

Brief Encounters from the Taos Institute Board – July 2012

Language and Peace?



by Sally St. George and Dan Wulff

Language is not innocent (Andersen, 1996). We agree with Tom Andersen and find ourselves becoming more and more cognizant of the clichés, metaphors, and phrasing we use when we are working or enjoying conversation with our families and friends. Using our daily ways of researching and analyzing everyday occurrences, we see numerous examples of language that “rolls off our tongues” and language that we see before us in the newspapers, billboards, TV, and on internet ads that are quite conflictual, negative, and violent in sound and image.

Without a concentrated examination we fear that we inadvertently continue, promote, and contribute toward conflict without ever intending to act in this way. Here is one example of this kind of talk. Often parents, when talking of disciplining and teaching their children will refer to “picking their battles.” In our minds casting this privilege and responsibility as a battle is most unfortunate, because far too often it is enacted ad exactly that—a battle. Another example of expressing a determined approach is to say “sticking to your guns” which is another reference to violent behavior to support perseverance.

Language can also embrace peaceful invitations and relationships—oftentimes outside of our awareness or deliberate acts. How aware and conscious are we of forming our sentences and messages to contain words and phrases that are peace-filled and deliberate in promoting good will? Many words and phrases that are part of our daily lives can serve to highlight cooperative and respectful relating (e.g., embrace a thought, stand by your word, uplifting idea, shine up a project).

Is the connecting of these words and metaphors to violence or peacefulness a legitimate issue? Is it just supporting a “politically correct” approach to language or is it tapping into something that we should all attend to more than we do?

We hope you will join us at the next Taos Institute conference in San Diego and join us at our presentation as we analyze our use of language, looking for ways in which we can each speak and write utilizing language in more deliberate and purposeful ways, especially in reducing the metaphors of violence and increasing the metaphors of peace.