

Just Thinking: The Meaning of Our Words

By JoAnn McAllister, PhD

ABSTRACT

Words are our primary mode of conveying meaning. We string them together to tell our stories and intend for those who read them to ‘get it.’ And, yet, how they are understood is always in the hands of the recipient whether they are colleagues, collaborators, or antagonists. Beginning with JDP’s primary words – Democracy and Peacebuilding – the challenges of being understood in our current social conditions are legion. These challenges are not just with those who have different or opposing views, they can arise even among collaborative groups. Some strategies to increase understanding are suggested here. The first one is to ask ourselves first: “what do I mean by that?”

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We use words to tell stories about our past, present, and future as individuals and as groups large and small – families, communities, organizations, states, countries, cultures, and religious traditions. We also use stories to sell things – ideas, beliefs, preferred attitudes, acceptable behavior, and, of course, things. The words we use impart our values and the choice of words suggests the beliefs that are the source of our expressions. We select words intentionally to make the story ‘work,’ that is, to convey our perspective. It is important to remember this: all stories present a point of view, and their authors intend to convey that point of view in even the most ‘objective’ of works.

What recipients of our stories take away though is their interpretation of the words and what the story means for them. Yes, words have definitions and, yet, as we know from experience, words whose meaning we think are obvious are often misinterpreted. The recipients of our stories have a point of view, too, and our words are filtered through their lenses. Met with a rebuttal, we may try to revise, explain, or, sometimes, defend with more or less success but making meaning is done by the recipient.

I offer these thoughts as part of a new collaboration, the JDP team, because people who begin an activity together usually believe they understand and agree on the underlying ideas and values. For example, in beginning a new enterprise, a group develops a mission statement and documents that tell the world who they are and what they want to do. As prelude to this inaugural issue of the Journal of Democracy and Peacebuilding, the JDP team developed a mission statement as part of the submission guidelines for those who want to publish their work in the journal.

The parameters are specific, the name of the journal is further defined by the subtitle: “a journal for the international community of conflict engagement and peacebuilding practitioners.” Seems straightforward but my experience in collaborative groups of all kinds – friends, work, community, social change – is that we often do not have the same understanding of the words we use to describe our beliefs and intentions.

Democracy and Peacebuilding, for example, are loaded with possible definitions and interpretations. I think of Humpty Dumpty’s response to Alice asking: “can you make words mean so many different things?” and his reply that a word “means just what I choose it to mean.” In the

United States and in many parts of the world people are doing just that with the word democracy. That is a problem and depending on your point of view democracy is in trouble here and in other countries with democratic systems.

In the United States, the Constitution is the template for understanding our form of democracy. Even so, the words of the preamble: “we the People,” “a more perfect union,” “justice,” “tranquility,” “common defense,” “General Welfare,” and the “Blessings of Liberty” are the subject of multiple interpretations of what exactly they mean. Moreover, these words rest on the philosophy expressed in The Declaration of Independence – “all Men are created equal,” and “endowed” with the Rights of “Life,” “Liberty,” and “the Pursuit of Happiness.” The meaning of these narratives and each word and phrase was contested at the time they were written, the debates have been continuous, and today have become contentious and a source of the polarization of civic discourse. If these words mean different things to different people, how do we talk to each other whether across the political divide or with allies or potential collaborators.

I used the word lenses above in describing the point of view of the recipient of your story. We all view the world through a particular lens, usually our default view of reality unless we adopt a specific framework. Our view of the world has been composed of all we are woven from the threads of our personal histories. In a conversation I would be able to ask the hearer of my story about their context and, perhaps, understand their perception of what I said and their perspective about the topic. In sending a missive out into the world it is more challenging to ensure understanding and minimize misinterpretation. This is why I suggest the first step whether in conversation or in written communication is to know your own story.

What do you mean by the words you use? It is so easy to assume you know what you mean, and that you are being clear and convincing. However, understanding your own beliefs begins with examining where they come from and what dynamics shaped them. So, what does this word democracy mean to me and what are some sources that have shaped my perspective? It means that:

- as the daughter of a working-class family, I am equal;
- as a woman, I am equal;
- all others are equal; and that
- my role is to ensure the equality of all by promoting the “General Welfare.”

Democracy is not an abstract word for me and when I use it I am not neutral. I know what I mean, and I am passionate about it. What I need to remember is to be mindful and listen to the stories of others and their understanding of democracy.

Words have always mattered, but perhaps not as much as they do today when there seems to be even more nefarious attempts to manipulate the civic conversation and confuse, if not just outright lie about, the important issues that challenge democracies. Sometimes I find I have no words to describe the degraded dialogue that purports to be about our national and international challenges – questions of survival for people and planet. What I do know is that words matter! I look forward to reading your thoughts about what the words that we have selected to describe our collaborative effort mean to you and how you use them in your work to “engage with conflict, creatively and constructively in order to strengthen democracy and create a more just and peaceful society.”

About the Author:

JoAnn McAllister, PhD, focuses on the development of social change theory and practice that is guided by an appreciation for the cultural context, beliefs, and aspirations of communities. She is working on a new book: *Still Doing Democracy: Finding Common Ground and Acting for the Common Good* (www.StillDoingDemocracy.com). She is the President of the Human Science Institute (www.HumanScienceInstitute.org) and teaches qualitative research at Walden University.