

The Power of a Word by Rev. Tania Y Márquez

I believe in the power of words to help us see the invisible.

One of my favorite anecdotes about the power of words is when I was teaching Spanish at a community college and when I corrected my student's translation of community college from "colegio comunitario" to "universidad comunitaria". Of course, that comes from the fact that in Spanish speaking countries the concept of community college doesn't exist, and after high schools students go to a university. The sudden realization that they were indeed taking university level classes was priceless. It transformed how they saw themselves and how they understood the work they were doing. Right, because you've probably heard debates about why a university is better than a community college.

And I'm sure you have your own stories about words that have transformed or impacted your lives because they offered a reframing, an answer you were seeking, or just the ability to name something you had noticed but for which you had no word to describe it. I have had several of those throughout my life. Words that have allowed me to move forward in life, that have unstuck me from a difficult place or that have opened the door to possibility.

So there are words that can suddenly reshape our relationship to the world. In both a positive or a negative way. Today, I'll introduce a word that may be new to many of you, but let me give you some background and context first.

One day, a couple of years ago, in a meeting with my spiritual director, I had a sudden realization. I had been sharing for years my story of a time I moved to Mexico City to study Theology, that it was during the period of time that marked the beginning of my journey to leave the Catholic faith. I had always shared about my feeling out of place and losing my faith, but always left something out. I hadn't shared that I didn't have the money to pay for college. To go to Mexico, I had worked hard for a year and had saved all my money to pay for my first semester of classes and to pay for housing, but once in Mexico, it didn't take me long to realize that I was not going to be able to work and pay for school in Mexico. The university was a private and expensive institution and I had no scholarships. Most of the scholarships were given to the seminarians and the nuns attending the school and I was neither.

I didn't share that information because I had already internalized the many messages I received growing up about being poor. They are hard to escape. Turn on the television and you see how people are portrayed in movies and series. Success is wrapped up in nice clothes, purchasing power, etc. Poverty is pervasively presented as a flaw of the individual. Maybe you've been there already and know this well: it is incredibly expensive to be poor. Because being poor is systemically understood as a flaw in character, those with less resources are often hit with higher interest rates, higher penalties, and higher prices when they can't afford to pay wholesale or bulk prices for the items they need. Maybe you never thought of your Costco card and your Costco purchases as a privilege. They are.

But many of the penalties and high prices of housing, schools, and services are so in order to keep those with less purchasing power away. It's a form of segregation. We still love, though, the stories of the one who makes it, who overcomes all adversity and becomes a millionaire. Our culture then uses that narrative as proof that the same possibility exists for all and those who don't make it so far didn't work as hard.

Poverty is not having the freedom to choose.

I don't think anyone ever told me that I was supposed to feel shame for not having money and for not being able to pay my way through a private university. I don't think anyone had such conversation with me. But it was not necessary, I had already been acculturated to just know that. It just took paying attention to the way women with food vouchers are looked at, to the annoyance people feel when they find out they're behind someone who has wic vouchers to pay for some of their food. To avoid that, several stores dedicated to the exchange of WIC vouchers were created. Women don't have to put up with the dirty looks nor the comments about how long they take.

The way people talked about how panhandling was a great way to get money. Like the story of a disabled panhandler at the border who posted a picture of himself eating lobster in the tourist town of Puerto Nuevo. And the divided comments about whether he was entitled to such a meal or not. I learned to doubt the ability of a homeless person to make good choices and to offer them "food" instead of money.

In other words, the poor in our communities are often treated paternalistically and as an inconvenience. Most cities have anti-homeless laws that prohibit people from sitting or sleeping on streets, or certain streets, or sleeping in their cars.

And when we talk about people living in poverty, we can name tangible and intangible things like: house, car, money, resources, dignity, etc. And as we name them, we can see them and understand them. But while I can point to tangible items and you'll understand them, there are more abstract concepts that require a little more. They are unseen and ideological, and when it comes to ideology, in the words of Adela Cortina, a Spanish philosopher and ethicist, "(Ideology,) the more silent it is, the more effective, because it can't even be denounced. It distorts reality by hiding it."

