

I wish I could speak like music

In a packed tube train in London around a month ago

Silence – packed – everyone seemed engrossed in their newspapers or iPods

I noticed a man reading a children's story to a girl sitting on his knee – possibly his daughter –

- something about the calming balm of his voice

– something about the words that seemed to flutter down the carriage and spread light – something about the gentle tone of his voice – despite all this rush and stress a human voice simply reading a story

- most of the people in the carriage seemed to be listening

– one of our ancient pastimes – I felt moved – perhaps I was being returned to what truly mattered in that moment or any moment – that we have the choice to reach out to each other with our voices and our words - I felt this man was offering the carriage a great skill and a great gift – and it was all free – his only qualification in that moment was being fully human

An example of simple words having the power to inspire and heal

And at the other end of the spectrum – from one stranger in a packed tube train to words addressed to 300 million Americans ...

Barack Obama appeared to deliver another of his nation unifying speeches recently after the shootings in Tucson, Arizona – he managed to use words to try and build some kind of hope for the future rather and challenge his listeners not to lazily fall into a blame game or a scoring points game

He said

‘what we can't do is use this tragedy as one more occasion to turn on one another. As we discuss these issues, let each of us do so with a good dose of humility. Rather than pointing fingers or assigning blame, let us use this occasion to expand our moral imaginations, to listen to each other more carefully, to sharpen our instincts for empathy, and remind ourselves of all the ways our hopes and dreams are bound together.’

An example of words used sensitively to urge a nation to work together and find a way forward rather than slip into more suspicions and divisions between democrat and republican

Words can uplift and heal us
And words can really matter to us

I was saying goodbye to a friend the other day – I said ‘see you around’
She said please don’t say that – where is around? – it’s so metropolitan –
it offers no commitment – I found myself a little surprised by my own
frustration – I said ok ‘Au revoir or see you soon I hope’

For some reason she just didn’t like that phrase and it made me think of
the way I use words and phrases

I wonder if you have any words or phrases you really don’t like?

And how about words you like to use?

So words are very personal to us – they can be like friends or foes – I
sometimes wonder whether we sometimes allow something as important
and vital to us as faith and our search for the meaning of life to be
hijacked by words?

I wonder if you witnessed an event billed ‘the great faith debate’

Back in November last year in Toronto, Canada
Tony Blair one of the most famous Catholics in the world and
Christopher Hitchens, the outspoken atheist journalist debated on the
subject

‘religion is a force for good in the world’ –

Around 60 protesters angrily demonstrated outside questioning whether
Blair had the right to come and talk about God in view of his legacy in
Iraq

But the debate went ahead...

Christopher Hitchens – compared God to an oppressive regime
‘supervising us is a sort of celestial dictatorship, a kind of divine North
Korea....Salvation is offered at the low price of the surrender of your
critical faculties’

‘religion forces nice people to do unkind things...and do stupid things’

Tony Blair

Listed all the great things that have been achieved in the name of religion

According to statistics gathered by asking the audience to click on buttons after the debate Hitchens 'won' the argument

To me the event seemed to be yet another wrestling match of words to prove or disprove whether we need religion or if God exists

We have the high profile atheists trying to expose religion as pure folly
Richard Dawkins book 'The God Delusion' quotes the American comedian Cathy Ladman 'All religions are the same: religion is basically guilt, with different holidays' - a book I have read

And a book I haven't read – 'God is not Great' by Christopher Hitchens

And those writers who stick up for religion.....

'The Dawkins Delusion' by Alister McGrath

'The Case for God' by Karen Armstrong

Wars of words picking over the carcass of religions and God with literary artillery from both sides in the form of best selling books

Is this the way its going? An increasingly polarising debate which possibly takes us further away from the place where this entity, phenomenon or dimension some of us call God and some use other names or words may indeed live

Perhaps this endless ping pong game proving or disproving God or arguing that religion is a good or bad force completely misses the point

Perhaps we risk throwing out the baby of curiosity with the bathwater of scepticism

Maybe our words for exploring the unknown are getting in the way – do words like God, salvation, sin, soul, redemption, righteousness help or hinder us in our quest for truth and integrity

Maybe many religious words can begin their life as poetry and metaphor
....then over time these words can become more concrete and

unquestionable and used to gain power over people rather than empower them – do countless religious words need to be abandoned or redefined?

And the blasphemy controversy in Pakistan at the moment – should we be protecting religious words and banning words that speak against religion? Isn't this an example of religious words becoming more important than people's freedom of speech – what should we be protecting – religions or real people? And in the west we can't claim we put human rights before religious doctrines – only a few years ago a Birmingham theatre company cancelled a play exploring blasphemy

Maybe we're losing touch with what the mystics have been teaching us for centuries — we can get caught up in a fog of words that can entrench us further into our views and assumptions – this war of words can possibly stop us hearing the real heart beat of life

RS Thomas, the Welsh poet, says that an honest search for God is about embracing the abyss and the vacuum of not-knowing, and abandoning our equations and words and calculations

Walt Whitman in his mighty poem 'Song of Myself' describes the experience of finding fragments of the holy and the sacred in our lives and finding signs that point to realities beyond the mere biological understanding of this life

He writes

'I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord.
A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropt,
Bearing the owner's name someway in the corners, that we may
See and remark, and say whose?'

Mary Oliver, the American nature poet follows on from this rich tradition of celebrating mystery – she talks about playing at the edges of knowing and that maybe rather than worrying about proving or disproving things – our real challenges are to look, to touch and to love

And art critic of the Independent newspaper Tom Lubbock found out in 2008 that he had a lethal brain tumour – he decided to keep a journal of his experiences as he slowly lost his faculty to create words – his specialist craft – as he literally slowly lost his mind – until his death in January this year – in his very honest often poetic writings he explored the dark, mysterious place deep in himself, the place beneath words,

beyond mere language and was faced with the question of where exactly our words come from –
Are they manufactured by millions of nerve endings in the little grey cells or from a source that we will never fully understand – a soul, part of us that connects with what Carl Jung called the collective unconscious he wrote very movingly about his curiosity about language and where and how it is created in ourselves

he wrote....

‘The mystery of summoning up words. Where are they in the mind, in the brain? They appear to be an agency from nowhere. They exist somewhere in our ground or in our air. They come from unknown darkness. From a place we don’t usually think about.....The mystery of the generation of speech.’

Perhaps this is partly what the author of the Gospel according to John in the Bible was describing when he wrote

‘when all things began, the word already was. The word dwelt with God and what God was the word was’

– or in other words is it our will to express ourselves that lies at the heart of our soul or existence?

Is our urge to communicate somehow at the centre of this big project we have – to be alive?

I have been thinking a great deal about language recently – I have two young nephews aged 5 years old – sons of two different brothers of mine– Josef is very chatty and articulate and bilingual in English and German – he knows most of the names of the internal organs of the human body in both languages – like the larynx and the liver etc - while Peter cannot speak any words at all –he possibly has a condition called sensory integration disorder - he is so smiley and tactile and when he looks at me his eyes melt into me with complete trust and warmth – he communicates so much without words

He dares me, jogs me into exploring this life without words, without my obsessive use of words – who would I be without my words?

So today I challenge you to think about the words you use and to notice how words are used, for better or worse, in our exploration into the meaning of this life, in our quest to describe our beliefs and to make sense of the realities in our world that lie behind and beyond the realities we can see or prove

And maybe Hafiz had the right idea when he said ‘I wish I could speak like music – I wish I could put the swaying splendour of the fields into words so that you can hold truth against your body and dance – I am trying the best I can with the crude brush, the tongue’

Thanks for listening...