

When words don't work



by [Nancy Sylvester](#)

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- [Contemplate This](#)
- [Spirituality](#)

Have you ever said, “That word doesn’t work anymore,” when you were trying to explain something? You had to fish around for a word, a phrase that might capture what you wanted to say because you realized that the old way of talking about things didn’t quite match your experience. Such a moment brings home to me the power of words, of language.

Words are powerful vehicles not only for communication between and among each other but as constructs conveying a worldview or a belief system. Words shape our thinking and our imagination. Prayers shape our religious imagination. When we refer to God as “He” or “Father” and talk of heaven as being “up there,” those words reflect and shape our thinking, making God a male human person and heaven a place existing in the sky. Each reflects a theology and a cosmology that has come to us over the generations.

Many prayers we learned growing up existed over the centuries. They are a source of comfort. They are known by most of us. Some we speak almost without thinking because they have become such daily offerings – they simply flow out of us. We just take the words for granted.

There are transition times, however, when the words one uses become very important. I believe we live in one of these times. I think about our language regarding race. In the ‘60s many of us who are white and living in the U.S. began to see for the first time that being white privileged us in ways that we weren’t even aware of. I remember watching a film in the early ‘70s, narrated by Bill Cosby, which showed how the images in films and the language we used for those other than the white majority were pejorative and demeaning; they often equated anyone of color with evil or badness, laziness or distrust. The words we used shaped how we saw, experienced and felt about those who were not like us. Once we realized that, we began to change how we spoke of those who were not in the majority.

Certainly the language that shapes our beliefs about the afterlife reflects a cosmology of an earlier time. The richness and beauty of what we are learning about an evolving Universe is sorely missing from our religious imagination.

You may be wondering, "What does this have to do with contemplation?"

I know I needed to find a way to pray, to experience God that did not force me to do mental gymnastics with every word I heard or read. I needed to experience God in another way. Contemplative practice was where I was drawn.

In the Gospel of John we hear that Jesus and his Abba God will come and dwell with us . . . that Jesus is in God and we are in Jesus and Jesus is in us. The mystics of every faith tradition experienced this reality, and contemplation opens you to that gift.

Meister Eckhart, a theologian and mystic of the Middle Ages, wrote, “And so I ask God to rid me of God.” It invites us to quiet our minds.

There is no need to try to understand the words of a prayer or of scripture. No need to ponder, “What does that mean for me today with what I’m learning about x, y or z?” “How does it all fit?”

It invites us to empty ourselves of the blast of thoughts that bombard us as soon as we are silent. They take many forms, but often they are the shoulds, coulds, woulds, and what-ifs of our lives. Contemplation invites us to be present to this moment and to drop deeply into the soul space so as to experience the Divine presence, opening us to “take a long loving look at the real,” as the English mystics described contemplation.

The journey into that deep place is gift freely given and is cultivated through practice. In the next reflection I’ll focus on the practice and offer some ideas as to how to begin and how to deepen one’s contemplative practice.

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