

**Theodore Parker Church**  
**The Words That Define Us**  
**October 18, 2020**

I have long been curious about the work of linguist and philosopher, George Lakoff, regarding how we use language to communicate. Over the past twenty years or so, it feels as though our English language, at least, has been evolving in ways that help us see ourselves on spectrums of identity in many ways, rather than polar and binary ones. Is it merely confusion, or is it helping us to hear each other better?

**Opening Words**

Our service this morning is intended to honor two initiatives of this congregation: the first is to our ongoing intention to be as Welcoming a Congregation as possible by participating in the ongoing process of Welcome Renewal. And, this morning, to remind ourselves of our hope to Widen the Circle of our Concern.

And, as this has been yet another complicated week in our world, full of politics and pandemic, in addition to our personal lives - I want to open the service with a poem by William Stafford, one of a collection called the Methow River poems. This one is on public display at the mouth of the Methow River in Washington State, across from the fruit stand. Original location. Installed by the Forest Service in 1993-1994

*Time for serenity, anyone?*

I like to live in the sound of water,  
in the feel of mountain air. A sharp  
reminder hits me: this world still is alive;  
it stretches out there shivering toward its own  
creation, and I'm part of it. Even my breathing  
enters into the elaborate give-and-take,  
this bowing to sun and moon, day or night,  
winter, summer, storm, still—this tranquil  
chaos that seems to be going somewhere.  
This wilderness with a great peacefulness in it.  
This motionless turmoil, this everything dance.

**HE was red. But he wasn't very good at it.**

(silver) Oh, dear.

**His teacher thought he needed more practice.**

"I'll draw a red strawberry, then you draw a red strawberry.  
You can do this. Really."

**But he couldn't really.**

(Red) "Like this?"

(teacher) "Oh, my! Let's try again."

*(sung by Music Director) HOW COULD ANYONE EVER TELL YOU  
That you're anything less than beautiful  
How could anyone ever tell you that you're less than whole?*

**His mother thought he needed to mix with other colors.**

"Why don't you two go out and draw a nice round orange."

(yellow) "A really big one."

Rose: (Red) "A really orange one."

**But they made a big greenish one.**

(yellow) "Yuck!"

(Red) Oops.

**His grandparents thought he wasn't warm enough.**

(grandma) "Your class is making self-portraits for parents' night. Wear this warm red scarf."

(grandpa) "Nice! It's so you!"

**But it so wasn't.**

(silver) Oh, dear me.

*HOW COULD ANYONE FAIL TO NOTICE*

*That your loving is a miracle.*

*How deeply you're connected to my soul*

**Everyone seemed to have something to say.**

(amber) Sometimes I wonder if he's really red at all.

(Hazelnut) Don't be silly. It says red on his label.

(coca bean) He came that way from the factory.

(fuchsia) Frankly, I don't think he's very bright.

(grape) Well, I think he's lazy.

(army green) Right! He's got to press harder.

(steel gray) Really apply himself!

(sunshine) Give him time. He'll catch on.

(sea green) Of course he will.

**But he didn't catch on.**

Green frog. Black sheep. Brown cow. Red . . . aack! (blue ant)

**All the art supplies wanted to help.**

**The masking tape thought he was broken inside.**

This will help hold you together.

**The scissors thought his label was too tight.**

One snip should do it.

**I thought he wasn't sharp enough.**

Stay still, now.

**But even with all our help and all his hard work,**

**He just couldn't get the hang of it.**

*HOW COULD ANYONE EVER TELL YOU*

*That you're anything less than beautiful*

*How could anyone ever tell you that you're less than whole?*

**One day, he met a new friend.**

(berry) Will you make a blue ocean for my boat?

(Red) I can't. I'm Red.

(berry) Will you try?

**So he did.**

(berry) Thank you! It's perfect!

(Red) You're welcome. It was easy!

**And he didn't stop there.**

Blue jeans! Bluebells! Bluebird! Blueberries! Blue whale!

(Red) I'm blue!

