

Chapter Two

Words: The Poetry of Creatures

“The point of learning to speak together differently is learning to live together differently.” —Krista Tippett

OPENING QUESTION

Words matter. For as Tippett says, “The words we use shape how we understand ourselves, how we interpret the world, how we treat others.”

What was your upbringing in relation to words? Were they largely utilitarian, used simply to transmit information? Were they wielded as weapons? Engaged playfully or poetically? Presented recklessly or carefully?

DISCUSSION STARTERS

Tippett says we can be led astray, and have become unconvinced, by “mere fact.” In conversation with her, the poet Elizabeth Alexander emphasizes our longing for “words that shimmer”—language with power and precision that get at “undergirding truths.”

Where do you experience words used in this way? Where do you look for contrasts to “mere fact”?

“I can disagree with your opinion, it turns out, but I can’t disagree with your experience. And once I have a sense of your experience, you and I are in relationship, acknowledging the complexity in each other’s position, listening less guardedly.”

Have you ever participated in such an exchange of experience and story with someone of a different perspective? How did that change what was possible between you?

“Listening is more than being quiet while the other person speaks until you can say what you have to say. I like the language Rachel Naomi Remen uses with young doctors to describe what they should practice: ‘generous listening.’ Generous listening is powered by curiosity, a virtue we can invite and nurture in ourselves to render it instinctive. It involves a kind of vulnerability—a willingness to be surprised, to let go of assumptions and take in ambiguity. The listener wants to understand the humanity behind the words of the other, and patiently summons one’s own best self and one’s own best words and questions.”

Tippett notes that many of the ways we are taught to argue, debate, and advocate actually work against these qualities of the “basic social art” of listening, which we also need in our social toolkit. Does this make sense as you reflect on the ways you are equipped to enter public conversation? How challenging is the thought of truly being willing to be surprised by people on very different places on the political/cultural spectrum? What kind of inner preparation would that require?

“I’ve learned this: a question is a powerful thing, a mighty use of words. Questions elicit answers in their likeness. . . . It’s hard to transcend a combative question. But it’s hard to resist a generous question.”

Tippett proposes that we shy away from taking up hard discussions with different others, in part because we live in a culture that frames issues in terms of the most strident, extreme people and positions. Imagine a gathering, in the words of Tippett’s guest Frances Kissling, of people on both sides “who absolutely refuse to see each other as evil.” Imagine the questions you impulsively want to ask “the other side,” and the ways you might reframe your questions more generously, to invite honesty, dignity, and revelation.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“From Genesis to the aboriginal songlines of Australia, human beings have forever perceived that naming brings the essence of things into being.”

“Tolerance doesn’t welcome. It allows, endures, indulges. . . . Tolerance was a baby step to make pluralism possible, and pluralism, like every ism, holds an illusion of control. It doesn’t ask us to care for the stranger. It doesn’t even invite us to know each other, to be curious, to be open to be moved or surprised by each other.”

“Words are crafted by human beings, wielded by human beings. They take on all of our flaws and frailties. They diminish or embolden the truths they arose to carry. We drop and break them sometimes. We renew them, again and again.”

“We are starved, and ready, for fresh language to approach each other.”

“Profound truth, like the vocabulary of virtue, eludes formulation. It quickly becomes rigid, gives way to abstraction or cliché. But put a spiritual insight to a story, an experience, a face; describe where it anchors in the ground of your being; and it will change you in the telling and others in the listening.”

“I can disagree with your opinion, it turns out, but I can’t disagree with your experience. And once I have a sense of your experience, you and I are in relationship, acknowledging the complexity in each other’s position, listening less guardedly. The difference in our opinions will probably remain intact, but it no longer defines what is possible between us.”

“To me, every great story opens into an equally galvanizing exchange we can have together: So what? How does this change the way you see and live? How might it inform the way I see and live? I believe we can push ourselves further, and use words more powerfully and tell and make the story of our time anew.”

“The thing about the raw materials of the life of the spirit is that they are always changing. What you see in the past is dependent on what you are able to see now.”

“The art of starting new kinds of conversations, of creating new departure points and new outcomes in our common grappling, is not rocket science. But it does require that we nuance or retire some habits so ingrained that they feel like the only way it can be done.”

“Listening is an everyday social art, but it’s an art we have neglected and must learn anew.”

“Generous listening is powered by curiosity, a virtue we can invite and nurture in ourselves to render it instinctive. It involves a kind of vulnerability—a willingness to be surprised, to let go of assumptions and take in ambiguity. The listener wants to understand the humanity behind the words of the other, and patiently summons one’s own best self and one’s own best words and questions.”

“My only measure of the strength of a question now is in the honesty and eloquence it elicits.”

“If I’ve learned nothing else, I’ve learned this: a question is a powerful thing, a mighty use of words. Questions elicit answers in their likeness. Answers mirror the questions they rise, or fall, to meet. So while a simple question can be precisely what’s needed to drive to the heart of the matter, it’s hard to meet a *simplicistic* question with anything but a simplistic answer. It’s hard to transcend a combative question. But it’s hard to resist a generous question. We all have it in us to formulate questions that invite honesty, dignity, and revelation. There is something redemptive and life-giving about asking a better question.”

“Here’s another quality of generous questions, questions as social art and civic tools: they may not want answers, or not immediately. They might be raised in order to be pondered, dwelt on, instead. The intimate and civilizational questions we are living with in our time are not going to be answered with an-

swers we can all make peace with any time soon. The poet Rainer Maria Rilke, who became my friend across time and space all those years ago in Berlin, spoke of holding questions, living questions.”

“There is value in learning to speak together honestly and relate to each other with dignity, without rushing to common ground that would leave all the hard questions hanging.”

“The crack in the middle where people on both sides absolutely refuse to see each other as evil—this is where I want to live and what I want to widen.”

“It is language that reframes behavior—taking a sense of necessary actions out of the realm of guilt and into good.”

“The point of learning to speak together differently is learning to live together differently. It’s a dance of words with arts of living.”