

Words We Are Giving Up©
Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

Shared with the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Bozeman on February 17, 2019

I want to invite you to imagine for a moment what it might be like to give up a using a word for a period of time. Since Valentine's Day was this past Thursday I would suggest that an appropriate and timely word we could use for this thought experiment would be "chocolate." Remember, this is just a thought experiment. If this was anything other than an experiment I would instruct you to head for the streets to begin organizing marches and protest demonstrations. But as I said, this is only an experiment. So I would ask you to consider how long you think you could tolerate giving up the use of the word, "chocolate." Could you handle it for an hour, a day, a week, a month, or possibly a year? Now imagine for a moment what might be lost if you no longer said or even thought of the word "chocolate." (Pause) Okay, before panic sets in, the moment is up. The thought experiment is over. I would like to get a sense now of what that was like for some of you. What single word comes to your mind that might describe your experience? If you have a word you would be willing to share with all of us please raise your hand. (Sharing of people's words)

As I said, this was just a thought experiment. Two researches however, are suggesting that western culture may be giving up, or at least significantly reducing, our usage of a good number of very important words. The two are Pelin and Selin Kesebir. Their research was published in the *Journal of Positive Psychology* earlier in this decade. The title of their article is quite a mouthful; "The Cultural Salience of Moral Character and Virtue Declined in Twentieth Century America." Subsequent to the article's publication there have been multiple news articles written on their findings. Here is what the authors wrote in the abstract for the article. "Overall, our findings suggest that during the 20th century, moral ideals and virtues have largely waned from the public conversation."

I have learned over the years that Unitarian Universalists put a high value on words. We like to discuss topics and we need words, lots of words to do that. So now I want us to consider for real what the consequences might be of giving up words that have to do with moral character or virtue. What might occur if there was a dramatic reduction in the use of words such as conscience, honor, kindness, sincerity, courage, mercy, helpfulness, fidelity, thankfulness, and gentleness. From 1901 to 2000 the use of these words declined by more than 60% in books which had been digitized by Google. According to the research authors, in 2012 "the Google Books corpus contains approximately 5.2 million books or about 4% of all books ever published." That is a lot of books. And a 60% or more decline in the words I just mentioned is both very significant and disturbing. Other important words have seen a lesser, yet still significant, decline in the same time period. Words such as love, justice, generosity, honesty and thoughtfulness all saw their usage decline by 35% or more.

You might say, well maybe this decline of word usage in written language isn't really all that important. I suppose that is possible. But I can't help but wonder what would happen if there was a 60% reduction in the use of the word chocolate in books or other print media. Do you think the companies that produce and sell chocolate would think "well maybe the reduction in word usage isn't all that important?" I don't think so.

They would be doing everything they could think of to reverse that trend. It is quite likely that they would even go so far as to pay writers to add a sentence or two to include the word “chocolate.” Such a practice occurs often in video programs such as movies and television shows.

But words such as kindness, mercy, thankfulness, love and justice aren't products that any company has a direct financial investment in. It could seem then that there isn't any organization to conduct a marketing campaign on behalf of these words. While that is how it would appear given our economic system, I am pleased to say that there are organizations, and large ones at that, which focus on and are invested in words such as these. For centuries religious organizations have taught the importance of moral character and virtue. In this country, Christianity has been the primary religious tradition that has been doing so. The researchers noted the role religion has played in the use of some of the words they studied. They wrote, “It is noteworthy that some of the virtues that evinced the most precipitous declines (e.g., *humility, kindness, gratitude, charity*) are those that religions, and Christianity in particular, traditionally seek to cultivate.” But Christianity certainly isn't the only religious tradition that promotes words such as these. If you delve into other religious traditions you will find many of these words and concepts expounded in them as well. And I should mention here that not all of the words they chose for their study declined in usage. For example, the word compassion saw a 61% increase. The study authors noted that; “The increase in the frequency of *compassion* seems to parallel the increasing popularity of Buddhism in the U.S. Indeed, the appearance frequency of *compassion* was highly correlated with the frequency of *Buddhism* in Google Books...”

