

## SPEAKING OF WORDS: THE GIFT AND GLORY OF LANGUAGE

Ken Olson

Lewistown, Montana

October 2021

“All of language comes short of what it would communicate. Even in its most ample and precise exercise, language is a verbal groping for sufficiency, a grammar stalking elusive relations, flung loops of sentences tightening around the undulant and the evanescent.”

Joseph Sittler

“The difference between the right word and the almost-right word is the difference Between lightning and the lightning bug.”

Mark Twain

“Let’s imagine there’s an earthquake tomorrow in the average university town. If only two buildings remained intact at the end, what would they have to be in order to rebuild everything that had been lost? Number one would be the medical building, because you need that to help people survive, to heal injuries and sickness. The other building would be the library. All the other buildings are contained in that one. People could go into the library and get all the books they needed in literature and social economics or politics or engineering and take the books out on the lawn and sit down and read. Reading is at the center of our lives. The library is our brain. Without the library, you have no civilization.”

Ray Bradbury

For a very long time, there was no such thing as civilization, at least as we commonly understand the term, because there was no written language. During the last Ice Age, humanity faced an environment that was hostile in the extreme. A continental glacier more than a mile thick covered much of the land areas of the Northern Hemisphere. In Europe, small bands of human beings clung to existence in caves to shelter from the cold. There, a few of them produced the wondrous cave paintings in France and Spain displaying images of bison, aurochs, and woolly mammoth, on which they depended for food. Perhaps those likenesses of the animals were drawn on the rocky walls as a ritual having to do with the success or failure of the hunt, a sort of plea for sustenance, a kind of prayer for daily bread, offered 20,000 years before the words of Christ in the New Testament. Also portrayed were the hyena, leopard, and the huge cave lion, all of them their competitors in the hunt. To those fierce predators, the human beings were also prey. Yet Ice Age humanity survived and managed, even, to migrate from Asia into North America, something possible because sea level was lower than now by perhaps three hundred feet, thus exposing a land bridge a thousand miles wide between the two continents. All of this comprises one of the supreme adventure stories in human history, but there is no written record of it. Not one word. If symbols for words existed, they have not been found and, if they should ever be discovered, neither could we understand them.

This is an essay about the miracle and meaning of words, books, and communication. It is appropriate that I allude to, illustrate with, and celebrate many passages created by others.

Ray Bradbury, whose words in one of the opening quotations were provided in an interview, was in love with words, books, and libraries. In an Afterword to his best-known novel, he wrote: "As you can see, I am madness maddened, when it comes to books, writers, and the great granary silos where books are stored." That novel is *Fahrenheit 451*, a story set in a future time when books are banned and the penalty for possession is severe: books are sought out and burned, along with the houses in which they are found. The title marks the kindling temperature of printing paper: 451 degrees.

The main character is the Fire Man, Montag. In his youth, he had been an avid reader, but here he is, in the opening lines of the story: "It was a pleasure to burn. It was a special pleasure to see things eaten, to see things blackened and *changed*. With the brass nozzle in his fists, with this great python spitting its venomous kerosene upon the world, the blood pounded in his head, and his hands were the hands of some amazing conductor playing all the symphonies of blazing and burning to bring down the tatters and charcoal ruins of history." Books were a threat to the regime in power, because books gave people ideas. That was true of the natural world, also, as evidenced by Montag's new neighbor, a young girl, who says to him, "I sometimes think drivers don't know what grass is, or flowers, because they never see them slowly. If you showed a driver a green blur, Oh, yes! he'd say, that's grass! A pink blur! That's a rose garden! White blurs are houses. Brown blurs are cows. My uncle drove slowly on a highway once. He drove forty miles an hour and they jailed him for two days. Isn't that funny, and sad, too." "You think too many things," said Montag.

In discussing *Fahrenheit 451*, Bradbury revealed a surprising fact: "I write all of my novels and stories in a great surge of delightful passion. Only recently, glancing at the novel, I realized that Montag is named after a paper manufacturing company. And Faber [Montag's friend], of course, is a maker of pencils! What a sly thing my subconscious was, to name them thus. —And not tell me!"

Aren't words wonderful? They can make us cry, or laugh, or reflect. Sometimes their strung-together meanings are not clear. One of our neighbors some blocks away has a sign planted among flowers that reads, "Gardener Wanted: Must Look Good Bending Over." At home, we talked about it. There is a lot we don't know about the intended meaning of the sign. Is the owner a man? Probably. Does he want to employ a woman? Again, probably. Does he want a front view or a rear view of the gardener? He doesn't say. The sign has been there for a couple of years; so, is there a severe shortage of such workers? Does he, in fact, even want a gardener? Is the sign *really* a "Help Wanted" image, at all? Or is the sign, instead, a joke? We conclude that such is the case, even though there is nothing in the words themselves to indicate that. However, it illustrates some of the many variables that are mentally taken into account when we try to understand communications. Do all cultures tell jokes? Not being an anthropologist, I cannot say, but I'm guessing they do. And I suppose that humor is learned by

young children simply *via* exposure; after a while, they just “get it” when something is intended to be funny, ironic, or sarcastic. Practice makes perfect or, at least, adequate.

