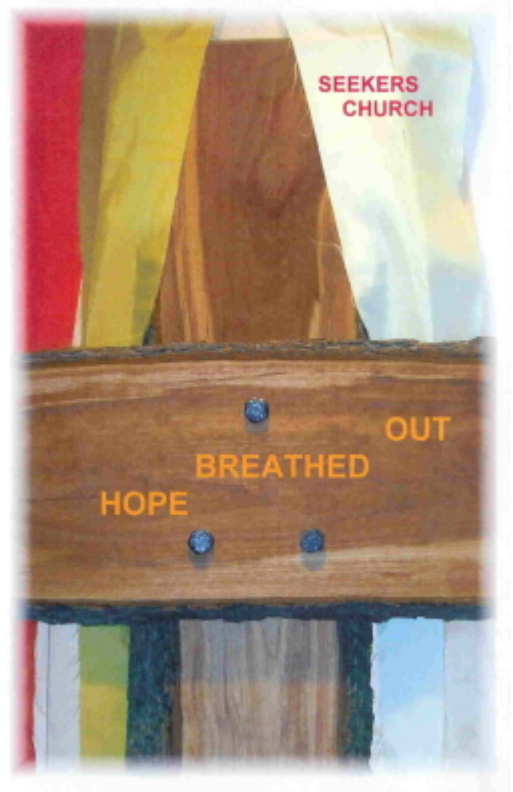


"Languages of the Heart" by Deborah Sokolove

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May 31, 2009, Pentecost

Well, how well did you follow the Scripture readings we just heard? I imagine the Hawaiian Pidgin version of Acts 2 was understandable to most of you, even if it sounded a bit strange. And some of you might have been able to follow the Gospel in Spanish, in which Jesus promises, "When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf." But I'm guessing that only one or two of you could follow the passage from Romans as it was read in Japanese, so I will read it again in English:

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor

pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

I imagine that, to many people, that passage is complete nonsense, no matter what language is being used. It is full of mixed metaphors, paradoxical images, and rhetorical questions. Defying the rigorous, logical structure I was taught to use in high school for constructing paragraphs, it flows from idea to idea like a stream of consciousness. If the disciples were talking like that at Pentecost, no wonder some people accused them of being drunk!

But, we are told, others heard them as if they were speaking their own, native tongue.

What does it mean to speak someone else's native tongue?

Have you ever lived in a country where you didn't know the language? I know that David lived in Ethiopia in his Peace Corps days; Peter lived in Viet Nam as a young soldier; Margreta taught English in Japan right after college; and others have their own stories of life in exotic places. In a time like that, it's exciting, but more than a little disorienting, to have to figure out how to take the bus, do the laundry, get a haircut, or find a place to live. To become fluent in another language is not just a matter of learning vocabulary and grammar, but rather of entering into another

way of thinking.

I learned that lesson 40 years ago. As many of you know, I moved to Israel when I was 22 years old, and lived there for 5 years. My life there was relatively privileged, because I had married an Israeli whose grandfather was wealthy and politically influential. Nevertheless, daily life was often very hard for me, as I struggled to understand what was being said around me, and to make myself understood. Just buying food was a major cultural shock.

In those days, there were very few supermarkets. Instead, most people in my neighborhood bought just enough groceries for the day's meals at the makolet – something like a 7-11. But, unlike those familiar, self-service places, where the only interaction with the cashier is to pay the bill, the makolet was more like an old-fashioned general store, where one had to ask the person behind the counter for a gallon of milk, a pound of butter, or a bag of apples.

Except, of course, not only did I have to remember that milk was khalav, butter was khemah, and apples were called tapuakh etz (which means, literally, something like "tree-potatoes"); but I had to mentally translate that gallon into four liters; know that the butter come not in 4, individually-wrapped, sticks, but in a 500-gram slab; and try to work if a kilo of apples would be enough to make the pie I had planned for dessert – all the while trying to follow the storekeeper's comments on the weather or the political situation, and listening to well-meaning advice from the other shoppers about making sure my children kept their hats on in the hot, summer sun.

I was often confused, frequently frustrated, and constantly aware that I was missing a lot of what went on around me.

I imagine that the pilgrims who came to Jerusalem in the 1st Century probably felt the same. The Roman Empire stretched from the Iberian peninsula to the Indus River, and from the British Isles to northern Africa. And while the Jews hadn't yet dispersed to the farthest reaches of that empire, there were among them, as the text tells us

Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians.

Of course, everyone most likely understood a bit of Latin, Greek, or Aramaic, but the languages they spoke at home may have been local dialects associated with specific customs and histories. So it must have been completely astonishing to hear those uneducated Galileans speaking their native tongues.