**He was blue. And everyone was talking.**

(olive) My son is brilliant.

(amber) Who could have known he was blue?

(hazelnut) I always said he was blue.

(cocoa bean) It was obvious.

(berry) His blue ocean really lifted me.

(sea green) All of his work makes me happy.

(brown) His blue strawberries are my favorites.

(apple green) He's so intense.

(yellow) I'm going to make a green lizard with him. A really big one.

(grey) I hear he's working on a huge new project.

(scarlet) He's really reaching for the sky.

**And he really was!**

(fuschia) Isn't it a beautiful day?

(berry) Yes, perfect.

*HOW COULD ANYONE FAIL TO NOTICE . . .*

*That your loving is a miracle . . .*

*How deeply you're connected to my soul.*

**Reading**

an excerpt from the New York Times article,  
"Choose Your Own Identity." by Bonnie Tsui

*I never realized how little I understood race until I tried to explain it to my 5-year-old son. Our family story doesn't seem too complicated: I'm Chinese-American and my husband is white, an American of English-Dutch-Irish descent; we have two children. My 5-year-old knows my parents were born in China, and that I speak Cantonese sometimes. He has been to Hong Kong and Guangzhou to visit his gung-gung, my father. But when I asked him the other day if he was Chinese, he said no.*

*"You're Chinese, but I'm not," he told me, with certainty. "But I eat Chinese food." This gave me pause. How could I tell him that I wasn't talking about food or cultural heritage or where we were born? (Me, I'm from Queens.) I had no basis to describe race to him other than the one I'd taken pains to avoid: how we look and how other people treat us as a result.*

*My son probably doesn't need me to tell him we look different. He's a whir-in-a-blender mix of my husband and me; he has been called Croatian and Italian. More than once in his life, he will be asked, "What are you?" But in that moment when he confidently asserted himself as "not Chinese," I felt a selfish urge for him to claim a way of describing himself that included my side of his genetic code. And yet I knew that I had no business telling him what his racial identity was. Today, he might feel white; tomorrow he might feel more Chinese. The next day, more, well, both. Who's to say but him?*

<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/14/magazine/choose-your-own-identity.html>

### **Meditation/Prayer    the Rev. Anne Bancroft**

Spirit of Life and all awareness - from the day we are born our task is at hand: to discover, over our years, who am I? And, how shall I be in the world? What words will help me know who I am for myself, and in my relationships with others? How is it I will find the grace of wholeness and live it in this one wild excursion of living?

There is a still small voice in each of us that whispers its need when we are listening, when we turn away from the definitions imposed and hear, instead, the truth of our being. If only the words will avail themselves to our need. If only the world will make room for our unique and unrepeatable selves in the myriad ways we are present to this life. If only love is the definition, the light that shines and guides us into ourselves.

Let us follow that course, that voice, that wholeness.

### **A Shared Homily                      The Words That Define Us    the Rev. Anne Bancroft**

I have a distinct memory of my 8-year old self running up the basement stairs away from one of my brothers, calling back over my shoulder, "Queer!" in response to some argument we were having. There was my mother, at the top of the stairs, overhearing our disagreement and responding, as soon as she heard my name-calling, that we did not use that word in our house. We were not to call each other "queer." I think it was 1965.

She didn't explain, and my child-self wasn't quite sure why I shouldn't use it but there was no lack of clarity in her tone of voice. "Queer" obviously meant something other than the many words I could have chosen to call my brother in that moment: stupid, idiot, till (that was big in the 60's). Queer, to my young mind, fit in a similar category.

There is a current of change in the world these days, despite the divisiveness of the times. I wonder if you feel it? On the one hand, I think many of us are tired of being pulled apart - and we are hearing the sound of reunion being offered and it is getting traction. Have you heard it? Or felt it? Oh, I so want it to be so. I also think there is a demand from the voices of those who have been silenced too long. We are moving, however frustratingly slowly, to a reframing of who we can be as a people. George Lakoff, who I mentioned in the description for today's service, reminds us that reframing is about creating a worldview that is more in keeping with who and what we want to be; and, that it requires language to describe that worldview. Language alone won't get us there, but without it, nothing changes. Our language IS changing, and with it our capacity not just to understand ourselves and each other, but our capacity to widen our perspectives, to widen our circles, if you will.