Religion then, and more specifically religious organizations, can and do have both an interest in as well as an influence on how often words such as these get spoken and written. But as the number of people who belong to or attend religious organizations has been declining, these words have had fewer and fewer advocates. Bill Leonard, professor emeritus at the School of Divinity at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, commented on this change in a recently published article in *The Christian Science Monitor Weekly*. Here I quote, “Religious language was once a source of spiritual undergirding, a language for your spiritual identity, and a resource of strength for coping and dealing with life and life's unpredictable qualities. But that language may be less viable and less considered now, even by religious folks.” Yet it isn't just religious folks who are concerned about the decline in the usage of these words. Here is what Roy Speckhardt, executive director of the American Humanist Association in Washington, had to say when asked his thoughts regarding the Kesebir's research. “Seeing the numbers go down for words like ‘love’ and ‘gentleness’ and ‘kindness,’ that is equally concerning to humanists as it is to religious folks. Definitely, that is not what we want to be seeing, and it is disturbing.”

Why would the decline in usage of these words be disturbing? Let's go back to our thought experiment involving the word “chocolate” that we engaged in earlier. The word “chocolate,” like all words, is just a symbol. Even though the word it is only a symbol, thinking of giving the word up for a period of time affects us. We are affected because symbols have meaning. We associate symbols with tangible objects, such as chocolate, or specific experiences, such as eating chocolate. If we perceive the objects or experiences associated with a certain word to be positive and beneficial we have a

tendency to want more, not less of the word. And the chocolate industry knows that in turn we want more of what the word represents. The same is true with things that are less tangible but just as important—things such as moral character traits and virtues. For example, there is a reason we celebrate Valentine’s Day. We recognize the importance of love. There needs to be more love, not less. And I would venture to say that, like love, we all want to see and experience more honesty, more kindness, more mercy, and more justice in our community, in our country and in our world.

So what does the decline in usage of these words signify? Here is what Pelin and Selin Kesebir told Jen Dole who wrote a piece about their research for *The Atlantic*. “It would be a stretch from data to say that our findings reflect an actual moral decline in the U.S.—that people are less moral now. But we believe that even if not outright moral decline, a moral confusion would be an unsurprising consequence of this downward trend in the cultural salience of morality concepts.” “A moral confusion.” To me, moral confusion seems to be a fitting description of much of what I see happening in our culture and in the world.

So what are we to do about this situation. We can’t depend on the chocolate companies, or for that matter any product industry, to invest time and money to increase the use of these words. As people who are actively involved in a religious faith organization, the task falls on us. We need to reclaim many of these words and be willing to write or speak them. Most of us aren’t going to be writing a book in the near future but those of you who are, here is your opportunity to influence where our culture is headed. I have made up a list of the words that are in decline. You can pick up a copy of the list from one of the tables in the Social Hall. I encourage you to make space in your book for at least some of these words. And what about the rest of us? I think it is likely many of us, just like a majority of people in this country, have been following the old adage that warns against talking about religion. Research commissioned by the Barna Group and done by Jonathan Merritt found that nearly three-quarters of all Americans rarely speak of spiritual or religious matters. Three-quarters of us follow that old adage and the precipitous decline in word usage I have been taking about appears to be one result. I believe it is time that we challenge the old adage and talk about religion. Or if you aren’t able to talk about religion, at least talk about the concepts that our religious tradition, as well as many others, have been teaching and advocating for centuries. If we don’t talk about these concepts it is unlikely that the word usage trend or the moral confusion we are witnessing will change for the better. We need to be willing to use words that speak to moral character and personal virtues. We need to do more though than just talk. We need to listen. We need to listen intently and patiently in order to learn where we can find common ground with the person or persons we are in conversation with. And as we listen, we need to ask considerate and sincere questions—questions that engage others in thinking about these words and the concepts they represent. As we listen and ask questions we may just find the common ground we share with those we are conversing with. It is on this common ground that a relationship based on respect can develop. Respect by the way, is another of the words that has declined in usage.

I believe that the time for a positive change to occur is now. Like those who are speaking up about issues such as racism and sexism, the time has come for us to engage in conversations about an array of moral character and virtue issues. Pick a

word or two from the list that is on the table and use them in conversations over the coming days or weeks. And after a week or a month, select another word or two and do the same. It will take courage, another word that had a 60% decline, to take the steps that are needed. My hope is that, in time, we will find the courage and we will develop the wisdom needed to take on the challenge that is before us.

So may it be.