

GROWING Together

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THE POWER OF WORDS

*Yes, as the rain and the snow come down from the heavens
And do not return without watering the earth,...
so the word that goes forth from my mouth does not return
to me empty, without carrying out my will and succeeding
in what it was sent to do. (Isaiah 55:10-11)*

Words have power. References to this power in words and in Word appear throughout Scripture in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

With words God calls creation into being. With word, form appears from chaos: light and darkness, plant and animal life, intelligence, choice and responsibility. And language.

The age-old children's chant: "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me!" is only partially true. "Sticks and stones" can indeed hurt me physically, but those wounds usually heal with time. Words, too, may hurt, not physically, but their wounds may go deep. They can destroy trust; cause fear, loneliness and loss of self-esteem; poison innocence, and bring despair. Such wounds take a long time to heal, if they ever do.

**"You're
such a
loser!"**

Besides the power to hurt, words have the power to heal. Words of love, compassion, hope, and praise can help to repair the damage done to innocence and can restore shattered self-esteem. Although words used for evil—for spreading fear, for lying, for slander—may seem to abound, if we listen carefully we find that words of wisdom and beauty are far more prevalent. Consider those qualities in story, poetry, and song, in hymn, in praise and prayer.

**"May I
help you
with
that?"**

Words, then, have power to hurt and to heal. Can we counteract the evil and bring about good? We have the example of Gandhi who would not

participate in oppression, would not abandon hope, would continue to work for justice. Similarly, Bishop Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela suffered the effects of hatred and racism. They felt the pain of cruel words, but refused to retaliate. Christ-like, they absorbed the words and transformed them into words of understanding, compassion, forgiveness and reconciliation.

Languages are made of words. What happens when a language disappears? There are about 6,000 living languages in the world—and at least half of those are under serious threat. UNESCO claims that the rate of language extinction has now reached ten every year.¹ When a language is lost the unique beauty, wisdom, perspectives, attitudes and culture carried in the stories of that language are lost as well. True, the vocabulary of English is growing rapidly, but the new words seem to be limited to commerce and technology. As our language grows, as more people work in isolation, as the rich and diverse English words fall out of use, will we lose story and literature, the art of conversation, the thrust and parry of wit and humour? Could poverty of language lead to poverty of spirit? Indeed, students are now dehumanized as "marketable," as "products" of a "learning" system that must be financially profitable. As we lose respect for language do we also lose respect for people?

Where do our words go after we speak them? The following may be an urban legend:

Some years ago a radio station in London, England picked up the signal of a radio station in Texas. On enquiring about it, the staff learned that the Texas station had stopped broadcasting some 25 years earlier. Where had that sound been? Had it been ricocheting among the stars and planets all that time?

Is that where our words are? If that is so, wouldn't it be better if instead of words of anger, complaint, fear and self-pity, we populate space with words of kindness, praise, hope, compassion and gratitude?

**"Call me
when you
need me."**

¹ Jessica Williams, "Ten languages die out every year" in *50 Facts that Should Change the World*. London: Icon Books Ltd., 2004, page 171.

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