For those of us who identify within the bounds of what has long been considered "normative" culture in this part of the world, the shift is important to attend to, encourage and expand. For those of you who have never identified within that small, restrictive framework, I can only imagine it feels far too long overdue.

We did not have vocabulary, in my childhood, for naming sexual orientation, not to mention gender identity. Nor did we have much vocabulary - or interest, perhaps - to describe nuances of race. And, it was not just my sheltered world and mind, but the larger culture of normative white, heterosexual and cisgender identity that limited our ability to know each other, to see and hear each other. We did not have words to talk about anything outside a very small box.

At 14 or so, having moved back to Hawaii, I remember hearing the word "mahu" in reference to a very tall, broad-shouldered person standing in front of me in line at MacDonald's - someone who fit their very large, wide feet - what we called luau-feet from going barefoot so much - into a lovely pair of too-small but bespeckled sandals. Before colonialism, before white people "Christianized" the indigenous culture of the Hawaiian islands, "mahu" was the word for third gender people, who embodied both male and female attributes, what we might now, in Western culture, refer to as gender non-conforming. Before Western intrusion, "mahu" wasn't considered non-conforming - which, btw, would better be described as "gender-expansive," don't you think? To be mahu was considered a holy state of being - and honored. In the 70's, in

the altered culture of white dominance, it was decidedly more pejorative. Shame on us. But even as we speak, appreciation of the native roots of the term are growing and it is moving back into being a term of respect and appreciation.

Our effort, today, is to think about the way our vocabulary has evolved, and is evolving, to help us better understand ourselves and each other, not just year-to-year but across generations, to have inclusive words that create space for the ways we each and all can feel whole, and known, and loved - the way Red can be celebrated as Blue. (OK - there is no intention for that to be a political metaphor!)

As the Chinese-identified mother in the reading this morning suggested, we each determine our own identities. Of her son, “who’s to say, but him?” Whether we’re considering sexual orientation, gender identity, race, or the many ways we come to know and define ourselves, we need to have words that help us create the framework for a more welcoming world..

**Rose Gallogly**                      Coordinator of Religious Exploration

Anne and I have been in conversation about this topic for a few weeks, both feeling sure that our collective language of identity is evolving, and that that process has deeper currents to it. These deeper currents show up particularly in the way my generation (which is, for context — young millennial, just on the edge of Gen Z) strongly claims language like queer and gender non-conforming, and pushes the boundaries or rejects language that relies too much on binaries.

The story that Anne shared about the word “Mahu” — a gender expansive identity baked into an indigenous language, and therefore a cultural understanding of the world — is, to my mind, really important context to understanding our contemporary language shifts.

Systems of colonialism, white supremacy, hetero-patriarchy: these systems love categories. They love boxes, putting people into boxes, and reinforcing those boxes with violence. Because if there is only “male” and “female,” it’s easier for there to be only one set of relationships between people: relationships where men are dominant, and women follow orders. If there is only “white” and “black,” then it’s possible for one race to be in charge, and another race that is lesser, that can be subjugated. Identity boxes with hard lines keep these systems of power in place.

But as long as these systems have existed, resistance to them has also existed. And I think what we’ve seen in recent decades in particular is that the people who have been most oppressed and subjugated by our systems of control — particularly Black, Indigenous, and other queer and trans people of color — have been standing up and saying: no more. I won’t let these

systems define me, and therefore I won't let these systems subjugate me. I won't let your language put me into a box, because I know that I'm so much more than that box; I know that my experience of the world, my experience of not fitting into the binaries you've set in front of me, is true and powerful. And I know that the more I'm able to claim the truth of my identity, the more the myths that these oppressive systems are based on start to fall away.

