

First Unitarian Church

October 15, 2023

Adapted from a sermon originally preached on October 13, 2013

You begin by lighting a candle. A flame is a small gathering together of the powers of the universe, the transformation of potential into actualized energy.

You breathe deeply, drawing into yourself the winds from the four directions. From the north, the east, the south, and the west.

And you say some very old words: *Lux sit!* *

[*The automatic blinds raise*].

Well, anyway, that's one way to do it.

Words are powerful. Maybe they can't raise the dead, or even the blinds really. But they are powerful.

Some words are so powerful that we categorize them as dangerous or bad words, like the mother of all swear words, the one that is the reason we call swear words "four letter words" even if they are longer...do you know what it is?... Don't say it! It's the F-word.

It has a lot of effing power, doesn't it? Anybody here have firsthand experience of the effing power of that word?

You know, if someone has used it within your earshot and you were offended by it, then that's also experiencing the word's power.

You'll never hear me say it.

Not in the pulpit.

But when I bend down to get something on the kitchen floor, and I stand up and whack my head on the edge of the counter, it comes in handy.

You know the show Mythbusters? That science show on the Discovery Channel that does experiments to test common myths or ideas, to see if they can disprove them.

Several years ago, they decided to test the idea that swear words can help you withstand pain.¹ Does it really feel better to drop the f-bomb when you whack your head? What if you yell "Fudge!" like my mom sometimes tried to do when I was a kid. Does it do the same thing?

* Latin for "Let there be light!"

Have any of you tried that? Did it work?

To test it, they used the cold pressor test, in which participants plunge their arms into ice water and hold them there until they can't stand the freezing pain any longer. For the first round, the MythBusters' five guinea pigs took ice-water arm baths while reading off a list of ordinary, non-offensive words. Then, they repeated the process while swearing up a storm.

The results showed that spewing expletives increased the participants' stamina to withstand pain by an average of thirty percent.

Now, it can also have unhelpful consequences.

I read an essay by someone who had hiked to the top of a tall mountain, only to find the F-word carved into the rock. She'd seen that four-letter word on telephone poles and in bathrooms and subways and scrawled across buildings and now here it was on the mountain. She said it made her feel like the F-word must be carved or written or spoken in every corner of the planet, and it felt like negative energy.

It felt like the person who did that was not just randomly swearing but was *cursing*. Another word for swearing is cursing, and it felt like that person was *cursing* the people who climbed the mountain after them.

Not just swearing but cursing. And another word for cursing someone, for putting a curse on them, is putting a *spell* on them. Making them experience something according to your will. In that case, a feeling of disillusionment.

But is cursing someone a real thing? I mean is it a big deal? To what extent can we cast a spell, really influence someone else's reality or our own, with our words?

George Lakoff, a linguist and cognitive scientist at UC Berkeley, tells of a little trick he plays on his students on the first day of class. Once they've arrived and settled down, and gotten through their initial greetings, he tells them, "Do not think of an elephant." The moment he says that, what happens? Every single one of them pictures an elephant.

It's the class's first lesson in the power of linguistic (or word) frames. You see, words are always tied to concepts. You cannot utter a word without simultaneously invoking its concept. And words—or concepts— that are woven together form linguistic frames.

"Frames are mental structures that shape the way we see the world," Lakoff says. "They shape the goals we seek, the plans we make, the way we act, and what counts as a good or bad outcome of our actions."

You can see examples of linguistic frames in the way politicians choose their words to describe what they are doing. For example, when we speak of a war on drugs or getting tough on crime, those frames shape the way we approach the issues and how we assess

the outcomes. Those frames lead to heavy policing and long or multiple prison sentences and other punitive consequences. Under the frames of war and getting tough, high incarceration rates look like “success.”

If we had a different frame, we’d assess it differently. Imagine if instead of waging a war on drugs, we’d launched a campaign to heal addiction. Or if instead of being tough on crime, we set out to reduce recidivism. Recidivism is when people go back to prison multiple times. More than 40% of people who are released from American prisons end up being incarcerated again, but because reincarcerating them counts as getting tough on them, it is accepted.ⁱⁱ We would measure our success differently if we had a different frame.

Changing our linguistic frames changes everything.

And Lakoff points out, “because language activates frames, new language is required for new frames. Thinking differently requires speaking differently.”

Now, a negative frame can be just as powerful as a positive one, like when Lakoff tells his students not to think of an elephant.

If words shape thoughts and thoughts shape action and perception, then to a certain extent, words have the power to change us and our reality. This makes sense, right? It’s something that is easily observable. Words have the power to change us and our reality.

That’s what the ancient idea of casting spells is about. And it is ancient.

Years ago, I visited the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, where I had the chance to walk inside the nearly 5,000-year-old Mastaba Tomb of Perneb.ⁱⁱⁱ It’s a house like structure that was purchased from the Egyptian government and has been at the Met for over 100 years. Etched into one of the walls were hieroglyphs, with words written in Coptic that said, “Reciting funeral spells...”

The recognition that words are powerful is old wisdom, passed down to us for thousands of years. And it is this kind of power that lies at the heart of real magic.

Now, my little joke with the blinds was a play on what modern day witches would call “street magic.” Street magic is the kind you see at children’s parties and in Las Vegas. It depends on illusion—on what you *don’t* see. It’s meant to delight us. And, I’m a fan, but if you ask a modern pagan, a modern day witch, they will tell you that *real* magic is something else.

While “street magic” is the art of surprising, entertaining, and delighting, real magic is the art of getting results. And not supernatural results, like objects mysteriously moving, but real-world results—the kind that were always possible, even if you could not perceive them.

