

Just Seven Words
Rev Lisa Doege
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Nora UU Church, Hanska, MN

In school I was known for my brevity. While classmates struggled to whittle their papers down to the acceptable upper limit of words or pages, I routinely handed in work that failed to reach the lower limit. I was never penalized for this failure. The comment most frequently penned on title pages by my professors was “concise.” That, it seems, was a good thing.

I’ve had mixed reviews of this same tendency toward brevity in my preaching. One congregant said approvingly, “Lisa can say in ten minutes what would take any other preacher 30.” Other congregants have wanted more--more heft, more length, more words. It’s a balance I’m still learning after fifteen years in the field--the natural bent toward just the right words, in just the right order, no more and no less, versus the desire to give my congregation its money’s worth. But, due to a recent trend in social communication styles, I’m hopeful my days of fretting over length or shortness may be over.

Perhaps some of you heard Scott Simon’s *Weekend Edition* piece yesterday morning on the 140 character limit for Tweets--messages on Twitter. My favorite sample came from David Hodges: *If you wear shoes that shouldn't get wet, you might not understand shoes very well.*

I’m not a Twitterer. I’ve embraced e-mail and instant messaging, the occasional text message, and, half-heartedly, Facebook. But I don’t Twitter, and I probably won’t. I just can’t imagine keeping up with another form of electronic communication. In fact, as I’ve unpacked my boxes and settled into the parsonage, I’ve discovered dozens and dozens of unused greeting cards, note cards and other assorted stationary that have convinced me I should turn back to pen and paper more often than e-mail anyway.

Nevertheless, I’m fascinated by the discipline of Twitter--reducing or concentrating communication into 140 characters or less. When I’ve had occasion to write according to strict rules, such as the five-seven-five syllable form of haiku or the more complicated cinquain (one word title, two words describing title, three words of action, four words expressing the emotion, and one word recalling the title), I’ve enjoyed the experience as a word game, a puzzle of sorts, an intellectual challenge.

I may be concise, but as a general rule, I neither speak nor write with quite such controlled brevity. Yet in reading others’ brief encapsulations I’m struck by the power of language boiled down to its essence.

The Car Talk website of Click and Clack offers automotive haiku, from the ridiculous to the sublime:

*did not lock old car
gaping hole and hanging wires
no more NPR*

Andie

*Rearview mirror shows
Highway patrol behind me.
How many did I have?*

Loren Castro

*"Check engine" light on.
Unscrew the dash. Stab with pen.
"Check engine" light off.*

James Cardillo

A possibly apocryphal legend asserts Ernest Hemingway was once challenged to write a story in six words. The result, heart-rending. *For sale: baby shoes, never worn.*

True or not, the tale was the inspiration for a new genre. Here are a few examples from the 2008 collection *Not Quite What I was Planning: Six Word Memoirs by Famous and Obscure Writers*.

Found great happiness in insignificant details (Alisdair McDiarmid)

She walked barefoot in wet cement. (Michelle Pinchev)

Well, I thought it was funny. (Stephen Colbert)

From Colombia to Columbia: 27 years. (Marisa Catalina Casey)

*Wife: one;
Degrees: two;
Arrests: seven.* (Patrick J. Sauer)

Works of art, but how much do they really communicate?

Several years ago the minister of a nearby, fundamentalist church stopped by my office unannounced. He explained he was offering a series of adult education discussions at his church to introduce his members to a number of other religions. He invited me to be the guest speaker the next week. Of course an adult RE series on various religious traditions appealed to an inexperienced Unitarian Universalist minister, and I was way too new to the game to recognize a set up. So off I went one evening the next week only to quickly discover I was there as a foil. I represented the wrong or mistaken point of view so that my colleague could articulate and emphasize the correct point of view for his followers. I was the non-Christian whose false views must be exposed. Even as I realized that it wasn't a fair fight or a genuine dialogue, I carried on, and soon found

myself in a *Twilight Zone* state of mind. There I was, a Unitarian Universalist minister, a representative of all that is wrong in religion, a token rationalist, arguing to a fundamentalist Christian audience that “revelation is *not* sealed” and “the age of miracles is *not* past” and most of all, “God still reveals Godself in the world today.”

Don’t get me wrong. I believed then and still believe now every word I said. The cognitive dissonance of the experience arose being the supposedly rational, proof-demanding one who was nevertheless defending the possibility of mystery and miracles to my supposedly more “religious” host who insisted that God’s word and God’s actions had happened long ago and been set in the stone of the Christian scriptures.

I am rational. I do want my religious beliefs to corroborated even strengthened by my empirical experience. I also believe quite emphatically that the divine, however we define it or understand it, is at loose in the world--too vast to be locked away in some long again age of miracles, too elusive to be captured once and for all in the written words of any holy text.

I’m with Barbara Brown Taylor, one hundred percent. Words are precious to me. I delight in their sounds and their meanings. I choose them carefully, seeking precision, beauty, poetry in my writing and my preaching. I understand completely the nine year cancer survivor who, according to her mother, spent hours at the computer, deliberating over her six word memoir. *Cursed with cancer. Blessed with friends.*

But I agree with Barbara Brown Taylor’s second point as well. Powerful as they are, words aren’t the things themselves. They aren’t the objects, the emotions, the actions, the relationships. Words only stand for the objects, the emotions, the actions and the relationships. And when we forget that, or take words for granted, trouble is likely. Seventeenth century philosopher John Locke observed, “We should have a great fewer disputes in the world if words were taken for what they are, the signs of our ideas only, and not for things themselves.”