To me, rejection of the myth of the binary is the deeper current to why my generation says, "let's always introduce ourselves by sharing what our pronouns are, including if those pronouns are "they/them." Let's always make room in the conversation for your identity to be outside of the box of 'male' or 'female' — because the more space that *some* of us have to claim our truths outside of a gender binary, the more space that *all* of us have to claim the truths of ourselves outside of whatever other boxes our culture has set up for us."

For those of us who fit more neatly into the boxes of gender or sexuality — or who are white, and therefore closer to dominate culture within racial hierarchy — deeply listening to that insistence to break out of binary is such a gift. It allows each of us to examine (in our own context, in our own experience of identity) which boxes we've been put in, which boxes have been limiting us. It allows us to open up more fully to our own truth, and shape our language around that truth, instead of language and systems of control being the ones to shape us.

**ANNE** - I wonder if you heard the words that are so comfortably a part of Rose's vocabulary: colonialism, white supremacy, hetero-patriarchy? I would include these among the terms that have found more recent place in my own, helping me to understand the intersectional structures that confine us. But I didn't grow up knowing those terms. I am grateful and hopeful that they are more commonplace - using Rose, of course, as an example of ALL people of her generation! (that's not problematic, is it . . . ?)

In a recent conversation among colleagues, Unitarian Universalist antiracist educator, Paula Cole Jones, reminded us that we are in the midst of a shift from a dominant culture paradigm to a multicultural one. At least we HOPE we are in the midst of that shift! Think about that for a moment. In a dominant culture paradigm, everyone is defined by how near or far they are from the dominant identity - not necessarily the largest population numbers-wise, but the identity seen as that which defines the rest, i.e., white, male, heterosexual, probably Protestant, etc. Our words adapt to that paradigm. As an example: the term cisgender, which has been popularized, if you will, over the last two decades and is now included in the normative descriptor, is a term understood to mean those whose gender identity matches the sex assigned them at birth. The purpose of a term like cisgender is to create the "normative" expression to which "transgender" becomes the other. So in a way, it's a move forward in our



vocabulary - raising the visibility of a trans-population by comparison. On the other hand, it is no less binary than male v. female, right? It lacks the nuance of a continuum, though I hope serves as a bridge to a more inclusive expression. Let's watch, together, how long it takes us to move even further in our capacity to understand the broader spectrum that is the reality of our sexual identities - for some, on one or the other; for others, a more fluid dynamic.

Similarly in the realm of racial identities. This year's census allows the following racial identities: White; Black or African American; American Indian or Alaska Native; Chinese; Filipino; Asian Indian; Vietnamese; Korean; Japanese; other Asian; Native Hawaiian; Samoan; Chamorro; other Pacific Islander; some other race.

Where is the census box for bi-racial, or - the population growing by leaps and bounds - multiracial?

Many of you may be familiar with the Hapa project, a brainchild of artist and photographer, Kip Fulbeck. Hapa, in Hawaiian, refers to someone who is blended. It used to be more specific to someone who was half white and half local - but whatever local is has also expanded, so that people with almost any blend of racial identity that is other than the "normative" white might identify as Hapa, and where it was once a sort of pejorative, it is increasingly - these days - a source of pride. Bonnie Tsui, who wrote the article from the reading earlier suggests, In a strange way, the renewed fluidity of racial identity is a homecoming of sorts, to a time before race — and racism — was institutionalized." From her mouth to God's ear, as they say . . . .

We are seeing, all around us, the need to get beyond our binary habits of mind, to attend to a vocabulary that allows us each to be the full and nuanced, and delightful range of identities that, in truth, we ARE if only we knew how to talk about it, if only we had words for it! Wherever we enter the conversation (and I think a good deal of that IS a generational reality!) we need to continue it - to expand the options - to let, as Peter Mayer would say, everybody in with joy and welcome to this amazing and challenging dance that is our lives.

So may it be.

### **Benediction**

The blessing of truth be upon us,

The power of love direct us and sustain us,

And may the peace of this community preserve our going out and our coming in,

Or, perhaps, our going in and our coming out (!)

From this time forth, until we meet again.