A college girl, away from home for the first time, wrote this letter to her parents:

Dear Mom & Dad,

I’m sorry to be so long in writing again, but all my stationery was lost the night the dormitory was burned by the rioters. I’m out of the hospital now, and the doctor says my eyesight should be back to normal sooner or later. The wonderful boy, Bill, who rescued me from the fire, kindly offered to share his little apartment with me until the dorm is rebuilt. He’s very nice, so you won’t be too surprised when I tell you we are going to get married. In fact, you have always wanted grandchildren, so you’ll enjoy hearing that you will be grandparents next month.

Please disregard the above practice in English composition. There was no fire, I have not been in the hospital, I’m not pregnant, and I don’t even have a boyfriend. –But I did get a D in French and I’m flunking Chemistry, and I wanted to make sure you received this news in the proper perspective!

Love, Mary

[I used this superb illustration in a sermon titled, “Finding the Yes,” based on St. Paul’s words about Christ in II Cor. 1:20: “All the promises of God find their Yes in Him,” and which included the encouragement to focus on the best in people. I can’t credit anyone for the quote, since I saw it in print decades ago, and no author was listed.]

The right words can inspire us, as individuals or as nations, to higher things. That is the case with this segment of a speech delivered in 1953 by President Dwight Eisenhower: “Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired, signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. ...It is spending the sweat of [the country’s] laborers, the genius of its scientists, and the hopes of its children.” It remains a superb presidential statement, reminding us still today of what things matter most for the health and harmony of nations, and it is especially pointed, given that the speaker had been the Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in Europe during World War II. Later, he would add, “I hate war, as only a soldier can who has lived it, as one who has seen its brutality, its futility, its stupidity.”

It is the written word that for generations has connected people with others when far from home. One of the volumes in *The Harvard Classics* series is *Two Years Before the Mast* by Richard H. Dana, Jr. Although almost totally overlooked today, in the author’s own time it became one of the most widely read books in the country, and it preserves a record of life aboard the old sailing ships that were used for trading to far regions. In 1834, as a youngster of twenty and a future lawyer of fame, Dana took a break from his studies at Harvard to sign on to a ship that made several trips from Boston around South America’s dangerous and dreaded Cape Horn to the coast of California. The object was to pack a ship’s hold with thousands of hides from cattle raised there and bring them back for the leather industry in New England. In the book, Dana writes, “No one has ever been on distant voyages, and after a long absence

received a newspaper from home, who cannot understand the delight that they give. I read every part of them –the houses to let; things lost or stolen; auction sales, and all. Nothing carries you so entirely to a place, and makes you feel so perfectly at home as a newspaper.” And then there’s letters, the written word, which, to generations of immigrants and people serving in military outposts around the world, have been mental and emotional lifelines.

When Shakespeare’s Hamlet was asked by Polonius what he was reading, he replied, “Words, words, words.” Words can be like treasure but they can also simply be banal and empty of substance or significance. In a moment of reflection, an advertising man once penned this: “I live in a sea of words, where the nouns and the adjectives flow, and the verbs speak of action that never takes place, and the sentences come and go.” We are all subjected to this sort of commercial almost every time we turn on the television set. Or, consider the obligatory “How are you?” uttered by nearly every clerk in every store, everywhere, with the expected answer – and yes, you *must* answer-- “Fine, Good, OK,” even when a person is anything but. I remember reading, somewhere, of a writer who lived in an apartment complex that had a large common area for coffee, etc., similar to motels. He said that in the year he lived in that place, nobody had said anything that made any difference to anybody. Even being face to face with those people we know, and know well, is not a guarantee that meaningful conversations will take place. Imagine a father visiting his son at college, asking: “How’s the apartment?” Answer: “Good.” “About your roommate: how is that working out?” “Good.” “How’s the cafeteria?” “Good.” “And your advisor: what sort of job do you think she’s doing to help you along in your studies?” “Good.” “So, have you decided on a major?” “Communications.”

Many of us are saddened by the decline of civil speech in our country. The problem is not new, but most would agree that there has been a significant change in both tone and content in recent years. Words that were once universally regarded as vulgar have become impossible to escape on social media and, in film, they are ubiquitous. The F-word (with connotations of rape) has become a false front for anything resembling communication. Angry? Curious? Surprised? Just say, “What the...”. It’s now an adjective, verb, adverb, a one- syllable, first-choice, all-purpose, go-to expletive, without end. Apparently, it is intended to signal strength or decisiveness, and such. Rather, it is the opposite. It is an indication of a very lazy mind with a very limited vocabulary. It is the mechanical, thoughtless, and ignorant substitute for the least bit of effort to say, with the least bit of clarity, what one intends.

George Orwell, in addition to being a writer of novels, was a social and literary critic of note. Recently, I read an article he published in *Horizon* magazine in 1946, “Politics and the English Language,” in which he states:

“Now, it is clear that the decline of a language must ultimately have political and economic causes: it is not due simply to the bad influence of this or that individual writer. But an effect can become a cause, reinforcing the original cause and producing the same effect in an intensified form, and so on indefinitely. A man may take to drink because he feels himself a failure; and then fail all the more completely because he drinks. It is rather the same thing that is happening to the English language. It becomes ugly and inaccurate

because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts.”

