU A PRIEST OR A MONK?**

**by Forrest Gilmore, © 2005**

The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.  
The name that can be named is not the eternal name.  
The unnameable is the eternally real.  
- The Tao te Ching

Words have power. We know this. Through words, we communicate with one another perhaps more than by any other means. If you doubt this, think of me attempting to offer this sermon without words. Now, I will admit, it has been said that the best sermon the Buddha ever gave used no words at all. He simply lifted a flower into the air and gazed upon it. But it is also said that with that sermon only one person understood what the Buddha was actually talking about. For good or ill, human beings would not have accomplished so much if not for our capacity for language.

But language has certain side effects. It is through words that we design our beliefs. And it is with words that we stir up our emotional world as they trigger memories from our past and connect us to times of joy and love or hardship and pain.

Our world is quite literally shaped by our words. With words, we develop our worldview - the lens through which we understand and relate to reality. And it is through our words that each of us develops our own personal identity, the subconscious language we use to define who we are.

Many of us can become caught in the words we use to describe our sense of reality, often without even knowing it. We can confuse our language for that which our language describes. As we fail to see the differences between our words and the experienced truth, our words can become more important to us than even the reality itself.

Most powerfully, when the words and beliefs that structure our identity feel threatened, it can appear as if our whole world is falling apart. People hate, hurt and kill to sustain such beliefs. As we speak words that stir joy in us but pain in others, we can become fearful and controlling. We can attempt to convince others to change their views. This often provokes the negative aspects of a coercive evangelism... or worse. Likewise, though, as others speak words that stir pain in us, we can run away and hide, avoiding meaningful interaction. Or we can become angry, aggressive and cruel for the “sin” of speaking such words in our presence.

This attachment and aversion to words can lead human beings to cause great harm. Perhaps nowhere is this more prevalent than in religious and spiritual contexts. The spiritual life so deeply defines much of our sense of identity. A professor of mine in seminary, Bob Kimball, often said that the many religious arguments over the centuries were and are, “all about language.”

You all know about the power of words. I’m curious, what are some of the religious words that can sting? [solicit responses]

I want to offer a story... An interfaith conference was organized and Buddhist and Catholic clergy gathered together to promote religious interchange and dialogue. The Buddhist and Catholic priests spent time together and the Buddhist and Catholic monks did the same. And of course, as the conference intended, these groups began to discuss their faith. And the Buddhist priests and Catholic priests did not get along with one another at all. Priesthood being a profession of the word, the priests argued over this detail and that detail, this belief and that belief. They just could not find common

ground. But the monks had a very different experience. Monks are more of an experiential crowd. They are far less focused on describing their beliefs, but rather prefer to cultivate their abilities to experience the Holy directly. As such, the Buddhist and Catholic monks got along fabulously. Although their language was quite different, they both recognized in one another the experience of the Profound.

So, I ask you: are you a priest or a monk?

The Buddha said, “My words are fingers pointing to the moon.” And he encouraged his disciples not to focus on his fingers but on the moon itself.

And the Tao te Ching reminds us, “The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao. The name that can be named is not the eternal name. The unnameable is the eternally real.”

In seminary, I heard a recounting of a tale about John Wolfe, the former minister of the very large All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa, OK. When working with a given congregation, he would often be asked if he was a humanist or a theist. And John would then ask the group what they were. Invariably, if the group described themselves as humanist, he would say he was a theist. And if they said, theist, he would say humanist. Now, there are many possible ways to reflect on this story, but what I find most interesting is John’s seeming ability to switch identities in response to others. For some of us that could feel chameleon-like, like the living of a flimsy identity. But as I see it, I think John knew his identity beyond those words. He was not attached to the language and he held to an identity that transcended what he chose or others chose to call him... a very powerful and liberating sense of self.

While many of us might consider ourselves very theologically open, many of us also can be described as theologically cautious when it comes to words that remind us of

religious fundamentalism. We can forget that theological words are simply fingers pointing at the moon.

God is one word that I know some people feel fearful about expressing and others feel fearful about hearing.

Some years ago, I read a story from Forrest Church, senior minister of All Souls Unitarian Church here in New York City, about how he worked with people who were troubled by the word God. He shared that when someone described him or herself as an atheist, he would often ask that person to describe the God that he or she doesn't believe in. And invariably, Forrest didn't believe in that God either and would say so... that then opened the conversation to share about the God they did believe in.

For those trying to come to peace with their religious past, one exercise I find powerful is to draw the God you don't believe in. And then to draw the God that perhaps you could believe in. I recently offered this exercise to someone and he then said to me, "Okay, that's a good exercise, but what about those of us atheists and agnostics?" And with his question, I realized that I had not adequately explained my point. For me, I am not interested in any of us having a particular religious belief. I am, however, interested in helping us behave more like monks than priests, where we can hear another's spiritual language and laugh and love as we recognize the common wonder of the sharing... One way to do that is to engage the words we fear in such a way that allows us to let go of a literalist or exclusivist understanding of those words. My friends, God has more than one meaning. Prayer has more than one meaning. Faith has more than one meaning. Sin has more more than one meaning.

As a minister, I try to be a bit like John Wolfe. Although my theology is quite liberal, I, at times, use more traditional words. And I do so because I value those words

but also because I see it as a way to serve our community.

When it comes to difficult words, we really have two choices. We can ignore them, thus never getting at the emotional buzz behind those words, allowing those wounds to fester and simmer. Or we can bring these words out of the closet and attempt to come to peace with them.

If a word has some buzz, I want to suggest that you spend some time with it. Keep it in your mind, meditate on it, reflect on the memories and feelings that the words stirs. Examine how your sense of yourself seems connected or even tied to your appreciation or avoidance of that particular word. Ask yourself what goodness the word might speak to... how it has meaning for people... how it might have meaning for you... Keep holding on to it until the buzz eventually fades.

And when connecting with another person... listen for the story, the poetry, the metaphor behind his or her words. Jesus often spoke in parables, because of the story's ability to express multiple meanings. All words are ultimately parables, metaphors, symbolic attempts to describe a reality that can at best be known experientially.

And that's just it - it is not so much our words or beliefs that define our lives, but our actions. The monks knew this. Rather than find themselves trapped in names, beliefs and definitions, they opened themselves to the direct experience of the Holy. And they also opened themselves to the direct reality of their interfaith colleagues. In Christian circles, such an activity could be described as loving God with all you heart and all your mind and all you strength and loving your neighbor as yourself. Notice such words are not so much a statement of belief but of action.

So, in the grand scheme of things, of course, label yourselves all you want, but know that the label is just a word. It is not actually you. And I encourage you as the

monks did to find meaning that ultimately transcends. Let us do less defining and more praying, more meditating, more walking in Nature, more yoga, more loving of God and neighbor, more communing with the Buddha Mind, more acts of kindness, more acts of justice. And may we exchange our attachments to words for the blessings of real relationship with the Holy and each other.