



# Ploughshare

## ***A Piece of Mike's Mind*** by Rev. Mike Morran

In The Beginning Was The Word. A Sermon for First Unitarian Church by Rev. Mike Morran

In 1841, Unitarian Minister Theodore Parker began his landmark sermon, The Transient and the Permanent in Christianity by quoting the Gospel of Luke, chapter 21, where Jesus says, "Heaven and Earth shall pass away: but my word shall not pass away." Parker then continues, "Christ says his word shall never pass away. Yet at first sight nothing seems more fleeting than a word. It is an evanescent impulse of the most fickle element. it leaves no track where it went through the air."

Let me share a couple of stories to set the stage for what I want to share with you. The subject is language and the truth of who we are, and while it comes with a small warning that we might raise more questions than we answer this morning, it is good to at least be asking the right questions.

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## ***Bright Summer Blessings*** by Erin Kenworthy, DRE

This Summer is flying past, and our building renovation project will begin soon. In June, Sunday morning RE spent time exploring meditative spiritual practices together. From sand mandalas that encouraged creativity and letting go, to playing games with a new friend in search of our commonalities, our RE community has benefitted from age inclusive connections that bring our Kindergarten through 12th graders together. Adults are encouraged to do the same. Our one-room schoolhouse approach continues in July. Guest facilitators will bring their hobbies and passions to share with our participants.

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Let me share a couple of stories to set the stage for what I want to share with you. The subject is language and the truth of who we are, and while it comes with a small warning that we might raise more questions than we answer this morning, it is good to at least be asking the right questions.

Some years ago, a young woman was working at a school for deaf children in California, and there was a young man of 27 who she began calling Ildefonso. Ildefonso had been born deaf, and he stood out at the school because he kept mostly to himself, very little interaction with the other students or what was happening in the classroom. Through trying to make a connection with this young man, the woman learned that not only did he not understand sign language, he didn't connect with language at all. Had no comprehension that people spoke to each other through sign or any other way. Had no idea that there were such things as words, and tenses, ideas like past, present, future, love, hope, suffering, or anything else.

She took it upon herself to find a way to communicate, but nothing clicked. Sitting with him and signing, writing, chalkboards, alphabets, everything people use to teach language and nothing worked. One day she abandons all that and tries something new. She completely ignores him and instead she sits in a chair, teaching an imaginary person in another chair what a cat is, and how to sign it. Then she moves to the other chair, puzzles over it for a moment then pretends she understands. Over and over she does this for weeks with cats, dogs, chairs, pencils, whatever she can think of.

Most of the time Ildefonso barely pays attention and sometimes just looks bored. But one day a light comes on. And his eyes get big. And he has to steady himself. And he looks around in amazement. He gets it. In this mind-blowing moment he comprehends that things have names, and all the gestures people make have meaning. And he starts pointing to things around the room, wanting to know what they are called. Overwhelmed, he sits down on the floor and cries.

For months he is in love with the idea that everything has a name. He would add words to his paper notebook, and sign over it like the symbols were sacred, holy things.

Just one of the really interesting things about this story is that years later, after he had learned how to speak and communicate, he was asked about his life before language. What was it like and what did he remember? And he couldn't describe it at all. He had no words and apparently no memory of his first 27 years. Almost like it never even happened. The word changes the world.

In the catastrophe of 1980s Nicaragua, one of many groups of refugees were deaf children. Some of whom were thrown together in a sort of a make-shift orphanage. And it wasn't like they were being taught sign language or anything, but for the first time, they were with other deaf children instead of just by themselves.

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This current Sunday finds our most recent board president, Chris Hahn, facilitating an improvisation workshop with his family. July 9th we welcome Amelia Dorn and her passion for personal safety, as she shares some of the self-defense lessons that she teaches with Impact Personal Safety of Colorado. July 16th we'll welcome Slam Nuba into our sanctuary, and provide a low key creative experience in the chapel for our children. July 23rd we welcome Jason Kenworthy from the National Park Service. He'll bring a mysterious trunk or two, full of objects that demonstrate our interconnected web of existence. We still have some dates open in August for sharing your passion or hobby with our enthusiastic learners on Sunday morning.