That is a significant insight. So, thought can corrupt language, and language can also corrupt thought in a kind of feedback loop process. And that can spread by habit and imitation to embed itself among a people who once knew better, and who *were* better. It’s obvious to me that is what we are seeing in American culture, and we are far from knowing the full consequences, yet. It was in 1949 that Orwell published his novel *1984*, just three years after the article; no doubt, the thoughts in both article and book were related. A key element in the novel is that of “newspeak,” words deliberately designed to confuse and inhibit thought, turning meanings upside-down, similar to the propagandist techniques that were used, in real life, in Stalinist Russia and in Hitler’s Germany in the last century. (In the cruelest of ironies, the large sign over the gate to the Nazis’ Auschwitz death camp stated, “Arbeit Macht Frie,” Work sets you free.)

Thus, words can convey information, facts, and truths, but they are often the tools for disinformation and deception. Emerson observed of one acquaintance that “The more he talked of his honor, the faster we counted our spoons.” Washington Irving (1783-1859) was the American writer whose lasting fame rests on the well-known short stories, *Rip Van Winkle* and *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*. In addition, he wrote serious works of history, some concerning European politics and lived in Spain for seventeen years, immersed in such work. He saw much, of both deeds and words, that was a discouragement. In one piece of correspondence, he spoke his heart and mind:

“I am wearied and at times heartsick of the wretched politics of this country.... The last ten or twelve years of my life, passed among sordid speculators in the United States, and political adventurers in Spain, has shown me so much of the dark side of human nature, that I begin to have painful doubts of my fellow man; and look back with regret to the confiding period of my literary career, when, poor as a rat, but rich in dreams, I beheld the world through the medium of my imagination and was apt to believe men as good as I wished them to be.”

Being “poor as a rat, but rich in dreams” –wonderful phrase-- is much to be preferred over the corruption of one’s character. Like Irving, we need a realistic look at the language of contemporary politics, including the promotion of The Big Lie by Donald J. Trump: that the presidential election was “stolen” and that he “actually won --and by a landslide.” Those statements led to a violent siege of the Capitol and continue to threaten our democracy. “I know words. I have the best words.” –That was Trump, again, in a sad, head-shaking, self-delusional statement, like so many others of his. Words: he knows mostly how to use them to lie. His almost continuous lying produced a count, while President, of more than 30,000. That is an assault on the very *idea* of Truth, and it is still being waged by Trump, but also by many complicit others, and it is corrosive to our highest values and to every saving virtue. Frequent lying without remorse is a well-established symptom of the sociopathic or psychopathic personality, and the political realm has recently attracted an entire throng of them: people capable of telling, repeating, and supporting the most blatant falsehoods for fame, money, and

power, and this with little qualms of conscience. Joseph Conrad's novels, set in imaginary Third World countries in the age of colonialism, plumb the depths of human propensity for evil. In the Introduction to a Conrad trilogy, Albert J. Guerard writes that "...the larger political forces at work in Costaguana may be at work anywhere: the vanities and illusions and secret pulls of power, especially the easily corrupted force of words, especially man's incorrigible gift of deceiving himself with the words by which he intended to deceive others."

Words communicate not just information, but also attitudes; they can be impressive and, sometimes, to impress is the primary goal. In an essay titled "Maine Speech," contained in *One Man's Meat* by E. B. White, the author says:

"I seldom tire of listening to the most commonplace stuff, directly and sincerely spoken; and I still recall with dread the feeling that used to come over me occasionally at parties in town when the air was crowded with intellectual formulations—the feeling that there wasn't a remark in the room that couldn't be brought down with a common pin."

I think that we have all been in that room.

The young Soren Kierkegaard, among the most self-reflective of persons, candidly and with deep remorse, recorded his similar pretentious mistake when he wrote in an 1836 Journal entry, "I have just returned from a party of which I was the life and the soul; wit poured from my lips, everyone laughed and admired me—but I went away-- and the dash should be as long as the earth's orbit -----and wanted to shoot myself." Not many who have been saturated in conceit have such regrets.

Others have no regrets at not reading. A new thought encountered in the printed page has the potential to change us, which may explain the resistance that some people have to it. However, that is a self-inflicted wound. Kathleen Norris, in *Dakota: A Spiritual Biography*, writes, "Who could be more impoverished than the man who, on hearing news of a former teacher, exclaimed in a tavern, 'That old cow? She used to make me read. Said I couldn't graduate till I read all she wanted. Well, I showed her; I haven't read a book since!'" Polls indicate that roughly half of the American public has not read a book in any given year.

The printing press with moveable type was invented by Gutenberg in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The first book to come out of his shop was the Bible, in 1452. Still, it took a long time before a variety of printed matter became widely available. In addition, most people could not read, and change in that circumstance was a long while coming. However, they cultivated listening. In his monumental 800-page volume on the arts entitled, *The Creators: A History of Heroes of the Imagination*, Daniel J. Boorstin (the 12th Librarian of Congress) tells us:

"Shakespeare's contemporary public were not readers but listeners. While our age of omnipresent print, and of photographic and electronic images, relies on the eye, Elizabethans were experienced and longsuffering listeners. Once in 1584, when Laurence

Chaderton, Master of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, the town's preacher for half a century, had preached for only two hours, the disappointed congregation cried out, 'For God's sake, sir, go on! We beg you, go on!'

