

Aloha, Arrivederci, Adios and Bon Voyage

The sermon of June 23, 2013 by Rev. Gary Kowalski

Foreign languages have never been my strong suit. I studied French in middle school with Madame Tenzitoff, but managed to send a waitress running screaming from the room when I tried to order a meal in Paris. I switched to German when I was in college, and just squeaked through the entrance exams for divinity school, where the ability to *sprechen auf deutsch* was considered a theological prerequisite. Words like *weltenschaung* and *zeitgeist* didn't help much, however, when my wife and I visited Munich, and the little phrasebook we'd borrowed from her father, who was stationed in Wiesbaden with the Air Force after the war wasn't much use either, filled with commands like "Surrender! Lay down your weapons!" and "Take me to your commanding officer." Not what you need when trying to order a beer at the Oktober Fest. When our son was about eleven, we took a family trip to Korea, to visit his home land, and because we'd been studying Taekwon-do, we all knew how to count – *hana, duhl, set, net, tahsut, yahsut*, - and we could also say *ap chagi* and *dwi chagi*, front kick and back kick. Fortunately, we didn't go anywhere near the De-Militarized Zone where we were warned one false word could trigger an international incident.

Spanish is my current project, which employs the subjunctive tense to a far greater degree than English. The subjunctive occurs whenever there's a degree of uncertainty or imprecision in what's being said. For example, "Hopefully, Mary will come to the party next Friday," or "*Ojala, Maria venga a la fiesta el viernes que viene,*" and won't not be washing her hair that night. I've pretty much given up learning on this tense, though, not just because it's hard but because all of my statements in Spanish already have a high degree of ambiguity and imprecision, so the subjunctive just like an extra layer of confusion.

All of these experiences have forced me to ask the question how much vocabulary and grammar you really need to know to travel or get around in this world. And I've come to the conclusion that beyond a few obvious phrases like "*Where's the bathroom?*" and "*Do you take Visa,*" the successful traveler really only needs four basic words: Hello, Goodbye, Thank You, and I'm Sorry. These simple utterances will cover almost all the difficulties that are likely to confront the average tourist, whether you're visiting India or Iceland, speaking Farsi or Greek. More than that, these basic words cover most of the rudiments you'll need on your existential journey, the contingencies you face in your wanderings through life. You won't need a Scrabble player's dictionary to get you through your turbulent youth or mid-life crisis. Although it is nice to know that "aa" is the

Hawaiian word for “lava,” you can have an ample, satisfying existence without that. But it is necessary to know how to say “hello.”

Now I immediately have to backtrack and qualify myself. Because it may surprise you to learn that the use of “hello” as a standard English greeting is of very recent vintage. The word didn’t even appear in print until the mid-nineteenth century and actually didn’t come into common usage until the invention of the telephone. Alexander Graham Bell suggested that we answer the phone by saying “Ahoy” but Thomas Edison called his switchboard operators “hello girls” and the matter was settled. Yet the original meaning of “hello” was something more like “Whiskey Tango Foxtrot.” As in, “Hello, Earth to Gary!” Are you completely nuts? It was an expression of surprise and alarm, a signal to stop and reconsider. A far older greeting etymologically is the salutation “howdy,” which is a contraction for “how do you do?” and which comes closer to my meaning. To navigate this world, we need to be able to share a how-de-do, a “Que pasa?” a “Wie gehts?” or “Comment allez-vous?” that brings us into relation with other people and the wider world.

It’s all about engagement, making connections. The Jewish thinker Martin Buber is one of my favorite philosophers of religion. And in his book *I and Thou* Buber suggests that “Basic words do not state something that might exist outside them; by being spoken, they establish a mode of existence.” Putting this same thought another way, linguist Deborah Tannen makes a distinction between what she calls “rapport language” and “report language.” Women, she claims, tend to use more “rapport talk,” using conversation to establish interpersonal bonds , whereas men do more “reporting,” engaging in discussion mainly to convey information. Buber gives some fascinating examples of how so-called “primitive” peoples use vocabularies that are rich in rapport and relationship. For instance, “we say ‘far away’; the Zulu have a sentence-word instead that means: ‘where one cries, ‘mother, I am lost.’ And the Fuegians [of the Yaghan tribe who live at the tip of South America] surpass our analytical wisdom with a sentence-word of seven syllables that literally means: ‘they look at each other, each waiting for the other to offer to do that which both desire but neither wishes to do.’” (Which sounds a lot like the Republicans and the Democrats in Congress, doesn’t it?) Buber continues,

We greet those we encounter by wishing them well or by assuring them of our devotion or by commending them to God. But how indirect are these worn-out formulas (“Hail!” no longer suggesting anything of the original bestowal of power) compared with the eternally young, physical relational greeting of the Kaffir, “I see you!” or its American variant, the laughable but sublime “Smell me!”

I personally like the Sanskrit *“namaste,”* which derives from the verb *“namah”* meaning *“to bow ”* while *“te”* means *“you,”* just as it does in Spanish and so many other variants in the Indo-European family. Wikipedia, that ultimate authority, explains that *Namaste* literally means

“I salute [your] form”, which implies an understanding that all beings in this existence are part of the surface phenomenology of *Maya* and that beyond the surface, so to say, all beings are part of *Brahman*, or the One ultimate essence that underlies all ...