Each Summer lesson is intended to engage our familiar participants and welcome our visitors. We've seen a steady flow of visiting families this summer, and seen our regular attendees create a warm and welcoming environment. We are also seeing visitors return, a result of connections made with other folks in the RE community. I've even heard a few positive reviews of our programming, shared enthusiastically during pick-up following class. Though we are all coming and going this season, First Unitarian remains a place of connection, with the power to create beloved community.

Soon, our physical space will undergo renovation, bringing both the hope and discomfort that come during times of transformation. Throughout this journey into our new space, may we remain connected. May we continue to offer warm and welcoming experiences to both our established members and our visitors. May we share our passions, our hobbies, our learning and growth with one another. May we celebrate joys and acknowledge challenges along the way, always holding each other in love and care, as we are called to do in this faith tradition. Our community is more than the walls, bricks, and mortar of our building. The glue which holds us together is our connection with one another, with old friends and new faces.



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And no one knows how or who started it, but over time the children invented a language all their own. This has actually been studied quite a bit since then, but the children developed gestures and hand signals that allowed them to communicate with one another.

And here's where this story gets even more interesting. As generations of kids moved into and out of this school, learning and building on this isolated language, the language kept evolving, getting more complex and more symbolic.

Years later, one of the people studying this language had the idea of comparing the original language with the one that had developed. So they brought back some of the original people, now in their forties and fifties.

And they discovered that not only was the language more developed, but the problem solving ability, the ability to reason, the ability to consider multiple viewpoints and do higher-level thinking was dramatically more evolved in the children than in the adults. And no one really knows exactly how this works, but there is a definite relationship between being able to speak and being able to think, and solve problems, remember the past, and even have an identity.

Which brings up the fascinating question of how specific languages both allow for and limit human thought, and how thoughts shape perception, how perception shapes behavior, and how all these things become our identity.

There are thousands of examples of how language, culture, and human identity shape each other. One of the classic examples is how there are certain groups of Inuit people whose language contains over sixty different words for snow. And some languages in the South Pacific have dozens of words to describe the behavior of ocean waves.

But it's much deeper than that. Indigenous people in North America are widely understood to be some of the most spiritually sophisticated of people, but there is no word in any Native American language for religion. Imagine a way of being in the world where your whole life, your own being, and your being in the world was so integrated that you don't even have a word for compartmentalize your spiritual life from the rest of it.

English, it turns out is about 70 percent nouns, made of objects, it objectifies things, and we modify our verbs to assign relative location, chronology or gender. But imagine a language that subjectifies things. Potawatomi, a Native American language of the upper Midwest is about 70 percent verbs, and in speech, those verbs are modified, not to indicate chronology or relative location, but whether something is animate or inanimate. And almost everything in nature is animate.

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In English, you water your garden, dig up some dirt, or cut down a tree. In Potawatomi, the water is a living spirit whose aid you are requesting. When you dig a hole, the earth you move is the very body of your mother. And when you take an ax to a tree, you are cutting down one of your relatives. The language you think and speak requires you to see it that way.

In Hebrew, you cannot create a sentence where evil is a noun or even an adjective. The closest you can come in Hebrew is the Yetzer Hara, which translates roughly as the “inclination to do bad things.” And isn’t it interesting that the whole concept is internalized in this way? The inclination to do bad things can only exist within creatures who choose to give in to that inclination, or choose not to.

Linguists say that English is notable for being linear. Like German, English excels at breaking things down into parts that can be isolated in space and time. It’s a great language for methodically solving technical problems, and this flows over into what people value, what we think is good and right. But not all languages do that.