"Only two hours!" Compare that with today's common sentiment that a fifteen or twenty-minute speech or sermon is twice too long, an outlook that, sadly, is now widely found, not just among congregants, but pastors, too, partly because it's compatible with sloth: the seven-minute message doesn't take much effort. It does --and should-- take time to develop an idea of substance, to avoid being simplistic, and to take account of the complexity of our daily lives.

"Of the writing of books there is no end." Ecclesiastes made that assessment so long ago. Publishing is surely big business today. A walk through the aisles at Barnes & Noble will suffice to show that, in addition to the wheat, there's lots of chaff, since publication alone is no sign of excellence. It is sometimes said that even William Faulkner couldn't get published today, and many publishing firms would not deny it, for the business is mostly about what sells. In the words of editor Richard Rodriguez, "Time was, there were readers in this world who enjoyed difficulty and density in books. Now simplicity is all, the flat horizon. Too bad for me. Too bad for the reader." So, with the culture half-buried in fluff, the odds of getting a serious work published today are something like 3,000 to one, and it's easy to conclude that an individual writer can make no difference. One of Aldous Huxley's earlier novels, before *Brave New World*, was a 425-page work titled *Eyeless in Gaza*. Therein, he has a character that scorns even the attempt:

"Millions of books. All those hundreds of thousands of authors, century after century -- each convinced he was right, convinced that he knew the essential secret, convinced that he could convince the rest of the world by putting it down in black and white. When in fact, of course, the only people anyone ever convinced were the ones that nature and circumstances had actually or potentially convinced already."

Of course, the character is a cynic and, with that impoverished view, why would anyone even try? Nevertheless, people do keep trying, convinced, and sometimes rightly, that they have something extremely worthwhile to say and that someone else, somewhere, just might want to hear. And sometimes they transform how others, even millions of others, even across generations or centuries, view the world. John Milton, the author of *Paradise Lost*, wrote a 50-page pamphlet, *Areopagitica*, (1644) that argued in favor of unlicensed publishing, the issue being freedom of the press. He used it to say:

"For books are not absolutely dead things, but ...do preserve as in a vial the purest efficacy and extraction of that living intellect that bred them. I know they are as lively, and as vigorously productive, as those fabulous Dragon's Teeth and, being sown up and down, may chance to spring up armed men. ...A good book is the precious life-blood of a master-spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life."

Henry David Thoreau failed in his effort at sowing words with his first work, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. A thousand copies had been printed, but the publisher notified him that less than three hundred had sold. Therefore, he would be billed for all of them, and the unsold would be returned, a whole wagon-load, at his expense. In his Journals, Thoreau gives us his reaction: "The wares are sent to me at last, and I have an opportunity to examine my purchase. They are something more substantial than fame, as my back knows, which has borne them up two flights of stairs. ...I now have a library of nearly nine hundred volumes, over seven hundred of which I wrote myself. ...My works are piled up on one side of my chamber half as high as my head. This is authorship; these are the work of my brain."

Thoreau's *Walden* and other classics of world literature are just that: classics, because, while conceived and printed at one point in time, they have the mysterious power to address the deepest dimensions of spirit in other times and places. They lift into view something of ourselves or the world around us that we have not seen before, or they give voice to what we have felt but could not express. Thus, the miracle of words.

H. G. Wells (1866-1946) was an extremely talented and prolific writer. In addition to a two-volume work on world history, he wrote dozens of short stories and novels, several in the science fiction genre, in which he was far ahead of his time. Perhaps his most famous piece is *The War of the Worlds* from 1896. Most of the first paragraph is included here simply as an illustration of the masterful use of words. In subtle but ominous fashion, Wells sets the stage for everything that is to follow:

"No one would have believed in the last years of the nineteenth century that this world was being watched keenly and closely by intelligences greater than man's and yet as mortal as his own; that as men busied themselves about their various concerns, they were scrutinized and studied, perhaps almost as narrowly as a man with a microscope might scrutinize the transient creatures that swarm and multiply in a drop of water. With infinite complacency men went to and fro over this globe about their little affairs, serene in their assurance of their empire over matter. It is possible that the infusoria under the microscope do the same. ...At most, terrestrial men fancied there might be other men upon Mars, perhaps inferior to themselves and ready to welcome a missionary enterprise. Yet across the gulf of space, minds that are to our minds as ours are to those of the beasts that perish, intellects vast and cool and unsympathetic, regarded this earth with envious eyes, and slowly and surely drew their plans against us. And in the early twentieth century, came the great disillusionment."

Joseph Sittler, source of this essay's opening quotation, taught for decades at The Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. The quote itself is quite accurate. All communication, even at its best, is at least a partial failure, for that is the nature of words. But how many could make that very point so successfully and with such eloquence? (I once drove a two-thousand-mile round-trip from Montana to a college in Minnesota to hear Sittler speak, this when he was nearly 90, knowing I would not get another chance.) He unwaveringly celebrated the entire world of art



and literature as revelatory of what we often call the human condition. This is from his book, *Gravity & Grace: Reflections and Provocations*:

“The meaning of experience is a poor and haggard thing if it refers only to what has happened to me. The meaning of education and culture is that we live vicariously a thousand other lives.... I would be a poor person if the only things I knew were what I found out for myself. Through great poetry and drama and essays I have experienced things that my own bracketed life never permitted me to experience firsthand. I have sailed the seas with Captain Ahab in *Moby Dick*. I have lived in a hundred strange places with Ernest Hemingway and Nathaniel Hawthorne. By reading Joseph Conrad, ...I have learned something of the horror of estrangement, alienation, and the life-destroying energies of loneliness. I have known how to comprehend my own moral embarrassment by the magnificent achievement of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. ...They are truth.”

