

Chapel Talk
April 2, 2008
Will Speers

There's a famous story in my family, occurring in the late 1940s. A young woman went to college, having been reared on the novels of Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Emily and Charlotte Bronte, raised in a family that read books and wrote letters and valued good conversations, a family and a culture that cared about language and was quite proper. Her college was all women; across the street was a men's college. She decided to run for class president in the fall of her first year. In her speech, she proposed the usual – better relations with the administration, more privileges and dances, more community service and outreach possibilities. At the end of her brief speech, she also mentioned something about the men's college, because it was so close by, and there were programs and gatherings that connected the two colleges. Calling on her British literature background, one steeped in formal language and expression, she offered one more proposal that she hoped would help her class get to know the men across the street. She said to her audience of 17 and 18 year old women: "I want us to have more intercourse with the men across the street."

Alas, this woman didn't initially understand the immediate uproar, the cheers, the dumbfounded expressions, the gasps of disbelief, the shrieks of laughter, that greeted what she had imagined was a fairly simple and obvious wish: to have more conversation with this men's college. Based on her readings of Austen and other great British writers, "intercourse" for her and her immediate world was conversation, communication, the exchange of ideas – the Latin "inter" means "between," and "course" implied "to run, to go" – hence words or anything going between, passing between people. For her, it was social, completely social, not sexual, in meaning – but she didn't know that until afterwards when a classmate explained to her that the word carried other meanings, an insight which caused much embarrassment and humiliation – although she did win the election.

This woman's situation underscores how strong a single word can be. Words are mighty, erupting, explosive, joyful, memorable, tricky, potent – not just passages or poems but single words. Our language is fluid, layered, complex and confusing. “Bad” now means “good” in many contexts; “money” then replaced “bad” as the way to acknowledge someone else's feat or success, followed by “Kobe,” and now even “word” itself. My generation said “cool,” “sharp,” “wicked,” and the strangest of all, “groovy.” Think of nicknames, middle names, curse words – a single word tells a story. Presidential candidates want you to remember their campaigns with one word, like “Hope” or “Strength” or “Change.” Dan Rather endured endless ribbing for closing his CBS Evening News broadcasts for a while with one word, “Courage,” as if that summarized all he had reported for the viewers. Think of the individual words that define this community, which over the last decade have become our own St. Andean lexicon: “ethos,” “engaged,” “intentional,” “authentic,” “outstanding,” “citizenship.” A word defines a person; Mr. Austin exclaims “Byzantine”; Joshua says “sweet” in response to anything I say to him. One word, with a paragraph of emotions behind it.

When I was in college, I stayed with my grandparents in New Hampshire for a summer weekend. My grandmother was a wonderful lady, but she had a sharp, difficult side to her. On Sunday, she wanted me to leave at lunchtime to drive the five hours back to Connecticut; I wanted to enjoy the afternoon, swim in the lake, and leave after supper. I was twenty years old, after all, but to my grandmother I was still a tottering baby bouncing across the grass with a heavy diaper and a messy face. After lunch, I told her nicely that I heard her concerns but that I was going to stay for the afternoon, that I'd be fine and would drive home carefully. I remember we were outside on their front lawn, a warm July sun cascading across the grass. As we walked away from the kitchen door, her arm linked through mine for balance and control, she replied, “I'm just disappointed in you, Will.” “Disappointed.” The word seared through me. I had let her down. I had failed. Thirty-one years later that pain, that deep hurt, caused by that one word, still torches me. That day I resolved never to use that word again, when speaking to anyone, when dealing with my children and their inevitable stumbles, when talking with a student

who's fallen into trouble. Why lash them further?

Recalling that word, I picture the flowerbeds outside her house, the white clapboard siding with the dark blue window shutters. I can hear her cadence, her measured voice as she said without fury or passion but with authority and damning judgment, "I'm just disappointed in you, Will." That word instantly connects me to the gulf that separated us that day; to the sense of failure I felt before a grandmother I loved; to a confusion why this was happening over a desire, after all, to stay longer with my grandparents. A single word sliced me in half, a word I still have trouble even repeating before you tonight, as if it's a curse word, one of those "never-said-in-public" words, the word "that shall not be spoken." It cautions whenever I'm in a position to correct or get angry with someone – a child, a student, anyone – that *how* I say what I say is perhaps more important than *what* I say. An entire story rumbles, brews, simmers behind "disappointment" for me; it's as if one word becomes a novel, one note incarnates an entire song or symphony, one color a tapestry or mural.