Like the disciples in 1st-century Jerusalem, we live in a polyglot society. Walking down the street, riding the bus, waiting in the doctor's office, or grabbing a coffee in Starbucks, I hear people talking in languages I recognize – like Spanish, French, German, Russian, Japanese, Korean, Hebrew, or Arabic – and in many that I cannot place at all. And as I hear this babble of languages, I think about how each of these visitors and immigrants, students and laborers and professional men and women, must have a story not unlike my own – a story filled with moments of confusion, of

frustration, of simply hoping to find someone else who speaks their own language, or at least someone who is willing patiently to hear them out as they haltingly search for the words to explain what they need.

But understanding is not simply a question of whether someone speaks Spanish or Pidgin or Japanese. If you have ever traveled in a country where you don't know the language, you may have had the delightful, frustrating, surprising experience of having a conversation using a combination of the few words you know of the local tongue, the other person's few words of English, and lots of hand waving, pointing, and smiling. Last year, when Glen, his sister, Ruth, and I were in Japan, we had one of those moments.

We were looking for lunch, but it was a little late in the day, so not much was open. Finally, Ruth said, "What about this?" "This" turned out to be a Chinese restaurant, and the long, long menu was entirely in kanji, with very few pictures. The cheerful waitress spoke no English, but somehow, with pointing, laughing, and Glen's limited Japanese, we managed to order three meals from the illustrated lunch specials menu. The photos were so poor that we had no idea what we were ordering. So it was with delight that Ruth discovered that she had ordered sweet-and-sour pork, and Glen got fried rice, one of his favorites! My main dish was a soupy mix of tofu and spicy ground pork – unexpectedly delicious, and not what I would ever order on purpose!

We had been served the cold tea that seemed to be standard in summertime as soon as we sat down, but Ruth really wanted a Coke. She tried "Coke" and "soda," but the waitress was smilingly uncomprehending. Finally, she said "Coca Cola" and

the young woman's face lit up. When I indicated that I wanted one, too, off she went, laughing and exclaiming to the other waitress who was lounging in the back of the otherwise empty eatery. A few minutes later, two icy Cokes arrived, amid more laughter.

After we had eaten, the waitress showed us the check, but – like the menu – it was incomprehensible, and we just shook our heads in dismay. So she began to read the numbers aloud, and Glen scrambled to write them in Arabic numerals. Nodding and smiling, she indicated that he got it right. When she returned with our change, she smiled broadly and said in English, "Thank you." Everyone laughed again, as we giggled "Arigato" and went out the door.

Nodding and smiling goes a long way in human communication. But, sometimes, even speaking the same language is not enough. How often does it happen to you that you say something that you think is perfectly clear, and the other person responds as if you had said something else entirely? Email is notorious for its ability to be misunderstood, but the problem of miscommunication predates email.

There is an old, Jewish story I once heard, about a young man who went on a journey, a long time ago. Like many college students today, he runs out of money and writes home to ask for more. As I was trying to remember the details, I found a version on the web, which continues:

Knowing of his father's love of him [the son] decides to send him a telegram, asking for money so that he could return home. He sets out to the post office with a vision of a warm home-coming.

He writes: "Dear father, I am far from home and I need your help to return since I have run out of money. Please send money. Love, David." When the clerk explains how much sending such a wordy telegram will cost, he begins to chisel his message. He says to himself: "My father knows that he is dear, and he knows he's my father – I can erase 'Dear father.'" Then he says, "My father knows that I am far from home, and why else would I be writing to him, if it not for my desire to come home, with no ability to do so?" and with this he erases "I am far from home and I need your help to return since I have run out of money." He reads the words one more time and says, "My father surely knows that I love him" and out goes 'Love'.

As a true artist in the school of minimalism David sends a telegram that says: "Please send money David".

*David's father receives the telegram later that day. He reads: "Please send money!!! David". He is furious: "What is this? No 'Dear father'? No 'Love'? Only a demand for money? Has my son forgotten how to speak to his father? I will not send him a penny!" David's mother is distraught, missing her son and wanting no more than to see their son safe again at home. She tells her husband that he must be reading the telegram incorrectly and takes it from his hands. She reads: "Please... send money... David..." and begins to cry: "Our son is in trouble, he is begging for help and he needs some money to come home, we must help him..."**

And the father said, "Oh, why didn't he say that in the first place?" and sent his beloved son the money he needed to come home.

You see, the father just read the words, but the mother was reading in the language of the heart, the true language of true understanding. And it is, in the end, the language of the heart that can overcome all differences of language, of culture, of conflict.

That is what happened, I think, at Pentecost, when the violent, rushing wind filled the entire house where Jesus distraught followers were sitting. The wind cleared out all the anger and fear; and

divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability...And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.

As we remember that first Christian Pentecost, let us, too, learn to speak and to listen in the language of the heart.

* Reb Mimi Feigelson, "Shabbat Parashat Va'et'Hanan – 15 Av 5768 – The Music of No", Judaism at American Jewish University,

<http://judaism.ajula.edu/Content/ContentUnit.asp?CID=941&u=7498&t=0>