When asked how the Christian Church could best engage the next century, Sittler replied, “Watch your language!” and he wrote, elsewhere, “I say so much about language, and with such passion, because of my certainty that matter and manner are inseparable, that substance and form cannot be split, that the what and the how are irrevocably linked.”

Frederick Buechner, in his book of essays titled *The Clown in the Belfry*, calls painting and music *subcutaneous* arts. They penetrate, they get under your skin, but in a generalized or subtle manner. Continuing the thought, he says:

“Writing, on the other hand, strikes me as *intravenous*. As you sit there only a few inches from the printed page, the words you read go directly into the bloodstream and go into it at full force. ...If there is poison in the words, you are poisoned; if there is nourishment, you are nourished; if there is beauty, you are made a little more beautiful. In Hebrew the word *dabbar* means both word and also deed. A word doesn’t merely say something, it does something. It brings something into being. It makes something happen.”

How to communicate the Christian message, to make something happen? It has been said that the content of the Gospel does not change, while the means not only can change, but must. When the cultural situation is altered in important ways, the form of our address, if it is to be perceived as relevant, must be in language that resonates with the times. One example: in the age of Martin Luther, the overarching and urgent question had to do with sin: “How can I find a gracious God?” Luther articulated both that need and the response of the Gospel to it. His was an age preoccupied with sin and guilt, something that continued to be the case with most Protestant churches for a very long time. Revivalism used that paradigm, and most so-called evangelical churches use it still. The issue is a biblical one and, obviously, still has a place. At the same time, in our culture, we don’t see huge numbers of people, both in and out of the church, who could be described as battling sin and wresting with guilt. To the multitudes, that formula is now largely empty and is surely linked to the severe decline in recent decades in what we like to call the mainline denominations. Rather than by sin and guilt, the context now is much more nearly defined by the question of meaning.

Rabbit Angstrom is the central character in John Updike's novel, *Rabbit, Run*. The nickname, given when he was a kid, also was fitting when he was a high school basketball star with fast and fluid moves. Early on in the book, Rabbit gazes at a familiar sight: "There is only the church across the way, gray, somber, confident. Lights behind its rose window are left burning, and the circle of red and purple and gold seems in the city night a hole punched in reality to show the abstract brilliance burning underneath." And here he is, near the very end of the account, when his life is falling apart: "Afraid, really afraid, he remembers what really consoled him by seeming to make a hole where he looked through into underlying brightness, and lifts his eyes to the church window. It is, because of church poverty or the late summer nights or just carelessness, unlit, a dark circle in a stone façade."

To preach to emptiness is different task than, say, in the preaching of Billy Graham (and now of his son, Franklin), which was/is a repetition of traditional formulas concerning sin and repentance that resembles casting one and the same stone out there to the public, time and again, never minding the context where it lands. That no longer works, this for many reasons, one being that biblical stories and allusions are no longer part of the wider cultural milieu. They are no longer familiar and, when they are heard, they are not widely understood. Instead, one must engage people in the realm of purpose, with the idea of Why? because that is the ever-present human question.

Long ago, I came across and jotted down the words of one Father Brian Joyce that I had seen quoted from a conference on preaching in Los Angeles: "Our messages must be about life, not about Scripture. Our context is Scripture, but our aim is the people. The message is to explore life. If we explain Scripture, but don't talk about life, it's a kind of tour through the ruins." In similar fashion, Paul Tillich wrote about what he called the method of correlation, which is to say that a message must engage with the conditions of existence of the hearer. If a message is to be seen to be an answer, it must be framed, with its images and allusions, in terms of the question, that is to say, the listener's situation in life. Otherwise, question and answer will resemble the proverbial ships passing in the night, with no contact and having no relevance. Thus, Tillich is sometimes called a theologian of the existential sort. For that type of engagement, in addition to the tools of exegesis and the awareness of history, one needs the tools of literature, art, and the other humanities, for their images are all about the questions of the meaning of life. Neither Rabbit Angstrom nor any of the rest of us can succeed in running away from those.

