

“Peaceful Parlance: Taking Violence Out of Our Speech”

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I’m not always the most graceful person. About two months ago, I slipped and fell –really hard –on my rear end. No serious damage, but I had a giant bruise that was pretty uncomfortable for a week or so. During that time, I went to my regular yoga class. Katrina, our teacher, was offering to help us with a pose but promised that she wouldn’t actually touch us if we didn’t want her to.

She knew about my bruise, and I said, “You’d better not touch my butt or I’ll kill you!”

I heard my words echo in the peaceful space of the yoga room. I couldn’t believe I had said them. And to my yoga teacher, of all people! Fortunately for me, Katrina is one of the most accepting, non-judgmental people I know. So she said with mock disapproval, “Kim! That’s not very peaceful language!” We all laughed.

But it did cause me to ponder more deeply something that I had been observing in myself for a while.

More recently, Katrina was talking to us about how, when it comes to yoga poses that require balance, we need to be aware of the point at which we are better off not trying to recover our balance and we need to fall. She said that we need to let go of the pose so we can fall “well” and not hurt ourselves. Falling out of headstand, for example.

I can do headstand but I do it close to the wall so that if I start to go over, my feet just touch the wall. I’d love to be able to do it away from the wall, but I’m afraid of falling and hurting myself. So I asked Katrina, “Would you be willing to demonstrate how you would fall out of headstand?”

She paused for just a moment, and then she did show us, and it was helpful for me to see how she did it. Later, though, she admitted that when I asked her, she thought to herself, “I want to kill Kim!” And again, we both laughed at how we

say these violent things even though we study a discipline that specifically teaches non-violence.

So I keep having these moments of awareness, in myself and sometimes in what I read or hear elsewhere, of the violence in our everyday language. We know that most human societies engage in violence, whether it's one-on-one aggression, one group against another or entire nations at war with one other. So it's only natural that in our language, we use words that come from those acts of violence. They add a little spice, or drama, to what we're saying. They "kick things up a notch," you could say.

I love language, and I'm often curious about the origins of words. So the more I started noticing words that had connections with war or other forms of violence, the more I became aware of just how prevalent they are. And the more I became aware of how much of my own language contained violent words. Ever since then, avoiding violence in my speech has been a constant battle.

Writer Richard Lederer addresses the issue of violent speech in a short piece, which I'll share with you.

I do think my language affects my thinking. I don't know whether or not studies have proven direct links between using violent language and behavior. In this case, I don't need science to convince me that reducing or eliminating violence from my speech is something I want to do. I want to make this change as a person who is committed to living a peaceful life. I made this commitment a long time ago, but I continue to learn new ways to apply it to my life.

I recently began studying the yoga sutras, which are the philosophical underpinnings of the practice of yoga. We know yoga as a physical activity, but there's much more to it, including a set of ethical principles, called "yamas."

The first *yama*, called "ahimsa," addresses violence. Judith Hanson Lasater, a well-known yoga instructor and founder of "Yoga Journal," says, "*ahimsa* is usually translated as 'nonviolence.' This refers not only to physical violence, but also to the violence of words or thoughts. What we think about ourselves or others can be as powerful as any physical attempt to harm. To practice *ahimsa* is to be constantly vigilant, to observe ourselves in interaction with others and to notice our thoughts and intentions."

Yes. Peaceful parlance is about awareness and intentionality. When we can bring what has been unconscious to our consciousness, then we can increase our awareness of it, and once we become aware, we can be more intentional. Living life with intentionality is a way of constantly creating and refining the person we want to be.

I want to be a person who, as much as possible, is not a part of perpetuating the violence that is woven into the fabric of our society. Monitoring my choice of words is one way that I can contribute to that goal. Mahatma Gandhi, a champion of nonviolence in India, said, "As human beings, our greatness lies not so much in being able to remake the world...as in being able to remake ourselves." For Gandhi, the *yama ahimsa*, nonviolence, was his guiding principle and something he believed people needed to develop as much as they could.

I think we'd all agree that a less violent world would be a better place. As with any changes we wish to see in the world, we must start with ourselves. Does this mean all I need to do is work on myself to be able to say I've made the world a better place? No, but that's a crucial part of the work. I also expect myself to be

involved in efforts outside myself in order to promote the values I personally and as a Unitarian Universalist hold up.

But we do need to focus inwardly, and sometimes ask ourselves, “What kind of a person do I want to be?” And as we know, it’s a journey, not a destination. We do this work for ourselves and we do it for the world around us. Because in our better moments we are modeling the attitudes, the character and behavior of a spiritually aware and mature person. And when we fall short, as inevitably we will, hopefully we can laugh about it.

When it comes to violent language, when we use it, we are saying implicitly that we accept it. It’s a little bit like a bystander witnessing violence. If I’m that bystander, I can say I didn’t do anything contribute to the violence, but then again, I didn’t do anything to stop it. The bystander does bear some responsibility.

We are bystanders to the violence in our language. We didn’t create it, but we can do something to stop it. If we change ourselves, we will change the world around us. If we change how we think, often it changes how we feel and what actions we take. Not only because we’re now viewing our environment through a new lens of thoughts and emotions, but also because the change within can lead us to take action in ways we wouldn’t have –or maybe wouldn’t have even considered, while we were stuck in our old thought patterns.

People who commit themselves to ridding their vocabulary of violent terms are tasked with coming up with new metaphors to replace the unacceptable ones. For one example, I’ve long tried to avoid saying that I “killed two birds with one stone.” I haven’t figured out a better metaphor, though.

There’s a community organization in Florida that has worked on this issue, and they’ve created some alternatives to combat-related words and phrases, using metaphors from carpentry, weaving, art and travel. So, instead of saying, “She *shot down* every one of his arguments, we could say, “She *took apart, unraveled, erased, or rerouted* every one of his arguments.”

Maybe I could say, “I built two birdhouses with one hammer?” I’m still working on that one. Finding new ways of expressing ourselves in a society that has violence woven into it is not always easy. It takes some creativity.

I believe that whatever we speak of gains strength in our minds and hearts. If I complain about something unpleasant that happened, I build it up in my mind, and I end up feeling worse about it. If I make a mean comment about a public figure, I think more mean thoughts and I become a little less compassionate. What’s happening in my mind and heart if I talk about “killing” someone? Talking that way is not helping me to become the person I want to be.

Part of our spiritual journey as Unitarian Universalists involves questioning and truth-seeking. We don’t simply accept the so-called “norms” in our society, and the use of violence in our language is a norm that I think we need to question and I think we need to examine its true effects on our own spirits.

As people committed to justice, compassion and peace, may we be committed to reducing the violence in our society. May we be intentional about expressing ourselves in ways that reflect our true values. We do the work for ourselves and we do it for those around us. As Gandhi said, “We must be the change we wish to see in the world.” May it be so.