Because of their elusive power, words pack tremendous history. For example, I tell my students in English not to use the word "interesting" in their writing, because I find the word vague, bland, non-descript. Don't write, "Hamlet says some interesting things to his mother in Act III," or "Janie and Tea Cake have an interesting relationship in chapter 12." Instead, be precise: "Hamlet speaks his anger and confusion to his mother in Act III," or "Janie and Tea Cake experience an accepting and equal relationship in chapter 12." In the dictionary, "interesting" implies "exciting, fascinating, appealing – enjoyable because of being varied, stimulating or exciting." However, for me, this word reminds me of an incident where "interesting" was the nicest word someone could say for something that was so ugly and unappealing.

In one of my early summers at St. Andrew's, I decided to grow a beard. My good friend Mr. Roach, it seemed, could sprout a beard in a matter of hours: look at the sports pictures of the boys' tennis teams in the early 1980s. He looks like an 18th century American pioneer. Since my father twice grew a full beard when I was young, I knew I

possessed the facial gene pool to claim my rightful turn at becoming Paul Bunyon. That summer during graduate school I shared a pretty bleak cabin in Vermont with Mr. and Mrs. Roach; one day a student from St. Andrew's came to Middlebury to tour the college. She and her mother invited us down from the mountain to have lunch with them at a nice restaurant. I'd been growing my beard for about four weeks, and to be honest, I was feeling pretty good about it. When I rubbed my chin and stroked my hair, it felt thick, robust, manly. Even Mr. and Mrs. Roach had been encouraging every time I asked them to evaluate it. At the restaurant we greeted each other warmly, but then the mother stared at me, examining my face from neck to chin to upper jaw. A bit confused, she finally remarked: "Well, that's interesting."

I blushed. I blushed deeply, as I realized that was the nicest description, under the circumstances, she could give about what was on my face. Shamed, I ducked into the men's room to see that what I had wished was a beard looked instead like a poorly seeded lawn – with some places growing out hair, yet other large expanses of my face totally lacking whiskers. "That's interesting," she had kindly said, but that word made me see I wasn't growing a beard at all. Her choice of "interesting" forever transformed the meaning of this word for me. When students use "interesting" in their papers, I rip through it with my pen, determined to make them be clearer writers, yet probably also seeking to excise the ghost of that self-inflicted wound.

What I'm realizing about these individual words, and my history with them, is that we make a meaning with words – we even add meaning to words. Words have a definition, but certain words, at key moments in our lives, carry extra weight. The poet Wallace Stevens wrote that "What we said of it became a part of what it is" – and that's what happens to these highly charged words: our experiences become a part of what those words mean. That's the muscle, the elasticity of language, how it grows and alters, changes and evolves, tricks and teaches us.

My last story involves, paradoxically, one of the most common words in the English language, placed within one of the most magnificent pieces of writing,

Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. One of Hamlet's most significant yet understated lines occurs in Act V when he confronts and touches the skull of his old playmate, Yorick: "This?" he questions to the gravedigger. The stage directions indicate Hamlet now takes the skull in his own hands. "Alas, poor Yorick, I knew him, Horatio." What strikes me about this crucial recognition scene is that one, Hamlet asks a question; two, Hamlet finally touches death; three, because of that touch, Hamlet is able to know death; and four, Hamlet moves this knowledge and this new understanding of the past into the present by turning to his living friend, Horatio.

I have always been in awe of this moment because it is so simple – "This?" – while so riveting in its truth, its faith, its vision. Hamlet's question forces a direct contact, a touch that makes tangible the human experience and exposes his vulnerability. That touch joins Hamlet to another knowledge, a deeper meaning to life and a more profound sense of his own identity. For me, this critical perception ensues because Hamlet asks a question. It's a single word, "This?" – an adjective acting as a noun representing an entire journey. A lone word encapsulates Hamlet's epiphany, a growth stemming from his many questions, an insight fusing together life and death with clarity and understanding for Hamlet. "This?" – such a basic word compared to the majestic language of Hamlet's soliloquies, yet within this tiny pronoun rests Hamlet's discovery. The question, significantly, becomes the answer.

"And what we said of it became a part of what it is." For each of us, there are words that crowd in like memories with multiple emotions and conflicting meanings. That's the vibrancy of language; that's our power to create, to narrate, to remember. We are poets of singular potency and minimalistic nuances. These solitary words anchor us to immense stories, portraits, myths. They reveal our frailty, they uncover our hubris, they witness our cruelty, they assert our capacity to wonder and hope. Although one, they are many, malleable, magical and mysterious.