[*Parenthetically*, concerning the language of the humanities: I myself have sometimes lamented that we moderns have too nearly lost the faculty of symbolic imagination and cannot appreciate other and older cultures wherein that came naturally. I now think it to be the case that people think much more with images and mental pictures than they realize. In just the past few weeks, I've been doing my own trivial "research" on the subject by simply jotting down common phrases that I hear on television and in personal conversation, i. e. clichés'. They are *entirely* visual in nature. I've concluded that most Americans can barely speak without them. In just a few weeks, I have sixteen pages, each with approximately eighty listings: Thus, something "slipped through the cracks," and "I can't wrap my head around it." "I don't want to push his buttons," or "rattle his cage," which "might upset the apple-cart," "strike a nerve" and cause X to "go ballistic." And we don't want to "jump the gun," but we must "let the chips fall where they may," because "we

refuse to sugar-coat it” or “let him off the hook.” He’s “in hot water, now,” so, we have to “hold on to our hats.” “We could, however, “pour cold water on the idea.” Or “let the air out of that balloon.” Just be sure “not to let the cat out of the bag,” while we “wait for the other shoe to drop.” And “she doesn’t have a leg to stand on,” but she should “hit the ground running,” that is, if she doesn’t “get cold feet.” “That dog don’t hunt” --is that the same one “that is “barking up the wrong tree?” Could you “put a wrench in that plan” or “gum up the works,” or would that be “grasping at straws?” How about “throwing spaghetti at the wall to see what sticks?” “Hold your horses,” and “don’t put the cart before the horse.” Perhaps we should “sweep it under the rug,” or “turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to him,” etc. etc. etc. “We crossed that bridge a long time ago,” but “We’re still kickin’,” aren’t we? --This is how we Americans speak, “off the cuff,” each and every day, myself included. We use image-filled picture-language. A strange note: the same is true of all those who assume that the Bible should absolutely be taken “literally.” Something strange happens to them when shifting from the spoken to the written word.]

Should not our self-imposed expectation in preaching always be to *attempt* to make it, not only faithful or true, but more interesting or engaging by utilizing illustrative material? Closely related is that we might rightly assume that to be a pastor is to be involved in a literary profession and that preaching is to be seen as an art. It is to touch the listener’s imagination. A sermon is an essay, something like a short chapter in a book. Herman Melville, he who wrote in *Moby Dick* of the pursuit of the great white whale, said, “To produce a mighty book you must choose a mighty theme. No great and enduring volume can ever be written on a flea, though many there be that have tried it.” Our theme is God, the world, human nature and destiny. What could be a mightier theme than that? And that means we need all the help we can get. I have listened to many well-structured sermons and speeches that, in terms of content, were very good, and which left its hearers in agreement --but largely unmoved. The messages could have been, not just good, but superb and inspiring, had they been laced with fitting quotations and memorable illustrations.

If I may reference my own attempts, I make liberal use of realms *other* than the theological, at least as usually so defined: sometimes the sciences but, again, mostly the humanities, and there are truly wonderful things “out there.” The English language, with approximately 170,000 words listed by The Oxford English Dictionary, is the richest on earth, with something like 20,000 -30,000 used by most individuals. Recently, I was curious about how many books are in my personal library, so I took to counting: just over 1,600 volumes, most of them non-fiction. No doubt, some of you have more. They span religion, philosophy, science, poetry, history, literature, and I have read all except a half-dozen. (In my case, this averages a book every two weeks of my adult life: appropriate, I think, for what is, again, a literary profession, wherein the job description of a parish pastor is to be always thinking, writing, speaking, teaching.) To clarify: on my part, quoting or making use of such items has no braggadocious or pompous intent. On the contrary. In addition to the fact that examples from such resources are effective, I would argue that such usage amounts to an exercise in humility. So many books, speeches, and sermons end up saying, “This is what *I* think.” My mind is to say, instead, “This is what I think --and, by the way, *another* writer has said something similar to it -- and better.”

It is in that vein that G. K. Chesterton alluded to what he called “The Democracy of the Dead.” Many, upon hearing just that phrase, assumed it be it a negative one, i. e. that he was merely criticizing a rigid, tradition-bound culture and critiquing dwelling in the past. But that is not at all what it was about; it was the opposite. It was to be widely inclusive, to incorporate or to hear from a multitude of people in time past, instead of having a narrow “here and now” focus. It was to broaden the conversation –and the wisdom—by including thoughts from the vast human procession, instead of “only those who just happen to be walking about in the present moment.” -- True democracy, even across the centuries! In a different image, one could say that this is to genuinely take account of “that great cloud of witnesses” who went before us. And their witness is in their words, and their words are in books. Thanks be to God!

That is some of what I believe about preaching. What I know is that preaching, as described above, is a great deal of work, but the work is commensurate with its large potential for making a difference in people’s lives.

We know that a great deal of communication happens without words. (In terms of human emotions, the non-verbal mode dominates.) Turning to the natural world, it is alive with *sounds* of every imaginable sort. Most creatures are part of sonic environments to which we are oblivious. Consider the great whales. Victor B. Sheffer, a biologist specializing in marine mammals, wrote *The Year of the Whale*, chronicling the experiences of a young Sperm Whale over the course of a calendar year, and he described how sound dominates:

“Every whale everywhere moves in a sea of total sound. From the moment of its birth until its final hour, day or night, it hears an endless orchestra of life around its massive frame. Silence is an unknown thing. The snapping and crackling of tiny shrimps and crab-like organisms, the grunting and grating, puffing and booming, of hundreds of fishes, the eerie whining and squealing of dolphins, the sad voices of sea birds overhead, the chatter of its own companions, the undertone of moving water and the drone of wind, all these notes and many more come flooding through its senses all the time. It *feels* the music, too, for water presses firmly on its frame –a smooth continuous sounding board.”

A recent issue of *National Geographic* reveals that the Humpback Whale has a vast repertoire of songs that evolve over time and which are rehearsed and repeated by others in a group. The songs of this whale can be heard by others over a distance of 40 miles, and that of the Blue Whale, the largest animal on the planet, for an astonishing 125 miles.

