

Brief Encounters from the Taos Institute

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“My Word!”

by Dan Wulff

“A picture is worth a thousand words” so the saying goes. A recent trip to Alice Springs, Australia and a visit with an Aboriginal artist there makes me think 1000 words is a far-too-modest estimate. She showed my wife and me a mural that she painted with other artists that presented the comprehensive set of life-lessons of their people. If one were inclined to describe this painting in words, the number of words would probably be in the hundreds of thousands and even then, the rich tapestry of meanings displayed on canvas may remain elusive. Our contemporary world’s dedication to valorizing words tends to background other forms of expressing ideas such as art, dance, music, ceremonies, walking with someone in the mountains, acting compassionately, soaking in a sunset, working the land. Ever wonder what we might be missing when we only traffic in words, sentences, and paragraphs?

I once heard a ballerina tell a story about a time when she was asked by a journalist after her performance, “What are you trying to convey in your dancing?” She responded to the journalist, “I will answer you when you *dance* me your question.” Forms of expression that are not word-based are some of the most profound and impactful—they have no intrinsic need to be placed into the template of words. In fact, wording them may drastically limit or distort the expressions that are available and desirable.

Our desire to express ourselves in words is such a taken-for-granted practice that we may not recognize that this practice is socially constructed. Many everyday practices in our world (using words being one) have become so routinized that we may actually believe them to be foundational. While they may indeed be necessary for persons to achieve status within certain communities’ metrics of success, those practices do not themselves command ultimate authority for all persons or groups, all points in time, or in all contexts. Those of us in academic settings have absorbed the use of words to direct our thinking, our teaching, our researching, and our pathways of career development in such pervasive ways that is difficult to imagine doing what we do without words. (And I must add here that words are not themselves culpable—they are not capable of agency. It is our largely uncritical immersion in them that leads to our self-imposed reliance on them.)

Recently a discussion within the Taos Institute focused on ways of seeing new ideas. A quote from Proust that I mention here was part of those interchanges:

“The only true voyage of discovery. . . would be not to visit strange lands but to possess other eyes, to behold the universe through the eyes of another, of a hundred others, to behold the hundred universes that each of them beholds, that each of them is. . .”
(Proust, 1932, p. 559)

Continuing on in this passage, in response to conversations among audience members of a musical performance, the narrator states:

“But what were their words, which like every human and external word, left me so indifferent, compared with the heavenly phrase of music with which I had just been engaged? I was indeed like an angel, fallen from the inebriating bliss of paradise, subsides into the most humdrum reality. And, just as certain creatures are the last surviving testimony to a form of life which nature has discarded, *I asked myself if music were not the unique example of what might have been—if there had not come the invention of language, the formation of words, the analysis of ideas—the means of communication between one spirit and another* [my italics]. It is like a possibility which has ended in nothing; humanity has developed along other lines, those of spoken and written language. But this return to the unanalyzed was so inebriating, that on emerging from that paradise, contact with people who were more or less intelligent seemed to me of an extraordinary insignificance.” (Proust, 1932, pp. 559-560)

Where am I heading with this? Persons involved with the Taos Institute have dedicated themselves to seeing and appreciating practices that embrace social constructionist ideas wherever they might be and however they might reveal themselves. Focusing on *practices*, would we recognize them if we saw them? I surmise that persons and groups from all corners of the world and from all walks of life may engage in social constructionist practices while not using any of the words we are accustomed to using and hearing in relation to social constructionism. Would we be able to see them? Hear them? Feel them?

(For those of you counting, I used 801 words in this article. ☺)

Proust, M. (1932). The captive. In *Remembrance of things past* (Vol. 2, pp. 383-669; C. K. Scott Moncrieff, Trans.). New York, NY: Random House.