



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen, Parish Minister  
The Reverend Don Randall, Community Minister

---

## “A Finger Pointing at the Moon and the Language of Paradox”

© by Lee Reed

A sermon delivered on July 5, 2015

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

### Centering Thoughts

*How is the self-conscious mind possible? I think that the answer is  
that it is only possible via language. Karl Popper*

*Language is, of all our mental capacities, the deepest below the threshold of our awareness, the least accessible to the rationalizing mind. We can hardly recall a time when we were without it, still less how we came by. When we could first frame thought, it was there. It is like a sheet of transparent glass through which every conceivable object in the world seems clearly visible to us. We find it hard to believe that if this sheet were removed; those objects and the world would no longer exist in the way we have come to know them. Derek Bickerton, LANGUAGE AND SPECIES*

*This feeling of isolation from the rest of nature is itself a byproduct of [language based] displacement – a function of our Western confusion between the surrogate world of the mind and the phenomenal world in which we live. . . . Without displacement there can be no self-consciousness. Our ancestral memory of usurping nature’s authority is embodied in that mythological constant called original sin. Eugene Linden, APES, MEN, AND LANGUAGE*

*The truth is that you are always united with God. But you must know this.  
Nothing further is there to know. Svetasvatara Upanishad*

*If this [meditative] practice is maintained, eventually you realize the inseparability of yourself  
and God, and God is with you always with no need for practice. Meister Eckert*

*The eminent men of each church . . . think and say the same thing. Ralph Waldo Emerson*

### Sermon

When my eldest son Adam was about 4 years old, I asked him, “What is the difference between humans and other animals?” His first answer was that animals go to the bathroom outside, which I thought was a pretty good response but not entirely accurate, considering his behavior off the deck and our dog’s inability to control herself in the house during her first year, both of which I reminded him. He then responded, “Humans talk and other animals don’t.” What a thoughtful answer from someone so young. And there are plenty of others who agree with Adam.

As paleoanthropologist Richard Leakey says, “When we contemplate our origins, we quickly come to focus on language. It is language that makes us feel human.” What are the effects of this amazing system of language? It certainly facilitates communication, but language is much, much more than simply a communication system. Other animals have communication systems, but human language is qualitatively different.

I recently finished a book by the linguist Derek Bickerton, *Adam’s Tongue*, concerning his ideas about how language evolved. He writes, as others have, that the primary characteristic of language making it different from an ACS, an “animal communication system”, is that it facilitates displacement. It enables us to communicate about things at a distance, things on the other side of the world. Likewise, displacement enables us to conceive of and talk about events that are not present in time: what happened yesterday and what might happen tomorrow. We can also communicate about imaginary things that are not present at all, of unicorns and flying saucers and of gods and goddesses. This characteristic of displacement is central to the special nature of human language, and although several apes, a parrot, and maybe some dolphins have been taught to use words of language in a rudimentary way, none has become proficient in using the special characteristic of language— displacement—to communicate about things that happened yesterday or will happen tomorrow or things that are imaginary. Although ants and honeybees communicate with a very limited version of displacement, this inability by other animals to communicate using the full range of displacement is something emphasized by Derek Bickerton.

A couple of further points: displacement has a very powerful effect on our minds and is so powerful in its effect that language becomes not only a system of communication but of mental perception and of consciousness itself. This is crucial to what I have to say. Language forms a model of the world in our heads, and we perceive the world and become conscious of it, through this language-based model. Our brains are structured through evolution to perceive this way, but an unfortunate circumstance is that perception through language has a very peculiar characteristic to it. The universe and thus the world—this present moment— happens all at once, but through our language-based model, we do not experience it that way. With language consciousness, we perceive the world in parts, divide it, and speak of each part as though we are separate from it, whereas actually—scientists tell us— our environment; the world, the universe, and we are whole cloth. This characteristic of language imposes its dynamic on our minds, a bead stringing view of reality, one thing after another. We describe the world in parts, and in doing so always separate ourselves from everything else that is. Intellectually, we may know that things—including ourselves—are interconnected in a wholeness or unity, but perceptually and emotionally, the displacement characteristic of language makes us feel separate from our home in the universe.