In addition, it might be said that other species, besides our own, have intricate languages to which we are oblivious. Some, like dolphins, are said to have amazing faculties. As is being increasingly recognized by wildlife biologists, the hoots and clacks of owls, the tweets and twitters of songbirds, the roars and grunts and howls of mammals of various sorts, are all *saying* something. Birds stake out their territory with mating messages and vocalizations galore that proclaim, “I’m here, this spot is taken.” But anyone who has spent time in a marsh or woods might not be wrong in thinking that, every now and then, there is an element of pure joy in a bird’s song that welcomes the sunrise. Lewis Thomas, the famed microbiologist, wrote a

number of books dealing with our deeper awareness of nature. He was given The National Book Award for *The Lives of a Cell: Notes of a Biology Watcher*, in which he says:

“Birdsong has been so much analyzed for its content of business communication that there seems to be little time left for music, but there is. ...The thrush in my back yard sings down his nose in meditative, liquid runs of melody, over and over again, and I have the strongest impression that he does this for his own pleasure. Some of the time he seems to be practicing, like a virtuoso in his apartment. He starts a run, reaches a midpoint in the second bar where there should be a complex set of harmonics, stops, and goes back to begin over, dissatisfied. Sometimes he changes his notation so conspicuously that he seems to be improvising sets of variations. It is a meditative, questioning kind of music, and I cannot believe that he is simply saying, ‘thrush here.’”

Neither does Thomas imagine that the 14<sup>th</sup> Quartet is simply the announcement that Beethoven is here, or that an answer came back, “after passage through an undersea of time and submerged currents of human thought, by another signal a century later, ‘Bartok here.’”

Birds communicate in richly varied ways, and the intelligence of birds is now regarded as being much more acute than was once imagined, even by specialists. Long ago, in a university class in Ornithology, I remember the term “bird-brain” being used in a derogatory sense. No longer. American Crows can count up to eight and use tools. Jennifer Ackerman, in her 2016 book *The Genius of Birds* that summarizes the research of scores of ornithologists, writes: “Chickadees are possessed of a prodigious memory. They stash seeds and other food in thousands of different hiding places to eat later and can remember where they put a single food item for up to six months. All of this with a brain roughly twice the size of a garden pea.” (There are a number of species with similar abilities.) None of us big-brained humans could do anything remotely like that. A series of experiments over several years at the University of Washington in Seattle involved people wearing “dangerous” masks and capturing some local crows, while other persons, without masks, merely wandered about. Nine years later, the masked scientists returned to the scene of the crime, and those wearing masks were mobbed and dive-bombed as a threat, while the others were ignored. The same happened in other areas some distance away, with birds not present at the site of the initial experiment. Apparently, the threat was even communicated to other crows and remembered! There is great variety among the nearly 11,000 species on planet earth. As E. O. Wilson remarked, “When you’ve seen one bird, you have *not* seen them all.”

Bernd Heinrich, zoology professor at the University of Vermont, studied Ravens for years and shared some of the results in *Ravens in Winter*. It’s clear that he loved the work, saying, “There is no greater pleasure than eating roasted moose while resting under a spruce and contemplating Ravens.” They are among the most intelligent of birds. Clearly much is going on with all the croaks, clicks, and clacks; but how to understand and describe it?

“We have hardly begun to decipher the language of the Raven. Its dictionary so far contains but a few ‘words.’ Perhaps our analysis has been too course-grained to catch the meanings. Our research has been something like that of aliens from outer space

who make sonograms of human vocalizations under different situations –eating, playing, loving, fighting, etc. Certain differences noted in frequency, intonation, and loudness are correlated with feelings and emotions. But human sounds convey much more, and perhaps Ravens’ do, too.”

British theologian Leslie Newbigin once gave a talk in which he described the nights he had spent in the jungles of India and of how they were filled with sounds: the hoots and jabbering of monkeys, the roar of lions, the howl of hyenas, and the twittering of birds without number. He asked, “Who hears all these things, there in the depths of the jungle of India, night after night?”

The poet George Parsons Lathrop intimates that

Music is in all growing things;  
And underneath the silky wings  
Of smallest insects there is stirred  
A pulse of air that must be heard;  
Earth’s silence lives, and throbs,  
And sings.

Sigurd Olson was a naturalist who spent many years among the lakes and evergreen forests northwest of Lake Superior between Minnesota and Ontario, where travel is by pack and canoe over the ancient trails of the Indians and Voyageurs. He tells of a Scotch-Cree friend of his who would sometimes stop in the trail and ask him to listen. “When I could not hear,” says Olson, “he would laugh. On a still lake he would inquire: ‘Can’t you hear it now? It’s very plain tonight.’ Once in a stand of quaking aspen when the air was full of their whispering, he dropped his pack and stood there, a strange and happy light in his eyes.” Olson said that he still didn’t hear it, but knew that his friend did, and that those who have lived close to nature all their lives are sensitive to countless things lost to the rest of us in the cities of a noisy and hectic culture. And he himself came to hear it, naming his book about the northern boundary waters *The Singing Wilderness*.