French for example (so I am told) is a much better language for philosophy and asking questions. Farsi, the language of Persia has 101 names for God, Arabic has 99. Aboriginal languages modify verbs to locate objects, people, and events within the cardinal reference points of the compass. Arabic modifies verbs to indicate whether the information you are sharing is first or second hand.

I read recently that if you give someone a series of things to be ordered, like small to large, bright to dark, or something similar, English speakers will automatically arrange them left to right. But a Japanese person will order them right to left. And an aboriginal, no matter what direction they are facing, will lay them out East to West, because the land is their reference point instead of themselves.

English also has an inherent bias towards competition and winning. Note all the ways in which our language literally perpetuates conflict, like the way the very idea of an argument is framed as a war. You establish your position. You defend your position. You gain, lose, or stand your ground. You demolish or shoot down the other side. You go on the attack, retreat or negotiate. You win or you lose. Our culture and our interactions take on these qualities of language.

But imagine a language where war was not the central metaphor for an argument. As George Lakoff notes in his book [Metaphors We Live By](#), imagine if the central metaphor for an argument was a dance; where your ideas and my ideas move around each other, move to a common rhythm, build off of each other, touch and separate and touch again... and the common goal isn’t to win or lose but to participate in the spontaneous, shared creation of something beautiful.

We could go on and on and on. Language is more than a vessel for communication. Languages shape the speakers, what they value, and what they see, how they perceive, and how they behave. They are astonishing in their complexity. And, they arguably create obstacles as much as they create opportunities.

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Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor is a Harvard Neuroscientist who had a major stroke at 37 which she writes about in her book, [My Stroke of Insight](#). Here she is speaking of the morning of her stroke in a TED talk a few years ago:

*...I'm asking myself, "What is wrong with me? What is going on?" And in that moment, my left hemisphere brain chatter went totally silent. Just like someone took a remote control and pushed the mute button. Total silence. And at first I was shocked to find myself inside of a silent mind. But then I was immediately captivated by the magnificence of the energy around me. And because I could no longer identify the boundaries of my body, I felt enormous and expansive. I felt at one with all the energy that was, and it was beautiful there.*

*...So here I am in this space, and my job, and any stress related to my job — it was gone. And I felt lighter in my body. And imagine all of the relationships in the external world and any stressors related to any of those — they were gone. And I felt this sense of peacefulness. And imagine what it would feel like to lose 37 years of emotional baggage! Oh! I felt euphoria — euphoria. It was beautiful.*

No one is claiming that all strokes are like that. The point she is making is that when the language centers of her brain stopped filtering and ordering her experience, what was left was joy, and peace, and beauty, and a felt connection with the energy of the cosmos. Euphoria!

The Gospel of John begins, "In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God." Now I will share with you that the first time I read those words I was in my late twenties, I had trained as an engineer, I had a strong preference for clear and direct language and I thought that must be the stupidest thing anyone could write. No wonder Christianity was dying! Who would clutter their poor minds with nonsense like that!

But I have had cause to reconsider. And you are invited to consider... in the original Greek, it would read logos. In the beginning was logos, and logos was with God, and logos was God. In ancient Greek Logos was the divine order of things, the invisible principle that gives the universe sense and structure. Without this divine principle, there would only be chaos.

Later Greeks would use logos to refer to the discourse of philosophers, the arguments and principles they spoke of. And of course logos survives to this day in modern English as the word logic; which is not just the linguistic methodology, but the sense of things, the ordering principles of matter and Life.

With that in mind, listen again to the opening words of the Gospel of John with that substitution. In the beginning was the ordering principle of the universe, and the ordering principle of the universe was with God, and the ordering principle of the universe was God.

This is a revelation! The Gospel was never intended to be literal. This is not about chronological time - but the timeless dance of matter and spirit. We are being given deep wisdom here about the animate, living, unfolding nature of the cosmos and everything in it.

