

Words Matter

Have you noticed that language has evolved? When I was growing up, my Mam used to call me queer. Not in the way I call myself queer now, but that I was strange, ie weird child, who was often lost in a book or using my imagination to transport me to far away lands with most excellent adventures.

When I came out as Queer to my Mam in 2016, she said "You've always been a bit queer, that's just the way you are." I had to explain what I mean by Queer, in that I am attracted to both women and men, those who are cis and transgender. Cisgender meaning someone who is born to and identifies as that gender. I am born female and identify as female. Thus I am cisgender.

A phrase she often used with me when I was in high school was to offer to wake me at a certain time. Her father, after the Second World War, was hired by one of the mines to do this professionally. What did he do? He was paid to "knock people up". Mostly men. He had a wooden pole with a metal top and a piece of rubber on the tip of the metal. He would go from house to house, following a list, and would knock on the upper window as that's where the bedrooms were in terraced houses. He was known as a "knocker upper". It was a respected and noble profession.

When my Mam was growing up, her parents would ask her if she wanted to be woken at a specific time by asking "did she want to be knocked up and if so, at what time." She never thought twice about this, as possibly having another meaning, until she came to Canada.

I was a teenager and we were having dinner at a friend's house. Their daughter was about eight months pregnant and her boyfriend was also there. We were sitting at the kitchen table, after we had finished supper, but before we sided the table. I had to leave early as I had an early start in the morning. As I was getting ready to leave my Mam asked "do you want me to knock you up". And I said "Yes, please, half seven."

What she was asking me was "did you want me to wake you up in the morning", and my reply was "yes, please at 7:30 am."

As you can imagine this innocent conversation caused quite a ruckus from the girl's boyfriend. He was gobsmacked at what my mother was offering to do and even more astounded that I agreed to it. Because you see, to him, knocking someone up meant something very different than it did to me.

Rubbing his girlfriend's baby bump he said "this is knocking someone up", and both my Mam and I thought that phrase to be quite shocking and in rather poor taste.

What do you call a sweatshirt with a hood? Most people call it a hoodie, but if you're from Saskatchewan it's called a Bunny Hug.

What do you say when someone dies? Do you say "passed away", or "lost" or "passed"? Euphemisms can be a great source of fun, and yet, some of them are inappropriate or even hurtful. For some reason, in our current society, death has replaced sex as the great unmentionable. Some people will go to great lengths to avoid using the word dead or died.

I once heard a grandparent tell her young grand-daughter that grand-dad is having a big nap. I wonder if that child ever agreed to nap again?

The last year of my Dad's life, he started collecting euphemisms for death...the weirder the better. "The great dirt nap" was one of his favourites as well as "shuffling off this mighty coil". There's also "pushing up daisies", "kicked the bucket", "expired", and "passed".

Expired sounds like a parking meter that is out of money, or milk that's gone sour. Passed could be many things, passed an exam, passed a kidney stone, or passed a car on the highway. It's important we be careful with our words. Words matter.

In today's Psalm the Psalmist compares the righteous to the wicked. The Psalmist considers the righteous to be "like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper." (Psalm 1.3, NRSV) The wicked are considered "like chaff that the wind drives away." (Psalm 1.4, NRSV)

The lesson is straightforward, if you follow in the ways of the righteous you will be rewarded, yet if you fall in with the wicked you will suffer.

Language evolves over time. Do you know what "bags o'mystery" are? They are sausages. "An 1850 term for sausages, "because no man but the maker knows what is in them. ... The 'bag' refers to the gut which contained the chopped meat."" (www.meantalfloss.com - 56 delightful Victorian slang-terms you should be using)

In the second reading today, from the letter of James, he writes first about two kinds of wisdom. There is wisdom from on high, which is described as "the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy." (James 3.17, NRSV). This is the type of wisdom on which we should focus. James warns "if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind." (James 3.15-17, NRSV)

In other words, we want to keep our eyes on Jesus and our hearts on God. There is, however, a danger in being so heavenly minded that we are of no earthly good.

Here's a couple of words that carry a tremendous amount of baggage. Religious and spiritual. I conducted an experiment about ten years ago in Ontario, asking a group of church folk what the difference was between religious and spiritual.

I also asked a group of non-church folk what the difference was between religious and spiritual. The answers were surprising.

To the non-church folk, "religious" meant "stuffy, boring, rigid, exclusive, putting on airs and graces. To the church folk, "spiritual" meant, "watered-down, hippie, airy-fairy, ethereal (in a bad way), shallow".

Terms like “connected, collective, gathering, higher-power, and learning together” were how the church folk described “religious” and how the non-church folk described “spiritual”. Words matter.

The way many people in the Elk Valley describe “religious” makes me shudder. I am often told, when folks approach me, that they aren’t “religious”. So I ask them to define what “religious” means. Most often they mean “judgmental, stuffy, rigid, boring and exclusive”. Now y’all have known me for many years. Would you say that any of those words apply to me and how I do ministry? So what I do now, when someone says they’re not religious I tell them I’m not either. When they look at me with that “what did she just say” expression, I ask them to define what “religious” means to them, and then I smile and say that I’m not any of those things.

After we’ve worked together for a while, I will share with them what being “religious” means to me. To me, being religious means being interconnected with God, with the earth, and with each other. It means a deep desire to engage in Relationship with the Divine and with our brothers and sisters. To seek and share love with everyone and everything we encounter.

And as most of you know, those things are exactly like me. I’m all about Relationship and I’m all about love. Words matter.

My greatest wish for everyone, whether they attend Church or not, whether they consider themselves religious, or spiritual or something in between; is that everyone thinks of others before themselves. That we all commit to listening twice as much as we speak. After all, my Nana said that’s why God gave us two ears and one mouth.

There is a federal election tomorrow. For those of you who have not yet voted, please get out and vote. It is your right and a privilege that is denied to many. Yes, your vote counts. Yes, this election was ill-timed. But that does not give you permission to sit this one out.

And regardless of who is elected Prime Minister and who is elected as our MP, we must work together, whether we agree with the results or not.

Division and scarcity is how we separate ourselves from God and from each other. Evil thrives in isolation and fear. The way to combat evil is with love. The way to conquer hate, which is usually fueled by fear, is with love.

Now, that may sound very “airy-fairy” or unrealistic, but I truly believe, deep within myself, that it is the only way to live. Jesus taught us to “turn the other cheek” (Matthew 5.39), but not to be a doormat. Remember, there was a time when Jesus drew attention to himself by arranging a protest march, arriving while riding on a donkey, with his followers waving ditch-weeds. There was a time when Jesus, furious with the state of his Father’s house, turned over a table and drove out the money changers. (Matthew 21.12-17)

Loving doesn’t mean giving yourself away. It means the willingness to do the hard work, in loving the unlovable. In putting in the time to get past the gruff and angry exterior. In responding to those pushing against you with compassion and calmness. It’s not easy. Yet when it’s done well, it’s life-changing. Words matter.

In conclusion, be careful with your words, be gentle with your words and listen not only with your ears, but with your heart.

One final delightful Victorian phrase, “a fly rink”. It means “An 1875 term for a polished bald head.” (www.meantalfloss.com - 56 delightful Victorian slang-terms you should be using) Isn’t that fabulous? I’ll drop the link in today’s email.

Let all God’s children say Amen. Let all God’s children say Amen. Let ALL God’s children say Amen. Amen..

The Reverend Andrea L. Brennan, Incumbent
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19 September 2021 - Creation 2
Psalm 1, James 3.13-4.3, 7-8a