Aldo Leopold taught Forestry for many years at the University of Wisconsin. In his classic work, *A Sand County Almanac*, he writes of the sounds of his youth:

“...on a still night, when the campfire is low and the Pleiades have climbed over the rimrocks, sit quietly and listen for a wolf to howl, and think hard of everything you have seen and tried to understand. Then, you may hear it –a vast pulsing harmony—its score inscribed on a thousand hills, its notes the lives and deaths of plants and animals, its rhythms spanning the seconds and the centuries.”

There was a concept, going back to medieval times, that intrigued a great many people: the thought that the sun, moon, stars, and planetary bodies each produced unique vibrations, something they referred to as “The Music of the Spheres.” The Astronomer

Kepler found that “the difference between minimum and maximum angular speeds of a planet in its orbit approximates a harmonic proportion.” The ideas are now dismissed, but the composer Gustav Holst picked up on the imagery of such music for his symphonic piece, *The Planets*, composed between 1914 and 1917. Perhaps there was some intuition in all of this. Human beings catch sounds between 16,000 and 30,000 vibrations per second, but there’s much more going on. We miss what is below that range, and above it there are sounds so vast that their chorus is unimaginable, such as in electricity, one to two billion vibrations a second; light, up to trillion a second and, above 250 trillion are X rays. We normally hear only the tiniest slice of the staggering entirety. Both day and night, the giant arrays of radio telescope dish-antennas are pointed to the heavens, listening among the stars for the music of the spheres redefined: static, sounds, and signals at many frequencies that are traveling at the speed of light all across the universe. Given the right instruments, not even deep space is empty of sound.

In an essay about words, what is the meaning of *The Word of God*? In the Hebrew Scriptures, “the Word of the Lord” is a message delivered by the prophets to kings and others who need to hear it, and the phrase is often spoken after biblical readings in Christian churches the world over. The very word Bible or *Biblos* means “book,” and many equate The Word of God with the Bible, linking the term with particular theories of inspiration. However, in the Christian Faith, the Word of God is a *Person* before it is a book, and the book bears witness to the Person. St. John’s Gospel opens with the affirmation that “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.” That is the Incarnation or “the enfleshment” of God in Christ, and it’s the reason that, in 1939, England’s Archbishop William Temple wrote that “Christianity is the most materialistic of all great religions.” Thus, the Bible, the book, is the Word of God in the *derived* sense that it bears witness to God. It is respected and revered, but this as an authoritative testimony to the acts of God, instead of the print and pages themselves being sacred. Thus, the *Logos*, the Word, *became flesh*, not words. And that is an infinitely deeper thing.

(In this area, the religion of Islam is utterly different. There, Jesus is a prophet. There, the counterpart to Jesus the Christ is not Mohammed but the Koran. Muslims believe, *not* in the Incarnation, but in what is called inlibration, the embodiment of God *in a book*, and the book is the Koran. In fact, the Islamic doctrine is that the Koran itself is *uncreated* and has existed from eternity. (Such a doctrine, of a perfect, infallible, and eternal book, is one of the contributing factors to the fanaticism of divergent groups, such as ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and the Taliban.) Concerning items of the most importance, the simplistic idea is often promoted that all the major religions teach the same thing. This is one *graphic* illustration that this is not the case.

To illustrate something of what we mean by the incarnation –and again, language fails, but one must try—consider a segment from *For Heaven’s Sake*, a musical revue, lyrics by Helen Kromer:

I open my mouth to speak, and the word is there, formed by the lips, the tongue, the organ of voice. Formed by the brain, transmitting the word by breath.

I open my mouth to speak, and the word is there, traveling between us –caught By the organ of hearing, the ear, transmitting the thought to the brain. Through the word.

Just so do we communicate –You and I: the thought from one mind leaping to another, given shape, and form, and substance, so that we know and are known. Through the word.

But let me speak to my very small son and the words mean nothing, for he does not know my language. And so, I must show him: “This is your foot,” I say, “and it is meant for walking.” I help him up: “Here is the way to walk!” And one day “walking” shapes in his brain. With the word.

God had something to say to Man, but the words meant nothing, for we did not know his language. And so, we were shown: “Behold the Man,” he said. “This is the image, the thought in my mind –Man as I mean him, loving and serving. I have put him in flesh. Now the Word has shape and form and substance to travel between us. Let Him show forth love till one day ‘loving’ shapes in your brain. With the Word.”

Try as we might, concerning the most important verities and articles of faith, our words will always leave much unsaid, for we are attempting to express the truly inexpressible. Commenting on what he called his own anticipated passage to “the other world,” the great British composer Ralph Vaughn Williams said, “There, I won’t be doing music, I will be *being* it!” Thus, The Book of Revelation says, “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard what God has prepared for those who love Him.”

Who hears all this, from the cricket’s chirp to the music of the spheres? “If a tree falls in the forest, and no one is there...” Who hears all those sounds that permeate all Creation in forests and prairies, mountains and seas? All the music? All the prayers and praises of all the People of God? God hears. God, who created by the Word, is, we dare to say, also a listener and a music lover and one who says of the entirety, “It is very good.” God, who speaks the ongoing word of life in Creation, also speaks the word of Love in Christ. It is the one and same Word of which Dante wrote, “the love that moves the sun and other stars.”



Kenneth H. Olson

October 2021