

Words

I love words. I particularly love the written / typed word. I love how words sometimes effortlessly come together to express a thought, expand an idea, relate an observation, convey an instruction. I am equally in awe of how at other times words can fail us completely — when the experience we are trying to capture or the scene we are trying to describe ventures so far beyond words that any attempt to use them to represent the experience renders us verbally impotent. As the great fourteenth century Persian poet, Hafiz (Shamseddin Muhammad) wrote in *I Wish I Could Speak like Music*:



I wish I could speak like music.
I wish I could put the swaying splendor of the fields into words
So that you could hold truth against your body and dance.
I am trying the best I can with this crude brush, the tongue.

But even with limitations, the mere word has so much potential! Depending upon their context, words can be frivolous and transitory visitors to a conversation or permanently and indelibly imprinted in the deepest recesses of our brains. Words can be infused with light or encumbered by overpowering darkness. Words can precipitate unimagined joy or unbearable pain. Just one word can trigger a cascade of electrochemical reactions throughout the human body ... they can ready our muscles for action or render us incapacitated and unable to move. Just one word can send our minds down a myriad of associated neural pathways, transporting us in time, place and space to the furthest realms of the universe, of our beings. Equally potent in the opposite direction, words can paralyse us inside circuitous, well-trodden mental highways, closed circuits of psychological imprisonment that lead us further into darkness.

There are so many words from which to choose! In the English language alone, there are at least a quarter of a million distinct English words. If we include all the versions of words – determined by tense, sense, number, gender etc. — the Oxford English Dictionary reports a total of 750,000 English words. A multitude of choices when it comes to which words we use and in what combination, and which ones ultimately make it onto paper or a computer screen.

Neuroscientists tell us that the average English speaker has a working vocabulary of 60-100,000 words, depending upon our education. In contrast, our canine companions know up to 250 words (depending on their education!). Although one of my rebellious Irish Setters vehemently denies his vocabulary is that extensive, choosing to respond only to the words that fit with his plan for any given moment.

Whether human or canine, and regardless of the extent of our vocabularies, so much of what a word means when it is perceived or uttered, depends on the context — both the interior and exterior landscapes of the person speaking (or writing) and the person listening (or reading). Word meanings continually change. In the English language particularly, words sometimes have multiple meanings, they change depending upon who uses the word, with what tone, timing, placement and intent. In this age of emails, Facebook, Myspace, Twitter, etc ... the meaning and intent of words can be grossly distorted with unintended impacts far beyond the initial utterance.

Words can inflict pain. Just one word – like cancer, schizophrenia, divorce – can be so heavily laden with meaning and so weighted by misinformation, misunderstanding, and misinterpretation. Just the word itself can change a life, a relationship, a future or a past. Words can be used as weapons. Research on bullying reveals the deadly impacts words can have when deliberately, relentlessly and maliciously used to harm. When deployed as all encompassing labels, some words can lock us into an identity that negates the many other aspects of who we are.

Words can heal and bring great joy. An exquisitely timed compliment, a sincere praise of a job well done, soothing utterance of empathy, strident expression of support, a genuine offer of apology — can equally transform a relationship, a life, a future or a past. In some circumstances, the words don't even have to be in context to foster healing and sustenance. Research in social psychology reveals compelling evidence about the beneficial impacts that simple daily journaling can have on our immune systems, on our general and mental health, on our capacity to cope with traumatic events. In these instances, “brain dumping” – a stream of consciousness delivery of words onto the page or computer screen — for just 20 minutes a day for three consecutive days – unleashes the power of the written word to positively influence the human body, mind and spirit.

The exploding field of neuroscience is only at an embryonic stage in understanding the neural machinery in the brain that allows us to encode words and string them together into meaningful sentences and coherent thoughts, let alone how the verbal expression of emotion mobilizes the very neurochemicals that can soothe our psychic wounds. Neuroscience research reveals that while words are predominantly represented in the left hemisphere, right hemisphere abilities, such as visuo-spatial processing, emotional processing and emotional tone, affect how words are expressed and received. A wide range of words can elicit a response in any given neuron and consequently trigger the activation of a cascading number of neural

networks, resulting in all sorts of reactions in the body. All of these word-related brain activities are dependent upon both the inner landscape of the mind as well as the outer landscape of the external environment at the time the word is uttered. It is both these inner and outer landscapes which imbue any given word or group of words with meaning. And our brains organize language in ways that reflect this more complicated, nuanced and emotional ways we humans think.

Rather than store words as in a dictionary or a google search, we encode and store categories of meaning. And it is all of these meanings, with thousands of potential associations, down thousands of potential neural pathways, which can be evoked with the utterance of one word.

So any given word is the conveyor of thousands of possibilities. Fundamentally however, any given word is ultimately just a vehicle – a vehicle that can convey pain or joy, horror or humor, distress or comfort; a vehicle that can relay information or misinformation; bestow meaning or confusion; a vehicle that can advance ideas or stunt them. While I acknowledge the capacity for words to display their dark side, I am drawn to their light side: the potential for facilitating joy, humor, comfort, information, meaning and the advancement of ideas. So for the words and ideas waiting to tumble onto the screen of future blogs ... I am excited by the opportunity for my mind to meander down the neural pathways of both my right and left brain, to play with ideas, to see how they evolve as the 60 -100,000 words in my mind compete with each other and string themselves together to form a sentence, evolve into a paragraph, a chapter, a book ... or hang there in cyber space to just be...