Furthermore, we talk to ourselves, constantly, incessantly. In so doing we displace ourselves not only from the rest of the world, but from our deepest being. We identify ourselves with our words and separate ourselves from our inmost nature. This is what our attachment to and dependence on language does in such a very profound psychological way. We come to know the world through a process of division and separation, a subject acting on or being acted on by a predicate. Me in here and It out there. I and Other. What we call “human consciousness” that forms the “self” is thus mostly the representations of the little language voice in our heads. As Thomas Merton observes, “We can never believe ourselves fully at home in the world that is ours, since we are condemned to dwell in it as spectators, to create for ourselves the distance that establishes us as subjects fully conscious of our subjectivity.” And he adds further, “What can we gain by sailing to the moon if we are not able to cross the abyss that separates us from ourselves?”

We experience the world constantly through the language model, which psychiatrist R.D. Laing

described as “50 feet of mental concrete.” In this consciousness, we feel separate from each other and from our environment. Rather than just attending to what is going on, we are forever talking to ourselves about tomorrow and yesterday. Yet reality can never be the words we use to talk to ourselves about it. A tree is never the word “tree.” The map is never the territory it represents. In our evolution with the powerful manipulative and organizational advantages language gives to us as weak, slow, naked apes, we have become ever more reliant on and addicted to language and the abstract consciousness it gives us. Truly, language is a two-edged sword. On the one hand it gives us a very powerful tool for manipulating our surroundings. We are evolved in fact to use this tool, which is held not in the hand but in the brain. But language makes it also difficult for us to perceive our wholeness in our environment.

I am not being religious or spiritual here. I consider my remarks to be analytical and very much in the tradition of science, trying to describe as accurately as possible what the universe and ourselves in it are really like. No mumbo-jumbo unicorns, flying saucers, and gods and goddesses for me.

But you are beginning to see a general direction I hope. Language provides the very basis by which we engage reality (the Universe), yet it causes us to feel that we are displaced from, separate from that reality. Is there a solution to what amounts to an incredibly profound, existential double bind? The answer is yes. Throughout recorded history there have been very practical people, whom I call “reality therapists,” who have pointed toward a possibility of wholeness or unity in our consciousness and experience that puts our language-based models of the world in their proper place.

Again, my fellow UUs. I am not now nor have ever been a traditionally religious person. My mother tried unremittingly to inculcate Methodism in me, but it never took. I figured that many of the Bible stories I was read by my mother contained descriptions that were even more fantastic than the tooth fairy or Santa Claus, which I knew early on were not true. No, I’ve never been a very religious person.

One day, however, in law school at the University of Chicago, as I was pondering the Genesis creation story to avoid thinking about bankruptcy and corporate restructuring, I suddenly had a realization, which has matured over time, about why Adam and Eve were said to have been expelled from Paradise. Most interpretations of the Bible suggest that God kicked them out of Paradise for disobeying him in eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The Judeo-Christian tradition focuses on Adam and Eve’s disobedience to God in doing this, but I kept wondering what it meant that the fruit was the “knowledge of good and evil” fruit. What was the point? Then it came to me: good is so very separate from evil, making the knowledge of good and evil is so very abstract. Dichotomous abstractions are formulated and manipulated, indeed, made possible, by language. I concluded — to make a long story short — that the story of Adam and Eve being expelled from Paradise was not about disobedience to a biblical god I did not believe in but, rather, amounted to a metaphor for the invention of language and its consequences on human perception and human consciousness. Walking with God, which is what Adam and Eve did prior to their separation from Paradise, represented experiencing wholeness and indivisibility with the Universe. Then humans with the invention and evolution of language and its characteristic of displacement came to experience themselves as separate from that wholeness, from each other, from what is. Although at the time I thought this conclusion was all mine, I have since found a number of other contemporaries who have said precisely the same thing. Behind the biblical expulsion story were people who sensed—even if they had only mythical metaphors to represent

it—that language-based perception and consciousness caused the fall from unity with God, Reality, the Universe, call it what you like. It’s just a word.

