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Language as Communion

Abstract

"Language is a profound and almost magical gift of God, a gift of mystery and deep human importance."

Posting about the complexity of language from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/language-as-communion/>

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Language as Communion

James Calvin Schaap

April 26, 2022

When it comes to the English language, international students are not all created equal. Some come with significant prowess and use it fluently—others are not so blessed. Those less skilled create essays that make English teachers like me laugh and cry simultaneously—laugh at silly constructions and cry because we know that all the red ink in the world is not going to bless them with the skills of a native communicator.

Sadly, they enroll in literature classes, where nuance is everything, where meaning is implied and allusive, and connotation is almost always richer than denotation, even though, when it comes to meaning, both what's suggested and what's actual come into complex play.

In "Something Else," a poem by Nin Andrews, the title line is related in several different ways because it can be—adoringly, as "sweetie, you're really something else" or frightfully, as in "back then, you bum, you were something else." Imagine trying to understand such usage with nothing but a bookish sense of the English language.

A friend of mine whose mother immigrated to Canada after the Second World War told me how, late in her life, she confessed her one regret in leaving the old country: the virtual loss of humor. Unfortunately, she'd never learned English well enough to catch nuance—and humor is almost always embedded in language, as in "I met a girl in a revolving door, and I've been going around with her ever since."

Years ago, an assiduous Korean student sat up front in my class, as determined to learn as she was bamboozled, day by day, by language her classmates handled so simply. It was perfectly obvious that, too often, she just didn't catch on. Understandable.

Which reminds me of a palm-sized piece of paper that stands proudly down here in my basement, a gift from a Resistance fighter during the German occupation of the Netherlands.

"Streng verboden te lachen," it says. The Nazis never quite understood why the Dutch wouldn't simply join them, Aryans all, so they put up posters begging them to become part of the celebrated Nazi enterprise. The Resistance thought those posters were hilarious, so they surreptitiously slapped these little handbills on the face of those posters, announcing, in Dutch,

"It is strongly forbidden to laugh."



The Germans, lacking irony, lacking language skills, lacking nuance, never caught the joke. Now this Korean student of mine was diligent in ways only a few of my native speakers could match.

So I came up with a plan. I found a poem by Chungmi Kim, a Korean-American poet, titled "Being in Love," and I gave it to her, asked her if she'd be at all interested in sharing it with the class. It's dangerous to make generalizations, but Asian poetry tends to emphasize images rather than word play, and I thought maybe she could talk about this poem herself in a way that her classmates couldn't. It was a long shot, but I wanted to involve her, and too much of what went on in that lit class simply flew over her head.

This poem, I thought, might be easier, with its sweet images. It begins this way:

"Awakened from a dream, I curl up

and turn. The roses on the dresser

smile and your words bloom."

Sweet love poetry, too, I thought. Maybe she'll do it. I like using international students in class, and they normally don't mind, especially if they can talk about home.

"I vaguely hear

the sound of your spoon scooping cereal

the water stream in the shower

the buzzing noise of your electric razor

like a singing of cicada."

One image after another, so typical of Asian poetry. And then the finale:

"Upon waking

on the kitchen counter I find a half

grapefruit carefully cut and sectioned.

Such a loving touch is a milestone

For my newly found happiness."

Love as a dutifully sectioned grapefruit. This is a slam dunk, I thought (an expression, of course, she wouldn't have understood).

A couple of class periods passed before I asked her about talking to the class about “Being in Love.” Class hadn’t begun, and she sat right in front, so the question wasn’t a public thing. “What do you think?” I asked her. “Maybe you could talk about the poem to the whole class? I could help you...”

She turned her eyes away. The very thought of standing up front was too daunting.

“We could talk about it—I mean, the two of us. You know,” I said, “I could help you prepare.”

She shook her head, smiling. No go.

“The gift of words is for communion,” says Eugene Peterson. “You can look at me, measure me, weigh me, test me, but until I start to talk you do not know what is going on inside, who I really am.” Language is a profound and almost magical gift of God, a gift of mystery and deep human importance. It begets communion, community. It is among this world’s greatest riches.

My attempt at inclusion didn’t work as I had hoped, so the lesson plans went forward without her interpretation of “Being in Love.” It was a long shot.

“But did you like the poem?” I asked her that morning, before starting the class.

“Oh, very much,” she told me with a broader smile, her eyes now steadily on mine. “I sent it to my boyfriend.”

And with that, I knew she understood, and I was thankful, once again, for the communion of language.

*This article is part of our ongoing series: **Living with Intentionality**. Our lives are a series of decisions of how best to love others, care for our creation, seek good, prevent harm, and glorify God. We will highlight these articles where fellow believers make intentional choices that can expand our imagination for what the Christian life—and the life of the mind—can accomplish.*