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Languages are alive. Languages are like spirits that have evolved along with the complexity of human beings and human civilizations. Nothing we know of science, philosophy, medicine, democracy, or civilization itself would exist without the ordering principle of the universe, and no awareness of that principle would exist without the language to describe it.

All of which is to say that words are important. Words make worlds. We can't all just go and learn new languages that will help us see the world and each other differently. But we can use the words we have in the service of Love and all that is holy. And if we do that with intention and faith, we just might live into the truth of who we are.

Amen

## ***President's Corner*** by *Stu Ferguson, President, Board of Trustees*

David Brooks, New York Times columnist, is my mentor on many topics from ethical living to how to understand Trump. One of his recent columns was based on Warren Buffet's letter to billionaires challenging them to give away their fortunes to support something they believed in or would like to see happen in the world. Many follow up letters to Buffet were illuminating with donors pledging to help in many areas, from things like donating to charities fighting childhood obesity, researching blindness, and improving childhood education. In his op-ed editorial David Brooks imagined having an extra billion dollars and spending his seed money to start "25-person collectives around the country." These would have a cross section of people that would foster deep nurturing relationships, perform small tasks of service and self-control, read and discuss instructional biographies, and discuss fundamental issues of life's purpose.

I thought to myself "Welcome to First Unitarian" with its Core Circles, social action groups, and inspirational ministries. FUSD has an intentional community with members committed to continuing their own growth as well as teaching the next generations. Transformation can occur in the open exploration of social justice in our society. Our immigration justice group, homeless initiatives, and racial justice projects provide chances to make a difference. Not just with an outward look but also in ourselves. The recent powerful service and workshop by Debbie Irving author of [Waking up White](#) challenges us to change our own subtle support of systemic racism.

I find this kind of personal transformation to be difficult with many painful lessons along the way. Only in a loving community where someone will deeply listen to me can I work out the struggle inside myself. Over my 35 years at First Unitarian I have found such friends, Core Circles, and other FUSD groups that have helped me on my way. If you are searching- then join a Core Circle, join an organized group, or start your own. We have tried to make it easy to find friends.

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## *A Message from the Abundance Ministry*

*by Kim Urish*

We are excited to share an update on summer activities around fundraising for First Unitarian. Representatives from the Board, Capital Campaign, Finance Council, Prosperity Strategy Team as well as Abundance are meeting regularly to create a Development Council. The goal of the Development Council is to plan and oversee all fundraising activities for FUSD. Our first project is an in-depth assessment of our current fundraising efforts which will take place from July through September. From this assessment, we will be able to map out a Development Plan that will allow the church to raise more funds for increased staff and programs. We will provide more updates as they are available. Thank you for your continued generosity.

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We have worked to become deep listeners. We are here to walk with each other along our respective paths.

There will be disruption during the remodeling of our church and the sabbatical of our minister. I pledge to do what I can to keep the fabric of our community whole. If you are having trouble finding a niche or want to start your own, let me know and we will try to make it happen. I encourage you to follow David Brooks' advice and take this opportunity to help us create a better place to call home.

## *Whole Souul Living*

A paraphrased summary of the spiritual sources of Unitarian Universalism might look like this:

- Direct experience of life and the divine
- The words and deeds of prophetic women and men
- Wisdom from the world's religions
- Jewish and Christian teachings
- The guidance of reason and science.
- Earth-centered traditions and the rhythms of nature.

The fact that we have a list like this defines us as pluralists, and it is wonderfully indicative that these sources look both backward and forward, both inward and outward, befitting a people who seek wholeness.

In this month when our ***Whole Souul Living*** Theme is The Sources of Unitarian Universalism, the following questions are provided for our individual and communal reflection:

1. What sources do you look to, depend on, or turn to, for strength/courage/peace?
2. Which of the sources above has the greatest capacity for holding a community together?
3. Which are the most challenging to you personally?
4. Which do you want to learn more about?
5. And, which ones should be held up more often, or more powerfully, in our common worship experience on Sunday mornings? Why?