I’ve also seen it loosely translated, “I greet the place in you where, when you are in that place in you, and I am in that place in me, there is only one of us.” That’s the hello we spend our whole lifetimes trying to learn to say, and every person we meet, every time we come together offers another opportunity to practice addressing that ultimate Thou who is the apex and convergence of every unique you.

So hello is one of the four basic words we need. *Thank you* and *I’m sorry* should be a little easier to grok, because life really is a continuous blessing and “if the only prayer we ever uttered were the words Thank You,” as the medieval mystic Meister Eckhart once commented, “that would be enough.” Gratitude is the art of savoring this brief moment we’ve been given, while repentance is necessary because we’re always messing up. One of the many stupid lines from that ridiculous novel *Love Story* was the bit about “love meaning never having to say you’re sorry.” On the contrary, love (or staying in a mutually healthy relationship) requires having to eat crow several times a day. And this point may have some of you wondering why I haven’t included “I love you” among the other essential phrases we need in our traveler’s kitbag. *Te amo! Ich liebe dich! Je t’aime!* Well, the truth is, I just haven’t found “I love you” to be all that useful. *Ojala que Maria venga a la fiesta*, but I never seem to get invited to that particular party, and in marriage it may be that “thanks” and “I apologize” have more staying power than any amount of pillow talk. Love (or at least romance) is a feeling that comes and goes, but common courtesy (words like “please” and “thank you” and “excuse me”) should be daily habits that express a fundamental respect and regard for one’s partner. *Gracias. Pardon. Entschuldigen bitte. Danke schon.* Whether you’re traveling the country of marriage or the territories of work or friendship, you’ll find these words endlessly useful and restorative.

And this brings us to *adieu* and *adios*. I think goodbye may be the hardest single word we have to master, and also the most important. The Buddha taught that non-attachment is the key to release from suffering, to living in the present , to achieving wisdom or enlightenment. Because impermanence is the nature of

things. Life is transitory, evanescent. We create grief for ourselves when we cling to people and moods and sensations that are ever changing. Yet our natural tendency is to hold on, to try to make the good times last. This is a particular challenge for churches, where tradition and stability are frequently cherished while innovation is viewed with suspicion. Indeed, we've spent much of these last five months together working on saying goodbye to Barbara Merritt and Tom Schade, learning how to dance and step lightly in this interval of transition, where so little is settled and so much is in flux. Many here have said to me, "I wish we didn't have to see you go. Couldn't you just stay?" Last week, someone asked if I wouldn't come back to Worcester to visit from time to time. The answer, of course, is that I won't come back to visit and have to go, because interim ministry is designed to be ephemeral. It's intended to model the life of the church, where ministers die or retire or get fired or get promoted to have their portrait hanging in the Bancroft Room but the beloved community remains. Interim work is intended to resemble the journey itself, where the companions come and go, but the goal is always beckoning. My job has been to walk with you just far enough to make you ready for the road ahead.

Yet before I say goodbye, though, I want to say thank you to all of you who accepted me and Dori into your midst. Thanks to the choir and Will and James and our instrumentalists who created such beautiful, fantastic music week in and out. Thanks to the rest of the staff here, Donna and Jennifer, Jessica, Abby, Lesa and Jim for such solid work in shaky times. First Unitarian Church, I believe, is in a stronger, more hopeful place than it was just a few months ago. Attendance is up. A Search Committee has been charged, a Stewardship Team is hard at work, and Reverend Tracey Robinson-Harris is ready to bring her experience to guide you through the next chapter. Thanks go to all of you who care about this faith and contribute your energy to this congregation. You have made this ministry a shared enterprise, and I am grateful to have been part of the history of a church that I believe has a vital mission and a promising future.

I'm sorry that I still don't know everybody's name. Forgive me for that. Five months are barely long enough to really get acquainted. Yet despite all, I believe we have had some genuine moments of connection. I had a chance to celebrate a wedding here two weeks ago with Charlotte Lawrence and James Kassal. And I was privileged to preside at the memorial for Ken Carlson, whom many of you knew, earlier this spring. It was an honor to share your life passages and draw near to the place where, when you are in that place in you and I'm in that place in me, the differences drop away.

I've especially enjoyed living in Worcester, which I see as a prototypical American city. Not super-big, but not small either. Moving from a predominantly Anglo-

Saxon past to a multicultural mix of hyphenated Americans. Dealing with all the problems that face our larger society: the gap between rich and poor, trying to re-invent itself for the 21st century. And this church, like Worcester, has also seen better times, but is still in the game with a message of tolerance and a gospel of equality that need a moral megaphone to be heard over the din. You're in a perfect position to contribute to our national conversation about race, immigration, social mobility and other issues that go to the heart of our democracy. First Unitarian has a voice and a viewpoint that deserves to be amplified.

And now I've run out of words, having said hello, thank you, I'm sorry and good luck. There's just one thing left to say. So aloha and bon voyage. Ciao, baby. And God speed.