Since my realization, dare I call it an “epiphany,” I have read quite extensively about the effects of language on the mind and about those rare reality therapists who have recognized and sought to counter these effects in the deepest psychology way. I don’t remember exactly when I discovered the reality therapists, whom many refer to as mystics, but I have compiled a lot of research about the reality therapists and their efforts to counter the displacement effects of language on human consciousness. That these practical, introspective psychologists, for that is what the reality therapists are, have historically been found in religious traditions is unfortunate, although today I note that the fruits of their highly empirical research—the values of meditation and mindfulness—are being used widely in mainstream Western psychology and psychiatry.

How do these reality therapists, these mystic, introspective psychologists, deal with this deep-seated displacement in the perception and consciousness of ourselves and of the world? They do so by practicing the focusing of attention on the present moment, i.e., by taking our minds away from this constant displacement created by the little voice always running its words and images of separation through our heads. The meditative practices this focusing entails—the concentration on our breath, on mantras and mandalas, on the Rosary, on mindfulness practice, on “God”—are all designed to help us overcome the displacement effects of language on consciousness. D. T. Suzuki writes in his comprehensive three volume essays on Zen of the neophytes who were pestering the Zen master about the meaning of their practice. The practice of Zen is usually short on verbal explanation and long on practice, but as the students kept after him for an answer, the master in exasperation finally cried, “Attention, attention, attention! There, I’ve told you everything.”

Western psychology and psychiatry have increasingly used meditative practices to relieve various stresses in our lives. As valuable to us as relieving stress may seem psychologically, in an important sense it is a bit like using the supercomputer Watson to play tic-tac-toe. For even as we become less stressed, we continue to identify with, believe in, and express at a very deep level our separateness from our environment. We continue to perceive who we are through our language-based consciousness. Yet the reality therapists—the -mystics—tell us, across traditions in almost identical terms that during intense meditation, as they attend to the present moment in bare awareness, there is sometimes a quite sudden and momentary, entirely nonverbal upheaval in their perception—which they later term “Enlightenment” or “seeing God face-to-face”—but which is such a powerful life altering change in consciousness that they are never the same again. The Zen Patriarch Hakuin reports that upheaval is accompanied “by joy such as one has never previously experienced.”

I conclude that these meditators have burst through the model of language displacement and separateness and experience themselves as identical with what we in our scientific language call the “Universe.” Scientific understanding and human consciousness become one. Of course, after this experience, we still use language, but now we perceive and experience our identity with, our interconnection to, our wholeness with what is. “That,” say the Vedantic mystics, “art thou.” Reality becomes non-dual, no separation. You are it! The awareness in you becomes the awareness in all reality. It is experiencing our true nature, experiencing wholeness, knowing that I am that and that art thou. And it comports exactly with what scientists tell us: we are inextricably connected to everything else; we are the stuff of stars!

Over and over again the reality therapists, these mystic psychologists, stress a paradox. Language, which gives us our scientific knowledge of wholeness and interconnection, can ultimately only point at it. Perceptually, to experience this wholeness, to bring it into our human consciousness we must do more

than talk about it. We must strive with all our will to pierce through the separateness of I and Other. This is immensely difficult. The meditator and her task have been likened to a mosquito trying to pierce the hide of an iron bull.

Language by itself, without meditative practice, can only point to this wholeness, to what you really are as an aperture through which the universe sees itself. Language, ultimately, can only be a “finger pointing at the moon.”

### **Questions for Reflection & Discussion**

1. How did someone’s great compassion affect you? Whose examples do you try to emulate?
2. Are you able to be compassionate for those you don’t understand or with whom you disagree?  
What would enable you to have greater compassion for them?
3. Are you as compassionate with yourself as you are others? How can you be more loving to yourself?