Kahlil Gibran said of language: “We shall never understand one another until we reduce the language to seven words.” It may well be that his remark was a commentary on the inadequacies of words, which after all only stands for things. He may have sought to simplify communication.

Still, I disagree. While recognizing both the emotional punch and the ability to express meaning evident in the car talk haiku, the six word memoirs, and the baby’s five words, I would also remind us that while estimates vary, the average adult has somewhere between five and twenty-thousand words his or her vocabulary. And using too few of them can at times, though not always, cause serious misunderstanding. This may be especially true when it comes to relationships at all levels from kinship and friendship right on up to international relations. It may also be especially true when it comes to matters of the spirit, of religious doctrine, of belief.

Legend tells us Rabbi Hillel was once asked to recite the whole of Torah while standing on one foot. Rabbi Hillel replied, "What is hateful to yourself, do not do to your fellow man. That is the whole Torah; the rest is just commentary. Go and study it." Most of us aren't Rabbi Hillel, however, nor are we great poets with the gift of language or the leisure to boil down our thoughts to their very essence. As mere mortals we're more apt to find ourselves in the kind of semantic dispute Old Turtle had to settle than to find ourselves with just the right quip to silence a challenge. Most of us require all the tools of communication at our disposal to make ourselves understood.

Of course, humor results, at times, from the inadequacies or misunderstanding of language. On the crime drama *NCIS*, the Israeli character, Ziva, peppers her speech with American colloquialisms she never gets quite right. When others avoid her, for example, she feels like a leopard, not a leper. And upon seeing a home that has been thoroughly cleaned she observes that it is Spic and Spam.

But more often, language that is imprecise or misunderstood or unnecessarily terse causes problems. I once told my brother and my sister that I had had words that day with the letter carrier. "Uh, oh, what did she do wrong?" my brother replied. "What did you say to her?" my sister chimed in. I had simply meant that the letter carrier and I had exchanged hellos, a pleasantry or two. But my siblings, having experienced my habit of speaking my mind and misled by my choice of words, assumed that I had taken the poor woman to task for some misdeed.

Are you Christian? I'm sometimes asked. A simple yes/no question. Yes, I'm a Christian. No, I'm not a Christian. Except the answer is really more along these lines. *As an infant I was baptized in the Methodist church, in the name of the trinity. From the age of reason on I was raised in Unitarian Universalist Sunday School. I don't know what it means to be born again and I don't accept Jesus as my personal Lord and Savior. I do however think he was a gifted teacher, wise and fearless in his pursuit of justice and his demonstration of love and mercy. I try to live according to his teachings.*

140 characters, 17 syllables, 6 words, 7 words, 5 words. Restraining our expression to these arbitrary limits can be a fun puzzle and may result in thought-provoking poetry, memorable art. When Hubert Humphrey died former Minneapolis based cartoonist Richard Guindon ran a blank panel, adorned, as I recall, only by the words, "closed due to death of a friend."

There are times when brevity and even silence are the best, most effective tools of communication we have. But ultimately it is not the way to communicate. When we want to be understood by another--and there are so many reasons to be truly, deeply understood by another--to convey ideas, express feelings, solve problems, ask questions, offer comfort, amuse, teach--when we want to be truly, deeply understood by another, then *conversation* is vital. Not forms or rules, but free flowing words, alternating with silences, back and forth between listener and speaker. Time and space and encouragement to search for the words we want, to try again when we don't quite

get it right, to correct ourselves, expand our thoughts, put it another way to make it more clear--whatever it is.

I sympathize with the contemporary desire for speed in communication, which has resulted in such things as the 140 character Tweeter (though it may be that the *ability* for speed has in fact driven the *desire* for speed, but that's a topic for another day). It simplified my life, for example, by allowing business with UUA Headquarters in Boston to be accomplished in a matter of hours instead of days or weeks. But communication, at the level of sophistication we possess it, is one of the gifts of humanity. And we squander it, censoring ourselves and others, at our own peril. In this age misunderstandings all too often turn deadly.

Community organizers and other activists around the globe employ conversation circles. As a means to addressing racism, violence in the schools, and other issues facing local communities, these formal opportunities to sit face to face and intentionally talk and listen to neighbors are changing lives. My own participation in such a circle on race in South Bend gave me insights I would never have received elsewhere. But we don't need to wait for someone to select a topic or organize a circle. Our lives overflow with opportunities for conversation--at the family table, in the post office, at the fire department barbecue, during coffee time before church, over the proverbial back fence. Any time we pause to listen or to speak for more than 140 characters or six words we treat ourselves and our conversation partners to the gift of communication. It's the beginning of understanding, the first step toward healing what's broken in our relationships, our communities and our world.

"Use your words," parents remind toddlers in danger boiling over into temper tantrum at the frustration of not being understood. "Use your words," special education teachers encourage reluctant speakers, such as some children along the autism spectrum. It's good advice for us all. Use your words, all of them--to bless, to protest, to inform, to question, to create, to soothe, to heal the world.

Amen