

## On the (im)possibility of communication

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October 8, 2015

There are times when I despair at the possibility of human communication. In the last few weeks, this despair has often been triggered by opening up my computer each morning and discovering a fresh stream of vitriol and righteous indignation associated with a [piece I recently wrote](#) about Christian discourse around the Syrian refugee crisis that generated a fair amount of heat (and considerably less light, I fear). So many angry people who seem so resourcefully determined to interpret my words in such bewildering ways. The picture of me forlornly sitting, chin in hands with a furrowed brow peering confusedly at my computer screen is probably the enduring image that my family will remember from the past few weeks.

But there are other sources of my pessimism as well. Here in Canada, we're in the middle of an election campaign, which means that every day we are treated to the spectacle of adult human beings shouting above one another, and regularly characterizing their opponents and their views as the very embodiment of all that is stupid, harmful, and evil in the world. The same is undoubtedly true south of the border, if on a different scale (*everything* takes place on a different scale when Donald Trump is [incredibly] involved). Political discourse seems often to be taking on the shape of so much human discourse—it is becoming cruder, more sensationalistic, and more obviously tailored to the imagined needs of a public whose views are increasingly pieced together from scraps and fragments of information assembled from the self-reinforcing social media silos that we create and maintain for ourselves.

But even on the level of interpersonal communication, I have been struck recently by how difficult it is to communicate well, how easily words are misconstrued or misunderstood or misspoken or misdirected. So often, I have found myself scratching my head, thinking, *Well I didn't mean that. Or, How could you possibly interpret this sentence in that way? Or, But I didn't even say that! Or, Did you even read what I wrote? Or, I think you missed the most important point of the sermon! Or, But I texted you and told you where I was going to be!* The gap

between “what I said” and “what someone else heard” often seems like a gaping chasm that is virtually impossible to cross.

On whatever level—in blog posts and e-mails, in coffee shops and church sanctuaries, on social media and in political campaigns—so many of our words seem geared not toward anything resembling mutual understanding or edification, but a noisy and belligerent reinforcing of our rightness. The response to the encountering of views different from our own, whether it’s political discourse or a blog post, seems so often to be to shout louder and to use more insulting language. A few days into the comment maelstrom from the aforementioned blog post, I decided to block one particularly offensive commenter. He has since poured forth over 20 comments into my spam folder, still blissfully pounding out his anti-everyone-in-the-name-of-Jesus views. I don’t think he even realizes that his comments aren’t getting through. This guy has become symbolic, for me, of so much of our cultural discourse. There he is, hammering away on his keyboard in the service of truth, not even noticing that *nothing* he is saying is getting through.

The irony of our cultural moment is, of course, breathtaking. Never have words been so ubiquitous and accessible. But it seems like the words just buzz around our heads, never landing, never connecting, never sticking. They are eminently manipulable, and easily discarded. We like our words like we like everything else in our impatient, fast-food culture: quick, disposable, cheap, and convenient. And, as it turns out, not very healthy.

And yet, despite the bleak picture I have just painted, I was struck in a new way one day as I was riding my motorcycle into town on a glorious, color-drenched fall morning, at the absolute miracle that the bare *possibility* of human communication really is. These things called ideas begin with an electrical storm in this chunk of meat in our skulls, and then move through mouths and tongues to create sounds that then bounce off membranes in people’s ears which then travel the electrical highway in other chunks of meat in other skulls where they are somehow decoded and interpreted as words and sentences that are apparently meant to represent actual things about the real world and what it is like and about what we should or shouldn’t do within it. Or, ideas make their way along the nerve highway to our fingers which (incredibly) press little keys with symbols on them, creating representations of words and sentences on screens or pieces of paper which then find their way through the wonder that is the human eye back to the brain where they are translated into ideas. Somehow, *against all odds*, all these symbols and

sounds and words and sentences keep bouncing off auditory membranes and flashing through optic nerves into all these chunks of meat where something called meaning is made.

Incredible.

The gospel of John begins with the well-known words,

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word *was* God.

These words echo other words from Genesis 1. In the beginning ... God said, let there be ... and there was ... God spoke. And then a world. The *world* is a result of a *Word*. The world *is* because someone spoke. And that someone, apparently, expects human beings to be able to listen, to understand, to respond. Somehow, at the heart of reality itself, there is speech, words, listening, responding. Somehow, communication is at the very heart of God's nature and purposes in the world.

Maybe this makes things seem even more hopeless. We so often can't (or won't) understand what we're saying to *each other*. How on earth could we possibly hope to understand what *God* might be saying?! But evidently God trusts us with words. They are, like all of God's good gifts, meant to be stewarded wisely. Not used as weapons, not used to selfishly prop up the idolatrous self-worship that we are such natural experts at, not wasted on the addictive noisy clutter that distracts and degrades. No, words are far too valuable and laden with potential for any of these smaller ends.

Words, like hands and feet and hearts and minds, are to be subservient to the demands of love. Because if we take the story of scripture seriously, we know that whatever else we might think the Word is trying to say to us, love is at the center of it. Love is what the Word has always been trying to say.

Originally posted at [Rumblings](#)