The ideology Cortina is pointing out is not new, has been noted by many throughout history: it was noted by the theologians who created the theology of liberation, it was noted by thinkers and activists, by the same people at the center of it: the poor.

Every year, Fundeu, a non-profit organization for the use of Spanish, chooses the word of the year. Many of the nominated words have to do with technology and the new language it creates. For 2017, however, the word of the year was one coined by Adela Cortina. A word she's been using since the 1990s but that in today's world acquired a more urgent need for it. According to Fundeu, the word was chosen because of its transformational power. The word is "aporophobia" and it means "rejection of the

poor or fear of poverty”. For Cortina, there’s an urgency “to name the rejection of the poor, of the destitute, because that attitude is strong in social life and it’s even worse because it functions from a place of anonymity. Precisely because its indisputable reality has not been recognized, it cannot be deactivated.”

In her book by the same name, Adela Cortina argues that at the center of this rejection of the poor lies the understanding that the poor don't have anything to offer. “The poor is the one that’s left outside the possibility of giving something back in a world based on the game of giving and receiving.” In this sense, they don’t have a choice.

Cortina felt the need to create a word that could describe a reality she, and others, had long noticed. The rise of conservative governments in our country and in other parts of the world that have called for sometimes inhumane measures against refugees and immigrants, she points out, is not just because of xenophobia. Foreigners are not feared merely for being from another country. It doesn’t mean xenophobia isn’t real. But the point Cortina makes really clear is that there’s a rejection of foreigners who are poor. Those who have money to spend are always welcomed: the investors, the business owners, and those who are famous, too, but the ones who are perceived as in need, those are the ones that are being rejected.

Activists and Human Rights advocates have, for a long time, called attention to the increasing wealth gap in our country, the richer getting more so and the poor, getting poorer. The current

pandemic has deepened this gap as we see working communities and communities of color being the hardest hit by the pandemic.

Aporophobia also means fear of poverty. Most of us would fear poverty because we know, we have seen how the poor are treated. The lack of access to healthcare, education, adequate housing, food, and other services.

This pandemic, for example, for those who were already struggling meant being exposed to the virus vs being exposed to hunger and homelessness. In fact, food insecurity has increased during this pandemic. In New Mexico, it was projected that 21% of the population would experience food insecurity in 2020.

What makes it difficult to deal with complex issues like poverty and its impact on people and communities is that because they are not easy to resolve, people look away, become numb, or are simply not paying attention because those issues are not impacting them or their communities directly.

And words are powerful. A word can make us pause and reconsider our understanding of what we see as real. They can make us see things differently. And that matters because we can only try to change what we can see and understand.

When I first heard the word aporophobia, it made a lot of sense to me. It's not an easy word and what makes it an even more difficult word is the reality that is pointing to. But it has invited me to

reflect on the ways in which I perpetuate this ideology with the choices I make, with the words I use.

What we have before us, what this word challenges us to do is to reconsider how we understand the world and what role each of us play in perpetuating invisible ideologies that otherwise we would condemn. The good news is that if we can see it and understand it, then it is easier to pay attention to our ways of being, to our interactions, to the way we construct reality with our words and actions.

Cortina reminds us “The isolated individual doesn’t exist, only humans in relationship with one another. The worst punishment to be given is that of condemning someone to invisibility, to rejection and contempt, and to ignore the existence of the other”

This is not news to us, our Unitarian Universalist faith invites us to affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Her commentary also affirms our human interdependence. We are already connected, not by nationality, not by social status, not by any agreements we have had between us, we were connected before we even knew it by our shared humanity.

So if harmful ideologies thrive on invisibility, bringing them to light can be the beginning of transformation for individuals and communities. If the worst punishment is to condemn people to invisibility, we can begin to heal the wounds in our communities by affirming their existence and recognizing that we are already connected to each other by our shared human experience.

The power of a word is that it can make the invisible, visible. It can point to hidden concepts and ideologies. And yes, there’s a

lot of work to do, aporophobia is only one of many harmful attitudes and ideologies present in our world today. But I believe when we find the words to name them, to make them visible, we then truly have the opportunity to raise our awareness and work on creating more compassionate and just communities, to face the evils of society with courage, to transform our relationship with others and with the world, to commit to the work of building a world where no one is outside the circle of love.

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