The kind words can help bring about.

Margot Adler was a reporter on NPR, you may remember her from that. But you may not know she was also a UU pagan and an early supporter of CUUPS. She wrote a book about modern day paganism in the United States called "Drawing Down the Moon." During her research for the book, she visited a farm run by pagans where she saw a good example of magic and of how seemingly ordinary or subtle an effective spell can be.

Each year, she says, the creek that passes through the farm's property would gradually dry up, becoming bone dry by September, and all the fish in it would die. This was the natural cycle of the creek. The day she visited, the water was dwindling, and the farmers decided to try to gather up the fish that were still there, and add them to the compost that would then nourish the farm. They would expedite the inevitable, to the farm's advantage.

So, Adler and others went down to the river with their buckets and tried to scoop up the slippery, still swimming things. But it was hard—the fish kept getting away. They soon wore themselves out, having caught only a few. They went back up to the house to let the head farmer know.

After listening, he asked them to come back down to the water with him. In the truck along the way, Adler says, the farmer muttered something about magic—the only time she heard that phrase during her visit. Then he started describing the way bears get fish, and as they approached the bank again, he asked the people in the truck to visualize themselves as hungry bears.

"In that mood," Adler writes, they waded in once more, waist high in the water and began slapping their hands together upon the fish, like bears, and tossing them over their heads up onto the beach. Soon they had their truckload.

His words changed their way of seeing the situation, which changed their behavior, which changed their results.

Starhawk says that "A spell is a story we tell ourselves that shapes our emotional and psychic world."^{iv}

But what kinds of words make the best stories, or *spells*?

The specific words we choose are important. Not just any old words will do.

The poet Elizabeth Alexander talks about "words that shimmer."^v Those are words that somehow have power within themselves. They get your attention; they stick in your mind. War and evil are like that. But so are restore and reconcile, unite and repair. There are silly shimmery words, too. Alexander gives the examples of bamboozled and hoodwinked, the kind of words that when children hear them, they want to hear them again.

So, some words have power within them.

On the other hand, another kind of power comes from within the speaker. In the interfaith journal, Parabola, William Segal describes this. He says,

We all know that the same idea in the same words expressed by different people can have quite a different impact. ...It seems that the most important influence behind language is invisible, an invisible energy...a word or a sentence, when spoken with attention, is charged with a special energy.

This has to do with the speaker's attention. "Where I put my attention," he says, "there follows a flow of force—and where there's an inner presence accompanying what is expressed, power is added to whatever is spoken."^{vi}

So, energy comes from the words and it comes from the speaker.

It must have been the combination of those things that caught the ear of another poet, Marie Howe, when her daughter came home from middle school one day with a new rhyme. The rhyme went like this:

Don't make me snap my fingers in a z-formation

Exclamation

Talk to the hand

Flip to the wrist

Ooh, girl, you just got dissed.^{vii}

Howe recognized it immediately. She said, "It's a counter spell! It's a counter spell against a mean girl!"

Something to flip the negative energy back to its source.

Have any of you ever been under the spell of a mean person? Maybe when you were a kid, other kids said you were weird or not cool and you believed them. Maybe it's only now, twenty or forty or sixty years later that it is finally dawning on you that being weird is cool, and you aren't interested in impressing mean people.

Maybe there was an adult who called you clumsy, and you still feel like you're tripping over yourself all the time.

Or they called you ugly, and your inner beauty shrank away in self-defense. It isn't too late to shine.

Or they called you slow, and you let your own potential start to leave you behind. It isn't too late to catch up.

Or they told you that you are helpless, and you've been giving up ever since.

Then you need a counter spell.

Or maybe you just need a regular spell. Maybe you are operating under your own frame, or one that you willingly accepted, and it's no longer good for you.

Could any of you use a good spell?

Ok. Here's how to cast a simple little spell for yourself. One way, out of many.

You can light a candle if you want, but you don't have to. All that you need lies within you.

You should take a cleansing breath, and breathe mindfully, because you're focusing your attention.

Visualize what you want to happen. The truth that is waiting to be made real. Make it meaningful. Remember, this isn't about the supernatural. It's about what was always possible but may have been hidden from your view: Not perfection, but joy. Not a pile of riches, but a sense of abundance. Not a new life, but new skill in revealing the potential that your life already contains.

And put it into words that you can whisper to yourself, or tape to your mirror, or carry in your pocket. Put it into an affirmation. Remember the power of a negative frame.

Instead of "I am not weird," try "I am authentic." If you have been feeling trapped, replace that with "I am finding my way."

"All that I need lies within me," is good one. What would you start to notice in yourself if you carried that around in your pocket? "My path leads to my full potential," is another. That's good for when obstacles seem to be derailing a life plan.

And then see what happens.

ⁱ Next time someone scolds you for cursing, you can direct them to the study here:

<http://dsc.discovery.com/tv-shows/mythbusters/mythbusters-database/cursing-and-pain.htm>

ⁱⁱ According to a Pew study:

http://townhall.com/news/us/2011/04/13/pew_study_prison_recidivism_rates_remain_high

ⁱⁱⁱ You can check out the Tomb of Perneb on the Met's site:

<http://www.metmuseum.org/collections/search-the-collections/543937?img=0>

^{iv} From her website: <http://www.starhawk.org/activism/activism-writings/whyactnow.html>

^v A great interview: <http://www.onbeing.org/program/words-shimmer/246>

^{vi} Segal, William. "In Light of Meaning: An interview with William Segal." *Parabola*. 20:3 (7)

^{vii} Interview with Howe: <http://www.onbeing.org/program/the-poetry-of-ordinary-time-with-marie-howe/5301>