

Journal of Student Ministries – July/August Submission

Prompt:

How does our language not only express our thinking but also form it? In what ways do the words we choose form our students?

What barriers to understanding are caused by our language choices, and how can we compensate for those barriers? How about in the ways we communicate to others?

What are the benefits to language sensibility? What are the dangers? What are specific ways we can be careful about our language without being over-the-top about it?

What do we need to simply be aware of ourselves, and what do we need to specifically pass on to our students about language?

Title: “Refrigerator Art”

I can scarcely imagine a place more intimidating for an exclusively English-speaking American to end up than India. For one thing, India has no national language. In the northern half of the country, Hindi is predominantly spoken and understood, but is secondary to the local dialects and languages of specific states, regions and people groups. For another thing, India is perhaps the most overtly religious country in the world. Most people follow one of four major world religions, none of which I practice. This complexity gives India a wonderfully rich national culture and places me totally outside of it.

I was in Pune—an up-and-coming city in the information technologies sector. Known as the “Oxford of the East” and also the cultural capitol of the Indian state Maharashtra, Pune is a city where Indian boys and girls dream big and parents of less fortunate upbringing are happy to have jobs for American and European corporations that will allow them to send their kids to college. Because Pune is becoming an integral location in the growing global economy, English is widely spoken. “What a relief!” I thought when I sat down to a table for one to enjoy my first course of Indian cuisine. The words on the menu were, quite literally, all foreign to me, and I was relieved when my waiter offered me explanation in something more familiar than Marathi (the local language).

Before coming to India I compiled a list of common words and phrases in Hindi and Marathi in case I encountered a situation in which English was unavailable to me. As a conscientious traveler, I know it goes a long way with the local people when one makes an effort to offer the customary niceties (“please,” “thank you,” “hello,” “goodbye”) in the local language. Unless of course, you happen to be a foreign national traveling to the US—in which case we prefer you memorize the English dictionary, lose the accent, *and then* inquire about a visit.

The first time I used my Hindi/Marathi phrasebook (at that first meal) I butchered “shukreeya,” which means “thank you,” and was able to ask my English-speaking waiter for the correct pronunciation. I happened to be traveling with my Dad, who was on business, and my brother, who, like me, was exploring the world on my Dad’s dime. In a show of Indian hospitality, one of my Dad’s coworkers, Gunjan, who is fluent in English, Hindi and Marathi made himself readily available for pronunciation lessons during my first few days on the subcontinent (shukreeya Gunjan!). During the first two days of

travel I corrected my pronunciations of a few staple phrases and felt prepared to sojourn the Indian streets, offering an occasional polite word intelligibly. Every time I spoke a word of Hindi or Marathi to an Indian person, it elicited a great smile and often an exclamation (in English), “You speak Hindi/Marathi!” To which I replied, “very little”—gesturing with pinched fingers. These responses reminded me of Gunjan and that waiter at the hotel restaurant who helped me so immensely and served as guides to this wonderful new culture.

The cradle of religious imagination

Another perk of traveling with my dad’s business was that we had a driver available to us 24/7 while we were in Pune. Anyone who has been to India and driven amidst that sea of seemingly out-of-control vehicles realizes how helpful this was. Our driver, Sannjiv, was a jolly little South Indian man with immaculately combed jet-black hair and cappuccino skin as smooth as Indian silk. My dad, brother and I spent a total of 25 hours in that rough-riding SUV with Gunjan and Sannjiv during our first two days in India as they drove us all over the western side of the Maharashtra state sightseeing. Sannjiv was another invaluable helper when it came to using Hindi and Marathi. Not only that, he and Gunjan became friends through our discussions of Indian and US politics, Gandhi, Hinduism and globalization.

Sannjiv’s English was broken, at best, and since my Hindi and Marathi are basically non-existent, he mostly listened as Gunjan and I conversed in English. I wonder what fragments of our conversation Sannjiv discerned. I can only imagine what words and phrases stuck with him and informed his understanding of my family, my country, my religion and my self. At one point, Sannjiv, my brother and I were in the SUV together talking about our families. Gunjan was not with us to interpret, so we muddled our way through a very meaningful conversation in the most basic English and Hindi. I asked Sannjiv, “How many years will your daughters attend school?” He replied puzzledly, “Sorry, sir?” (This was his customary response when I had reached the limits of his English.) I tried another way, “How long—your daughters—school?” “Five minutes, sir.” He happily answered. I now knew how long it took him each morning to shuttle his girls to the schoolyard, but still didn’t know if they would be there long enough to learn how to read. Persistently, I tried again. “Your daughters—in school—how many years?” “Grade 6 and grade 4, sir.” “Yes, but how many years in total?” “For me, sir, grade 6 only.”

I forgot my question. Sannjiv’s response gave me pause, and I considered life with a 6th grade education. Having grown up on a farm in South India, the child of peasants, Sannjiv’s hands were more valuable to his family than his mind. I wondered, “What might a person who has learned English, Hindi, Marathi and other languages with so little formal education have accomplished if schooling had been more feasible?”

I tried again, this time with a different approach. “Sannjiv, your daughters—college?” A breakthrough! “Oh yes, sir! Grade 1, grade 2, grade 3—grade 10. Then college, sir.” A breakthrough, indeed.

