Words That Get In The Way

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In her slim, but powerful volume, When God is Silent, Barbara Brown Taylor, asserts language has taken a "terrible hit" in our time, adding "…words are chosen not for their truthfulness but for their seductiveness. What they mean is beside the point. What they seem to mean is all that counts."

To make her point Taylor offers an example of a real estate development near where she lives called Harbor View which she notes is thirty miles from the nearest body of water. "The problem", she writes, "is the discrepancy between the word and the reality. Because the connection has been lost, the language is no longer trustworthy."

Her observation got me thinking about other situations in which, whether pressured from within or encouraged from without, we're contributing to the diminishment of language's trustworthiness.

Almost immediately I thought of interviews. Indeed, over the years I have been given much advice from people ahead of interviews. And a lot of that advice has in one way or another come down to figuring out and saying whatever the would be interviewers wants to hear. In other words to favor seductive words over more truthful language.

The degree to which I've not followed that advice really came into focus some years ago during a conversation I had with my department head when I shared with him the news that I was leaving chaplaincy for parish ministry. During the conversation we talked about my time at the hospital and he shared that one of the things in favor of my candidacy for the chaplaincy position at the time I applied, and that both he and the other interviewer remarked on during deliberations, was a comment I made shortly after the interview began.

As he recalled to me, "You were responding to one of our questions then stopped mid-sentence, commented that the office smelled of burnt toast, and then

continued on." He said this made an impression on them and gave them the opportunity to witness in real time how I observe, respond to, and process my environment.

Now, I wouldn't take that to mean sharing one's olfactory observations is key to nailing an interview. Rather, it suggests that in communication authenticity and observation can be more valuable than curated, strategic language.

This is especially true in fraught or uncomfortable situations including encounters with loss and grief. Our own or that of others.

The fact of the matter is many of us aren't sure how to respond to loss and grief. And one thing we modern people really dislike is to find ourselves in a state of not knowing. For most of us, such a state is uncomfortable, even unbearable. And so we speak. And often we use words that are more seductive than truthful….

"I know how you feel."

"God has a plan"..or the UU Version…"Everything happens for a reason"

"They're in a better place."

Such words are seductive because they attempt to pull us away from the reality of what is. And while they seem (and often are) a well intentioned effort to communicate care, they also seek to spare us from an unbearable truth… what the poet Lisel Mueller calls, "the indifference of nature." The sense that our human drama is too small to be noticed by the universe…that life goes on even when we don't.

Now, sometimes we respond to grief using demanding or diagnostic language,

"Don't dwell on it."

"You should be over this by now."

But these too seduce the hearer toward a reality that doesn't exist and turns healing into a matter of will.
Given that such words can get in the way rather than provide the comfort and sympathy often intended, one might conclude silence is best.

But silence can take many forms. From saying nothing at all to changing the subject or avoiding an issue or person altogether. These forms of silence are generally not helpful for the same reason platitudes whether dressed in the language of sympathy, demand, or diagnosis, are not helpful. Namely, that they seduce us to purge rather than make room, as Pema Chodron writes, "for all of this"….including grief and all that accompanies it.

Now, when I worked as a chaplain, I would often sit in silence with patients who were unconscious, sometimes with my hand resting gently on their wrist. And I always left a card on their beside when I departed so they, their family, or medical caregivers knew I'd been there and could call me if they wished. In pastoral ministry sitting in silence with someone can be a way of offering presence to another.

Presence may be described as the act of being physically and emotionally available to others.

Elsewhere in When God is Silent Barbara Brown Taylor offers a window into what presence looks and feels like. Recalling the story of a man whose wife had died, she writes,

"He says while he is grateful to everyone who ministered to him, the people he remembers best are the ones who had no words, no answers. He calls them "the silent comforters", and suspects that they were truer mediators of God than visitors who tried to staunch his grief with words."

The risk in our rather unpoetic day and age is that we take the notion of being a "silent comforter" too literally. Silence alone, as already noted, does not equal presence. To have no words, no answers is not the same as having nothing to communicate.

To be a "silent comforter" then is not simply to avoid words that get in the way, but to adopt what Taylor calls, "courteous language." "Courteous language", she

writes, "respects the autonomy of the hearer. It also respects [their] his or her ability to make meaning without too much supervision, which means it is language with some silence in it."

The idea here is less about inserting soundlessness than it is about fostering spaciousness in communication.

In our story for all ages (In My Heart: A Book of Feelings) Jo Witek reminds us our heart is full of feelings. "Big feelings and small feelings. Loud feelings and quiet feelings. Quick feelings and slow feelings. Our heart is like a house, with all these feelings living inside." When we are present to someone we acknowledge the many feelings that live inside the heart and are able to sit with whatever feelings they are feeling or seeking to express in the moment. Spaciousness is fostered by the assurance, "all feelings belong. The happy ones, the hard one, and everything in between."

We're using language with some silence when instead of saying, "I know how you feel." we ask, "How are you feeling?" then wait and stay with the answer rather than trying to debate, deflect, or dismiss it, even when its hard or uncomfortable.

Likewise, we communicate with language with some silence in when we resist making theological pronouncements or speculating answers, fixes, or reasoning, God's or otherwise, in the face of grief and loss and instead invite, listen for, and accept what is meaningful in the moment. Be it conversation, distraction, sitting quietly together, or something else.

Language with some silence in it is language able and willing to hold grief. It is language that is authentic and observant. Language, to paraphrase the poet Lisel Mueller, that grieves with us.

In contrast words that get in the way seek to defend us against grief and loss. Although often well intentioned, to the recipient the discrepancy between the words and their reality can be glaring, and at times, galling.

To be proficient in language with some silence in it, that is, to be present with someone, we need also be aware of how their pain affects us.

Turning to words that get in the way may be habit for some, but for others it may indicate we're feeling depleted or unable to be physically and/or emotionally available to another at the moment. And that's okay. Indeed it is crucial we be honest about what we can offer, and gentle with ourselves when we need to pause and replenish.

As generous and loving people who experience and bear witness to the seasons of life together in community, our connection to and care for one another is deepened when we use language with some silence in it, trusting the silence as much as the speech. Language that does not hurry grief toward an answer, and offers silence that does not abandon anyone to it.

In so doing words become trustworthy again—not because they explain every sorrow, but because they stay close to the person who is carrying it.

May we then learn language with some silence in it: language spacious enough to hold the hard feelings, the quiet feelings, and everything in between; a language of presence that does not diminish or turn away from grief, but grieves with us.

May it be so.
Amen and Blessed Be

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