At times I felt guilty that my ignorance required us to speak English. The British ruled India for about 250 years, and now American and European corporations are flooding the nation with movies, advertising, Internet content, Indian Idol, and yes—jobs. I felt sorry that we couldn’t find some linguistic middle ground. At one point I even tried mixing some Spanish into our conversation, hoping this self-made linguist might know the language (not that my Spanish is much better than my Hindi). No such luck.

A beautiful thing sometimes happens, though, when two people converse who readily acknowledge their own inability to master the subject matter. This human work of art is called humility. It’s the sort that Jesus spoke of when he said to his disciples, “Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”¹

My wife struggles (and often chooses not) to pull herself out of bed on Sunday mornings because church is so often a place completely lacking in this humility when it comes to speaking about God. One obvious offense is the church’s incessant (even insistent) use of exclusively male imagery for God. Some defend this limited picture with scripture. Others refer to tradition. Few appeal to reason or experience. The Bible regularly paints God with a feminine brush. In Luke 13, Jesus likens himself to a mother hen sheltering her young. The Proverbs repeatedly picture God’s wisdom as a woman standing in the streets calling us to follow her. Even the Holy Spirit (Heb. *ruach*) is literally the feminine breath of a nurturing, sustaining, feeling God.

It was the small figurine of Lord Ganesh stuck to Sannjiv’s dashboard (reminiscent of the Peruvian cross hanging from my rearview mirror) that impressed on me the church’s lack of imagination. Was it a child’s question that inspired the story of Lord Ganesh’s formation? Ganesh, the divine child of Lord Shiva and the goddess Pavarti, was created to be his mother’s gatekeeper and protector. One day, Lord Shiva came to visit Pavarti and Ganesh refused him entrance at Pavarti’s order. Shiva flew into a rage and decapitated his only son. When Pavarti discovered this, she commanded Shiva to go and find another head for Ganesh so that he might be resurrected. Lord Shiva took the head from an elephant, placed it on his son’s body, and restored his life.

Bizarre as this tale seems to my Western mind, although distantly familiar, it reminds me of the necessity for story in theology. My greatest theological discourse often takes the shape of story—most often in response to a child’s query. Stories often begin, “Imagine this...” and immediately both the teller and hearer’s minds are open to the whole world of possibility. Good stories don’t always require

¹ Luke 18:17

systematic plot consistency or even plausibility, but they do require vivid images painted by words that resonate within the hearts and minds of the people who tell them and the ones who listen. Somewhere along the way, Christians stopped telling stories and stopped reading the Bible as a divine story or series of stories. We traded in the openness of imagination and interpretation for the (d)illusion of certainty that creeds provide.

The image of Lord Ganesh reminds me that God appears to humanity in too many ways to pin down to “He” or to reject the significance of “Allah.” Ancient Israelites, our forbearers, spoke of God in myriad ways because they were observant enough to realize that God is not simply “redeeming” us, or “judging” us, or “fathering” us, or whatever other buzz words make us feel in control of our subject matter. God is also drawing us in to weep for the broken world with us. She is sustaining us with daily milk. If we believe that God is not just loving, but love itself, then we might also say that God is music. God is poetry. God is the air we breathe. God is the friend we meet for coffee and also the friendship between us. And still, *God is more* than all this and we need not be afraid to name the many ways that God is.

God is...

Our second-to-last night in Pune was a Maharashtra holiday for the goddess Pavarti. Sannjiv drove my brother and I to the mountaintop temple to which hundreds of Hindu devotees had come for *mandir* (prayers). Amidst a sea of brown faces, two white American Christians were somewhat less than indiscriminant. Within minutes, we had a great collection of about 25 boys crowded around us, pulling at our clothes and reaching over each other to shake our hands. “Hello!” and “Good morning!” they shouted. These were apparently the only three English words they knew. Over and over they shouted their English at us like children hoisting refrigerator art into their parents’ faces.

At once, a young boy of about 12 years emerged from the crowd and began to speak nearly fluent English. I was amazed. We spoke for nearly five minutes before he halted the conversation, said, “Okay, goodbye!” and headed off into the temple. It was as if this brief conversation with someone so different had somehow reminded him of the devotion that caused him to climb the many temple steps to begin with.

On the way down the hill, still surrounded by shouting and tugging children, I thought about the boy who welcomed me to the Pavarti temple so hospitably in my native tongue. Initially, I mournfully thought, “Young one, don’t learn English and become like Westerners!” Then I realized that the language most predominant in the industrialized world is, for now, his ticket to college and a job that will pay him a living wage. I also realized that there is room in his world, and mine, for English and Hindi. There is

room in the world for women and men, Hindus and Christians, Jews and Muslims, East, West, South and North to brush a stroke of color on the great canvas of life God is giving and *God is*.

Biography:

Derek Elkins recently finished a Master of Arts in Christian Education at Union-PSCE seminary in Richmond, VA. He has served as the Director of Student Ministries at Muir's Chapel United Methodist Church in Greensboro, NC, Youth Minister at Second Congregational Church of Newton, MA, and Music Director at St. Clare's Episcopal Church in Richmond, VA. Derek publishes original music and musings online at www.derekelkins.com.